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**Topographies of Kitsch: Locating and Dislocating Tyrannical Kitsch in
Contemporary Russian, Hebrew and Serbo-Croatian Literature**

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by

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Dedication

For my family: my mother, who told me to just finish my dissertation; my father, who said nothing but implied just as much; my fairy godmother; and my ladies, with whom I now get to eat cheese.

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Topographies of Kitsch: Locating and Dislocating Tyrannical Kitsch in Contemporary Russian, Hebrew and Serbo-Croatian Literature

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Much of what is known about contemporary Russia, Israel, and the Serbo-Croatian region is gleaned from the international headlines of newspapers. Yet, the continual political upheavals, military actions, and social strife that define the realities of these countries constitute only the faint backdrops to the emerging bodies of literature from these countries. The novels of writers such as Victor Pelevin, Orly Castel-Bloom, and Miljenko Jergović exemplify recent literary trends that default on the critical portrayal of the commonplace lives and commodity cultures in their respective regions. These novels obsessively depict the quotidian and trivial, documenting kitsch rather than war. Yet, the contemporary actualities that are reflected in these texts are the accumulation of historical moments that have brought on periods of neo-nationalism—the same neo-nationalistic movements that are responsible for the news headlines that they produce. The struggle to construct their national identities, both politically and culturally, and against the forces of twenty-first century global commercialism defines the particular brand of mythology that these countries are disseminating.

Claiming cultural exceptionalism while embracing the onslaught of globalization, the liminally Western countries must take account of the pervasive influence of Western

media and commoditization that, in the digital age, reaches their demographic through multiple outlets, regardless of the overt and latent systems of censorship set in place by their governments. Rather than attempting to thwart the consumption of Western media by their citizens, the political machines of these nations make allowances for its presence. Western television programs, name brands, and popular cultural trends are omnipresent in these regions. Fed to citizens through a political filter, the proliferation of Western media is incorporated into the national ideology and collective memory of the country, creating a semblance of freedom and cosmopolitanism, while leveling down individual liberties and cultural possibilities. The byproduct of this phenomenon is kitsch. The permutations and societal effects of kitsch are some of the central but often overlooked themes of contemporary Israeli, Russian and BSC literature. The following study will argue for the importance of detecting and examining the depictions of kitsch in these regional literatures. More than a study of consumerist practices, such an analysis promises to reveal the political charge of these ostensibly innocuous commonplace objects, which are revealed to be tools for the propagation of the homogenizing, objectifying ideologies of their respective countries.

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Introduction

The circuitous routes traveled by literary texts across various borders, checkpoints, blockades and holding pens should finally, once and for all, lay to rest the romantic notion that such texts announce themselves and arrive simply by virtue of their inherent qualities as literature. Nothing could be farther from the truth: like any commodity, literary texts gain access through channels and furrows that are prepared by other means. Fashion, chance encounters, fortuitous circumstances, surrogates, functions, political alliances and cataclysmic events such as wars or genocide are much more certain and constant catalysts than judgment based on actual literary history or cultural importance. The texts that manage to sneak through the policing of our monolingual borders still only provide a mere taste—fragmented, out of context—of what such works might represent in their own cultures, languages, as well as historical and political contexts. -Ammiel Alcalay, Introduction to Sarajevo Marlboro¹

In Ammiel Alcalay's introduction to *Sarajevo Marlboro*, the common configuration between place, language, and literature is interjected with quaternary quotient: material culture. Not only does Alcalay suggest that we step away from the "romantic notions [...] of the inherent qualities of literature," but he also reminds us that literary distribution is predicated, not on aesthetic value, but on the commercial and political forces which circulate goods within space, both regionally and internationally. This understanding of literature is echoed in *Imagined Communities*, wherein Benedict Anderson reminds us that "the book was the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity."² Both Alcalay and Anderson imply that an alternative discussion of literature is warranted, one that replaces the abstract notion of "the text"—the slippery set of signifiers that always eludes—with the concrete, material notion of "the book.

1 Ammiel Alcalay, Introduction to *Sarajevo Marlboro*, by Miljenko Jergović (New York: Archipelago Books, 2004), vii.

2, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 34.

A critical study that privileges the materiality of “the book” has the potential to shed light on its very *raison d’être*. After all, what is a book, first and foremost, if not an object that both represents and inhabits space—a physical indicator of the political and social currents sweeping through the rooms in which it was produced and the rooms in which it is found? Conceptualizing the novel as a commodity begs questions about its choice of structure, register, and furthermore, its choice of language in relation to its target audience, its commercial cache, and its potential for translation, and ultimately, circulation. As Alcalay points out, such an inquiry is particularly salient in areas of political unrest where censorship, both overt and latent, determines the movement of literature. More so, the concerns of a reading that is reoriented toward the materiality of the book extend beyond the book itself, and necessitate a defamiliarization and reassessment of the commonplace objects that are depicted within it. In other words, such a reading is not confined to the consideration of the book as a material object, but includes the author’s literary treatment of material culture as a player in the socio-political arena that has brought the very work into existence.

A materialistic reading of contemporary fiction emerging from Russia, Israel, and the countries of former Yugoslavia reveals the fruitfulness of such a critical inquiry. Writers such as Victor Pelevin and Tatyana Tolstaya, Orly Castle-Bloom and Sayed Kashua, and Miljenko Jergović and Dubravka Ugrešić, whose books have “managed to sneak past monolingual boundaries” in their own right, are paradigmatic examples of contemporary authors who find alternative narrative modes to the nationalistic high registers of their literary languages. These stylistic elements make it natural that scholarship discussing their novels should be preoccupied with language. Yet, in order to fully examine these authors’ successful production of their respective languages and vernaculars, an additional set of questions must be posed: What do commodity objects

intimate about the political climate in which their books were written? How are identity, space, and language defined vis-à-vis the commercial items that populate their novels?

Despite their disparate genres, regions, and socio-political realities, the narratives of these authors are deliberately confined to everyday spaces and objects. Such circumscribed settings lend their texts viability as tableaux of quotidian present-day actualities, and redefine contemporary norms against the historical truths and official mythologies propagated by the governments of their respective regions. Military occupation, war, institutionalized racism, these political atrocities are not addressed in universalistic terms; rather, their effects are translated into the day-to-day physical experience of their characters, and are expressed as minor iterations of major themes. In the commonplace spaces of these authors' fiction, human interest is privileged over omnipresent, overt acts violence.

While physical violence intermittently scratches the pages of their books, the understated psychological violence of commodity culture controls the destinies of their protagonists, all of whom, in their own right, are consumers. It is material objects that latently circumscribe the desires and identities of their protagonists. The textual centrality of these commonplace objects begs for a critical inquiry regarding their function and influence upon their consuming demographic. The Western commodities that are sanctioned to circulate through the spaces of these regions, rampant with neo-nationalism, have their political task: they usurp local aesthetics and the traditions based upon them, weakening the ties between families and communities, and dispossessing these demographics from the spaces which they inhabit.

The circulation of Western commercial goods and media is essential to these regions' national projects. By sanctioning the consumption and appropriation of Western aesthetics in the form of foreign products, the governments of these regions strive to

cloak themselves in the aesthetic raiment of Europe. In theory, the adoption of Western aesthetics came in tandem with the acceptance of other European values; it is intended to signal a government that is modeled on Western socio-political ideals—open market, freedom of speech, democracy. As the authors in this study will show, however, the government-sanctioned circulation of Western commodities in their countries takes the form of Enlightenment ideals gone awry. Incorporated into the national ideology and utilized as weapons of nation-wide culture homogenization, these foreign products are tools of government control; these are objects that disseminate an aesthetic which erases the regions' tumultuous histories, distracts from their violent present realities, and produces a normative collective identity based on taste. The commercial cache of these objects masks their role in the construction of identity and place. Nevertheless, the presence of Western commodity goods often intimates latent systems of governing powers that homogenize the collective memory, limit the civil liberties, and dictate the daily lives of their consumers.

This study examines the material goods that permeate the pages of contemporary Israeli, Russian, and Serbo-Croatian literature. By tracing the sources as well as the societal and psychological effects of these seemingly innocuous objects, this project reveals these commercial products to be kitsch, which

manipulates through the objectification of the effects of art, and through the ready-made formulas that function like premodern magical incantations know how to trigger specific emotional responses. Such responses often have the effect of mass hypnosis, even if a particular consumerist kitsch item advertises individual improvement [...]. Kitsch neither resolves nor critically exposes the conflicts; instead, it offers a fragile bridge of commonplaces over the unbridgeable abyss.³

3 Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1994),16.

The coming chapters examine six works of contemporary literature that thematize kitsch and commodity culture: Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* and Victor Pelevin's *Homo Zapiens*; Miljenko Jergović's *Sarajevo Marlboro* and Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Sayed Kashua's *Dancing Arabs* and Orly Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City*. These six works of fiction focus on the everyday realities of their protagonists, privileging their common places. In each of these texts, the subject-object relationship between the protagonists and the domestic items that constitute their vernacular spaces is examined. In doing so, these works expose the presence of tyrannical kitsch, defamiliarize it, and offer it up for the scrutiny of the reader.

Kitschography as Methodology

Kitsch is everywhere, and though it is readily recognized, it is not easily defined. Today, the word has become a layman's term, and is freely attributed to mass-produced objects, trending arts and sentiments, and, most of all, bad taste. Despite its popularity, its ontology remains opaque. Though the question of kitsch may appear to be a fundamentally aesthetic problem, over the past century it has become a central preoccupation of cultural theorists and human geographers alike. The attention allotted to the study of kitsch seems disproportionate to what the term is surmised to designate: useless bric-a-brac and hackneyed sentiments. Nevertheless, major kitschographers of the 1930s already deemed the ubiquity of these generic objects and affects to be a marker of their epoch; in the age of mechanical reproduction, technology, which enabled the proliferation of consumerism, also threatened to enable tyranny over art and thought.

The consensus across various critical discourses is that kitsch is a product of modernity. Before the Industrial Revolution, material objects, even those that were purely decorative, were produced by artisans, and bore the unique markings of the craftsman's

hand.⁴ Mechanical reproducibility, which strips the consumer product of any signifiers of singularity, is a staple attribute of kitsch, intimating its lack of essence, or, to use Walter Benjamin's term, "aura." The convenience and accessibility of mass-manufactured objects has led to the emergence and acceptance of kitsch as an inevitable byproduct of industrialism. Inherently reproducible, kitsch manifests in an innumerable multiplicity of forms that constantly evolve to reflect the trends that shape the cultural zeitgeist, not only of a nation, but also, in more recent times, of a global community of consumers. Because it has no intrinsic value, its existence is purely contextual. Thus, at any one moment, a random sampling of kitsch products (as well as sentiments and ideas) could be compiled, the next moment this list would change. Thus, the study of kitsch, which lacks all physical signifiers while circulating ceaselessly through our quotidian spaces, has become synonymous with the study of everyday life.

"Kitschography" first fully emerged out of the European socio-political climate of the 1930s, and was pioneered by theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Clement Greenberg. Benjamin's seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" reflects his concern for the place of art in the post-industrial age:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be [...]. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process that points well beyond the realm of

4 "It is far from difficult to recognize a certain synchronism between the appearance of certain kitsch factors and that of mechanical and subsequently electric and electronic methods in the reproduction and transmission of art." Gillo Dorfles, "Kitsch," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1968), 29.

art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the produced object from the realm of tradition.⁵

In Benjamin's essay, the normative value of the aura is opaque. As a signifier of authenticity, the aura of an artwork also propagates and bolsters the class and political structures from which it emerged. Hence, as the aura of an artwork becomes obsolete, so do the nationalistic and economic systems that underlie it. While Benjamin argues that technology has made the function of art egalitarian, he also warns that the mechanical reproduction of art could be exploited for political gain. Though technology gives the proletariat access to art, allowing for new pathways and modes of expression, the mechanical reproduction of art also facilitates the "aestheticizing of political life," which operates by "granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights."⁶

Three years after the publication of Benjamin's 1936 essay, Clement Greenberg echoes the warning of his contemporary in his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch":

Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but always stays the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.⁷

Like Benjamin, Greenberg is concerned with the relationship between class structures and aesthetics. Greenberg's definition of kitsch, however, draws on a markedly non-egalitarian notion of art, and unhesitatingly asserts that the elite are responsible for the

⁵ Walter Benjamin, "Work of Art In the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflection*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 220-1.

⁶ Benjamin, "Art in the Age," 241

⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Street Press, 1961), 10.

production of authentic artwork, while kitsch is embraced by the lower classes. Greenburg's conceptualization of kitsch privileges avant-garde art as the mode of expression for progressive ideologies and social reform. Subject to mechanical production, art loses its human quotient, and by extension, its commentary on the human state. Thus, art becomes static, as do the ideologies that accompany it. Thus, at the point when technology stops art from pointing to the real and present, kitsch is born. In this way, kitsch constantly points away from the real toward a societal condition that was or can be, but never towards one that is. Greenburg argues that totalitarian regimes are quick to exploit this stagnation. Art made kitsch targets the lowest common denominator of consumers, pacifying the masses by proliferating a false sense of universalism and collective stability.

Both Benjamin's and Greenburg's essays unmistakably respond to and reflect on the modalities by which fascism arose and spread across Europe. In particular, the Nazi aesthetic—its messianic ideology, its cult of the body, its valorization of death— left a grotesquely rich bank of material for kitschographers to study. In the years following World War II, critical writing on kitsch, including Hermann Broch's "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" and Saul Friedlander's "Reflections of Nazism," either directly or obliquely addressed the fascist aesthetic. From this body of critical work, Lutz P. Koepnick's essay, "Fascist Aesthetic Revisited," bears particular relevance to this project. Koepnick delivers a more comprehensive definition of the aestheticization of politics by including Benjamin's later thoughts on modernity and consumerism from the *Arcade Projects*. Koepnick questions the unity of the Nazi aesthetic, and argues that Western consumerism, a marker of modern life, could not be eradicated under Nazism. Like technology, commodity fetishism had to be assimilated into the fascist aestheticization of politics. Thus, aesthetic concessions, which accommodated the

consumption of popular Western goods and cultural forms, had to be made by the Nazi state. This political move satiated the German population's cycles of desire, provided the veil of free choice, and kept the masses habituated and content.

To explain why the Nazi ideology remained unthreatened, and even embraced commodity culture, Koepnick turns to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. In his late text, Benjamin argues that the commoditized object is completely auraless; it partakes in no tradition and exists merely to satisfy the desire of the consumer. At the same time, by "graft[ing] onto the commodity's post-auratic character the autographs of auratic art," capitalism masks the absence of aura in order to make consumers believe they have acquired an object of cultural value; the falsified aura of these objects perpetuates cycles of desire and consumption.⁸

Because commodities do not promote alternative ideologies or traditions, they do not pose a threat to the fascist system of power. Rather, they provide "modes of mass cultural entertainment in which repression and wish-fulfillment, fantasy and symbolic containment, join together in the unity of a single mechanism."⁹ Though this system of consumption is unified, consumerism is individualistic and "atomizing," since each person consumes according to his own fantasy. While providing the semblance of free will, consumerism merely masks the fragmentation and chaos of modern life, and disempowers the masses by alienating themselves from one another, rendering them completely at the hands of the fascist state.

Koepnick's discussion of the Nazi consumerist ideology delineates a model of authoritarian capitalism that neatly applies to the regions and texts examined in the

⁸ Lutz P. Koepnick, "Fascist Aesthetics Revisited," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 13 (1999): 57.

⁹ Koepnick, "Fascist Aesthetics Revisited," 59.

following chapters. The prevalence of kitsch in all of the contemporary fiction featured in this study is similarly masked by neo-nationalist governments. Gillo Dorfles' essay, "Kitsch," in her 1969 book, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, provides a useful rubric for detecting its presence. Dorfles was amongst the first to imply that context is key to identifying kitsch. In more specific terms, Dorfles claims that "the recognition of the kitsch 'tone' requires a lived familiarity with cultural material and meaning, so that recognizing kitsch in unfamiliar material is basically impossible."¹⁰ The ability to identify kitsch should, therefore, be regarded as a privilege of those who are aware of its existence and are familiar enough with cultural cues to contextualize it. Of the six authors included in this study, only Jergović, Ugrešić, and Tolstaya grant their protagonists the power of such recognition.

It is impossible to embark on an examination of kitsch without addressing the abovementioned works, which have pioneered the field of kitschography; however, this project's consideration of materiality extends beyond commercial goods to include the spaces in which they circulate. Thus, Edward Relph's analysis of the "museumification" of space in *Place and Placelessness* and Michel de Certeau's writing on spatial practices in *The Practice of Everyday Life* are central to the critical framework of this study. As the following chapters will show, their work elucidates the systems that govern the construction of space, and the human activity in that occurs within it. Their writing on place-making, therefore, provides key analytical tools that help detect the homogenization and kitschification of space itself. In that regard, no two texts are as indispensable to this study as Svetlana Boym's *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* and *The Future of Nostalgia*. The sweeping scope of Boym's

¹⁰ Dorfles, "Kitsch," 36.

theoretical studies extends beyond Russia's common places. In the forthcoming chapters, her work will not only help decode the rhetoric and aesthetic of the everyday in all three regions, but also assist in the analysis of alternative treatments of kitsch: as elegiac objects and intimate materials.

Buttressed by this critical framework, the readings in this project aim to amalgamate and apply contemporary thought on the phenomenon and the phenomenology of kitsch, arguing for its value, not as an inherent quality of a material object, but as a social signifier of oppression. Because it is mutable, kitsch cannot be studied ontologically; rather, it must be examined as a vacuum, and absence, a form without content. Kitsch is a quality of an object whose affect is divorced from its shape and whose effects are triggered by context. Lacking aesthetic and ethical depth, it makes for a perfect and dangerous receptacle for transmitting ideologies. Its function is similar to that served by the form of a myth:

But the essential point in all this is that form does not suppress meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses value but keeps life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation [...].

11

Roland Barthes' writing on the mythologies of modern day life shows that kitsch, meaningless in essence, is the perfect vessel for myth. Thus, the emergence and incorporation of kitsch through a culture and into its literary output can produce a powerful sociological and political study that extends far beyond consumerist habits. As the texts in the forthcoming chapters will show, the consumption of kitsch by a

11 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972), 118.

disempowered citizenry or a minority group intimates the presence of a violent power dynamic between the authority and their governing demographic. Differing from overt systems of political oppression, the material and spatial manifestations of kitsch point to a subliminal tyranny. The tyranny of kitsch, which results in the reversal of agency in the object and subject dynamic, must be realized and decoded in order for its observer to pass to a state of freedom.

In Russia, Israel, and the countries of former Yugoslavia, tyrannical kitsch is a contemporary political tool whose roots are tied to these regions' complex historical relationships with the West. Geographically scripted into the margins of Western Europe, these nations have and continue to suffer from an anxiety of Western influence. This anxiety takes two directions: the first propels these countries into Europe, and speaks to their desire to be regarded as "civilized" by emulating the culture and aesthetics forms of the West; the second turns these regions' political policies back onto themselves, stressing their cultural, social, and political exceptionalism. Both of these movements are fuelled by nationalism, and both are maintained by heavy governmental control. It is, thus, impossible to discuss kitsch, its political uses and literary representations, without first considering its role in the construction of these liminal regions' national narratives, narratives that continue to be mediated by the Western imagination of the Eastern Europe. In particular, the following sections will emphasize the part that literature plays in the production and representation of space. These sections will outline the figure of the contemporary author as a critic of national ideology, one who aims to make the reader aware "of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power

and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.”¹²

Kitsch and Spaces of Eastern Europe

We Slavs are a sad people. We've never had, nor will we ever have, a Joyce or a Beckett. Do you know why? Because Vladimir and Estrogon—that's us. We've been waiting around for centuries for someone to come, to fall from the sky, waiting's all we've ever done; we're artists when it comes to waiting. Maybe that's why, unlike others, we've never conquered or subjugated anyone. They've conquered us. Our rebellion is small beer. -Dubravka Ugrešić, “Europe in Sepia”

13

Though written in 2012, Ugrešić's essay “Europe in Sepia” speaks to the relationship of artistic production between Eastern and Western Europe that has been historically cemented over hundreds of years. While the contemporary political and cultural struggles of Russia and the countries of former Yugoslavia take disparate forms, their complex national identities and mythologies germinate in their liminal geographic position in relationship to Western Europe. Before Russia and the countries of former Yugoslavia had a chance to represent themselves, travelers from Italy, England and France were already documenting, categorizing and defining the spaces of Eastern Europe against the ideals of eighteenth century Europe. These men were no explorers aiming to physically colonize territories and reap the resources of the land. Rather, they were ambassadors, cartographers and philosophers of the Enlightenment period whose

12 Edward W Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 6.

13 Dubravka Ugrešić, “Europe in Sepia,” in *Europe in Sepia*, trans. David Williams (Rochester: Open Letter, 2013), 26.

aim was intellectual mastery of the world beyond the “civilized” countries of Western Europe.¹⁴

In his book, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Larry Wolff consolidates the travel journals and correspondences of visitors to the countries bordering on the West, arguing that our contemporary conception of Eastern Europe is predicated on the intellectual geography conceived by the West during the eighteenth century:

The idea of Eastern Europe was invented in Western Europe in the age of Enlightenment, and [...] was subjected to the same process of discovery, alignment, condescension, and intellectual mastery, was defined by the same formulas: between Europe and Asia, between civilization and barbarism.¹⁵

In a century when mastery was equated with knowledge, and the nature of knowledge was empirical, encyclopedic, and systematic, the spatial designation of Eastern Europe between “civilization “ and barbarism” provided a framework for comprehending and categorizing the political, social, and cultural practices that were witnessed in these territories, which were regarded as “other” but still comprehensible to the “cultivated” Western eye.

The writing amassed during this period formed the foundation of the Western imagination of Eastern Europe. Reports of violence, poverty, and unhygienic conditions in these regions were ubiquitously documented. Each travelogue reinforced the findings of another, validating the West’s conception of the lands to the east as brutish, yet with the potential for refinement—a region whose nascent buds of civilization were seen as an evolutionary social experiment that needed to be monitored and assisted. Although the descriptions of Eastern Europe “appeared as conventional literary constructions of the

14 Amongst the Enlightenment thinkers writing about Eastern Europe were Voltaire, Diderot, Kant, Rousseau, and Gibson.

15 Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 16.

Enlightenment, imagined more than observed,” neither the subjectivity of the writers nor the creative license taken in their texts was considered.¹⁶ Rather, their writing was treated as anthropological documents, scripted by trusted ambassadors of the Enlightenment whose measured, disaffected gaze produced objective empirical studies. As J. Nicolas Entrikin notes, “Enlightenment scholars describe the historical and geographical diversity of ways of life in terms of variations in a decentered, universalistic view of human nature.”¹⁷ Judged against the singular social norms and cultural standards that the Enlightenment deemed to be indisputably correct, the earliest writing on Eastern Europe was incontestably Eurocentric and self-affirming.

As a byproduct of eighteenth century cultural tourism to Russia and the Balkans, Western Europe was provided with a self-congratulatory metric against which it could measure its own identity of cultural superiority. Eastern Europe’s spatial “in betweenness” made a neat knowledge-power schema of the region more feasible; “Western Europe might offer a standard of civilization by which to measure the backwardness of Russia, but in this case Russia reciprocally offered a standard of backwardness for measuring ‘more civilized people.’”¹⁸ During this period, the travelogues of visitors to Eastern Europe forged and perpetuated a spatial relativity of civilization: the concentration of culture and progress was always located in the West and became increasingly more diffuse as one moved eastward. Geography was regarded as the explanation and physical manifestation of differences between Western and East Europe. Topography provided a concrete physical medium upon which Enlightenment scholars could represent this spatial relativity: “Dominant conceptions of space installed within the political imaginary

16 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 118.

17 J. Nicolas Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Toward a Geography of Modernity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 2.

18 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 64.

of the West a presumptive identity between ‘rationality’ and ‘space’; that the one was inscribed within another.”¹⁹ Had the “brutish” manners and customs that were noted in the East been identified in the West, a claim to cultural superiority by latter would have been made difficult. Instead, Eastern Europe’s geographic position in relation to the West rationalized the Eastern regions’ liminal placement on the map of the civilized world.

This map was not merely an abstraction. During this period, cartographers were dispatched to Eastern Europe in order to chart its various regions. The observations documented in their travelogues were translated and once again rendered visual in their maps. From the Enlightenment standpoint, the mapping of Eastern Europe was an expression of intellectual mastery, an undertaking that the countries of Eastern Europe were unequipped to execute themselves. Furthermore, these maps indicated that “the lost lands of Eastern Europe had been discovered, traveled, studied, and stamped according to the enlightenment standards of Western Europe.”²⁰ Since maps always intimate the “meaning” of place, the agenda of the cartographer must be kept in mind.²¹ In this case, the cartographical representations of Eastern European worked in tandem with the body of writing categorizing the habits and customs of the region’s demographic. Cartography, possessing the scientific quality that Enlightenment Europe so prized, provided an empirical diagram that “produced and organized knowledge of ‘these lost lands.’”²²

As Wolff intimates, these maps are less of a testament to Enlightenment scientific precision, and more of an exposition of the “philosophical geography” of the age. In other

19 Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1993), 137.

20 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 145.

21 “Cultural criticism has unraveled the seam between text and context as a deliberate political gesture...so that the late twentieth century cannot separate from the political involvement of its “maps of meaning” in the diverse worlds which they seek to represent.” Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, 312.

22 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 145.

words, the ideology espoused by these maps is more important than their accuracy.²³ Like the travel journals produced during this period, the cartographic projects of the eighteenth century

represented an ability to see the world as a whole, an ability which amounted to an ability to know the world. It is a very particular form of knowledge, a special exercise in the power of surveillance [...]. The map maker had to ‘forget’ or erase earlier knowledges of the structure of the world, and he overlaid these erased knowledges with different ways of knowing the world in the commentary accompanying the map itself.²⁴

Hence, the mapping and writing of Eastern Europe was not merely a benign act of amalgamating encyclopedic knowledge of the world. It was a gesture signifying the intellectual capabilities of Enlightenment Europe: its ability to know the world, to represent it homogenously, to monitor it through a system of knowledge-power, and thereby, to epistemologically possess it.²⁵

Rather than combatting the European philosophical geography, Russia and the countries of the Balkans tried to earn a place on the Western map by adopting Enlightenment ideals. Their attempts to Westernize their foreign and domestic policies

23 “While cartographies insisted upon their work as a matter of mathematics and astronomy, in fact there were far from objective forces at work in the making of maps. Armies and treaties of course, rearranged the map of Europe, especially Eastern Europe, throughout the eighteenth century, but maps and atlases also possessed a power of presentation over the land [...]. The caustic comments of unemployed spirits in a philosophical and cartographical underground—men who might get to do some coloring, even if locked out of scientific mapmaking—only emphasized the power of the profession to represent the world to the public. The impulse to color Hungary as independent, neither Ottoman nor Hapsburg, though flouting political reality, acquired cultural plausibility from the eighteenth-century idea of a domain between Europe and the Orient, the idea of Eastern Europe.” Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 149-51.

24 Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 132 .

25 “Certainly, in inventing of Eastern Europe the Enlightenment created the cultural context for presumptuous projects of power in the eighteenth century and thereafter.” Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 362.

were also reflected spatially. The European models for the reformation of Russian society and culture, which Peter I attempted to deploy via St. Petersburg, were problematically imbued with Western representations of Russia, which paradoxically resisted the concept of Eastern Europe as a cultivated region. Had Peter the Great forged new architectural forms suitable for the location of St. Petersburg, his capital would have testified to the innovation and genius of his nation. Instead, the city's "inexhaustible, maddening multiplicity of pillars, colonnades, and porticoes," which borrowed European architectural forms, produced a "foreign [...] alienating atmosphere" for its residents and visitors.²⁶ Similarly, "The history of Croatia bound it to Europe with the strong emotional commitment of a frontier province. Its unity has been confirmed in the seventeenth- and eighteen-century struggles with the Turks [...]. The baroque grandeur of their cities aped Vienna, Naples, or Madrid."²⁷ Thus, rather than speaking to cultural exceptionalism, this new architectural landscape adopted in Eastern Europe signaled, what Relph calls, the "disneyfication" of space: "a popular and kitschy expression of belief in the objective mastery of nature and of change: monsters and history and wild animals are brought safely under control."²⁸

The Eastern European literary tradition emerges out of this landscape, in and against an authorial tension with the West. The writers of these marginalized regions searched for the words to express the "I" of its people amidst a landscape constructed by the "They." In the words of Ashcroft, "this tension, this gap between the experienced place and the language available to describe it, lies at the very heart of the experience of

26 Joseph Brodsky, "A Guide to a Renamed City," in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 72.

27 Jeremy Catto, Introduction to *On the Edge of Reason*, by Miroslav Krleža (New York: New Directions Books, 1987), 8.

28 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London; Pion Limited, 1976), 99.

[...] displacement.”²⁹ This brand of intellectual and artistic displacement is exemplified in V.G Belinsky’s 1849 essay, *Thoughts and Notes*, in which he addresses the difficulties of writing a Russian identity: “our literature, like our society, presents a spectacle of diverse contradictions, opposites, extremes and idiosyncrasies. This is due to the fact that it did not originate by itself but in foreign soil.”³⁰ Belinsky called upon Russian writers to construct a yet unformed national identity against the intentionally Europeanized aesthetics of St. Petersburg. Gogol was deemed the pioneer of this project. Yet, Gogol himself was deeply mired in representing the inauthenticity of Russian spaces. In a letter to his mother, he writes:

In general, every capital is characterized by its people, who impress on it the stamp of nationality, but Petersburg had absolutely no character: the foreigners who have settled here have made themselves at home and are not at all like foreigners, whereas the Russians for their part have turned foreign and have become neither one nor the other.³¹

Thus, from the turn of the eighteenth century onwards, Russian and Balkan writers and intellectuals inhabited spaces that made it impossible to locate and script an authentic regional culture or identity without including the haunting presence of the Western gaze. The European aesthetic was not only disseminated through architecture, but also through the commodities that began to circulate in the cities of Eastern Europe. In Russia, consumerism helped proliferate the country’s new Westernized image: by forcing the nation to adopt Western fashion and manners, it sought to supplant local traditions with Western dress and customs. The modernizing reforms that were begun by Peter the Great reshaped the very nature of Russian spaces, imbuing them with foreign

29 Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformations*, 153.

30 Belinsky, V.G. “Thoughts and Notes on Russian Literature,” in Belinsky, Chenyshevsky, and Dobrolyuber, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: Dutton, 1962), 10.

31 Nikolai Gogol, *The Letters of Nicolai Gogol*, trans. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 29.

objects. Since the Russian people did not know how to interact with the foreign elements that were seeping into their culture and changing their society, the political machine could fully dictate how they were to be consumed. In two ways, the proliferation of demand for Western products worked in tandem with national political goals. First, the demand for Western goods solidified economic ties with Europe. Second, in line with Koepnick's argument, the consumption of Western products perpetuated an aestheticized politics, which masked the vacuum of civil liberties with liberal consumerist practices.

From the political perspective, literature too was seen as a cultural product that used European aesthetics and transformed them into works that signified the regions' creative genius. As such, literature was regarded as a political tool assisting in the propagation of a collective memory and narrative. The Eastern European literary tradition, however, never succumbed to this role. Instead, its writers exposed the discontinuities in their nation's collective consciousness by scripting the societal instability that consumerism attempted to veil. While commodity culture produced a palliative effect on consumers, ridding them of the burden of self-reflection, the self-conscious critical eye of the writer inquires: what distress is these objects placating?

In *On the Edge of Reason*, the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža explores this question. His novel investigates the gap between his country's industrial and commercial development and its lagging institutionalization of Enlightenment democratic ideals. In his novel, Krleža's antagonist, Director-General Domaćinski, is regarded as a national hero, who embodies and fuels the nation's socio-economic progress:

Just look, please, at those coal mines, the ships, the ship windows displaying a great variety of goods, and ask whose achievement all this is and who should be given credit for its existence in our country, where practically ten or twenty years earlier there was nothing. It is the achievement of a single lonely individual—a man like Domaćinski, who is by our standards a kind of superman, an idealist who deals with economics not out of egoistic motives, but in the higher,

architectural sense, prompted by pure creativity, motivated by the human impulse that has through the centuries raised all epochs of man to a higher level.³²

Ostensibly, Domaćinski is portrayed as the prototypical Romantic figure of Croatia's creative genius—a civilizing force of the country and its people. In reality, he is an unpunished murderer. When Krleža's protagonist recalls that the Domaćinsk had once shot and killed four trespassing peasants at one of the Director-General's dinner parties, Domaćinski accuses the protagonist of slander. The case goes to the criminal court and the protagonist is ultimately indicted and incarcerated. In the context of the novel, however, it is Domaćinsk. with his "primary-school cultural background," who is brought to trial.³³ The title and context of the novel reflect the absence of reason, the central Enlightenment ideal, in the Croatian justice system and in the country's society as a whole.

On the Edge of Reason reveals the superficial, mutated forms of Westernization that arose in the Eastern Europe as a byproduct of its anxiety of influence. As Krleža's cerebral novel demonstrates, Russian and Balkan writers were subject to this anxiety as well. Though their artistic output did not yield to economic or political demands, their fixation on the consumerist culture that grips their countries reflects the crisis of their national identities and the unenlightened socio-political policies of their governments. From Gogol's obsession with St. Petersburg's fashion, to Bulgokov's chapter "Black Magic and Its Expose" in *The Master and Margarita*, to Pelevin's depiction of Russia's contemporary advertisement industry in *Homo Zapiens*, Russian prose continually documents the effects of commodity culture on its people. This theme, which persists into

32 Miroslav Krleža, *On the Edge of Reason*, trans. Zora Depolo (New York: New Directions Books, 1976), 101.

33 Krleža, *On the Edge of Reason*, 28

the twenty-first century, indicates Eastern Europe's continual subservience to Western commercialism and by extension, to its aesthetic standards and its gaze. As Wolff writes:

The "iron curtain" seamlessly fit the earlier tracing, and it was almost forgotten, or neglected, or suppressed that an older epoch in the history of ideas first divided the continent, creating the disunion of Western Europe and Eastern Europe. [...] [The idea of Eastern Europe is] also certain to outlive the collapse of Communism, surviving in the public and culture and its mental maps.³⁴

Today, the propagation of the idea of Eastern Europe is put in the hands of Western commercial and media outlets. Boym makes this fact clear in an interview with a Sarajevan actress who states that "Sarajevo wasn't destroyed during the siege but it might be destroyed now by Steven Spielberg."³⁵ This sensibility is further echoed by Ugrešić who, in "Europe in Sepia," argues that the remnants of Yugoslav ideology is transformed and neutralized into commodity goods.³⁶ Rather than thwarting the proliferation of Soviet kitsch, the governments of Eastern Europe continue to utilize these Western commercial systems to bolster their own despotic policies, policies that continue to place Russia and Balkans on the margins of West.

The manner in which tyrannical kitsch manifests in the countries of former Yugoslavia will be explored in the second chapter of this project. Using Jergović's *Sarajevo Marlboro* and Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* as case studies, this chapter will address the contemporary political uses of commodity culture in the Balkans. Jergović's fiction will diagnose the societal ills that result from a society-wide enslavement to Western material goods. As war rages in Sarajevo, it is Western commodities that pacify the majority of Jergović's protagonists. Lending a sense of normalcy to the besieged city, consumerist products quell the discontent of its

34 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 4.

35 Svetlana Boym, *Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 246.

36 Ugrešić, "Europe In Sepia," 11.

inhabitants, making them more readily governable. As Jergović shows, consumerist culture not only homogenizes the city's demographic, but commoditizes their suffering. The persistent presence of Western media and news channels levels the subjective experience of war, turning it into kitsch. In Ugrešić's exilic novel, the systems of kitschification are addressed and reversed. The author offers the possibility of finding freedom through kitsch, not by escaping it, but by reappropriating the quotidian objects that inundate our common places, and preserving them from their intimate, mnemonic value. Such a treatment of kitsch presents the exilic subject with a method for reconstituting the fragments of their shattered lives and rehabilitating their memories outside of a scripted national narrative.

The works of contemporary Russian writers that I will examine in the third chapter will bear the marks of their forebears. Victor Pelevin's *Generation P* and Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* both define their national zeitgeist through the construction of fantastical worlds hinging on reality. Their novels grapple with the effects of kitsch on commonplace experiences and speak to the repercussions of globalization—the contemporary iteration of Westernization—on their culture and society. While the types of kitsch take modern forms, and speaks to Russia present-day realities (or un-realities), their commitment to their literary tradition reiterates that only in letters could the Russian writer find himself at home.

Zion and Hebrew Literature

The Eastern Europe of the Western imagination constituted a geographical arc from Russia to the Middle East: “the voyages to St. Petersburg and to Constantinople were intimately related as passages through Eastern Europe, so much so that they could

even be superimposed, and traveled together at the same time.”³⁷ This arc relegates Russia, the Balkans, and Israel to the periphery of Western Europe and links these regions in their anxiety of Western influence. The Eastern European origins of Modern Hebrew literature further cement ties between all three regions, as does Hebrew literature’s connection to Zionism, which began as a socialist ideology and emerged out of the zeitgeist of turn-of-the-twentieth-century European, and more specifically, Eastern European thought. This section will delineate the complex ties between Hebrew fiction and the national and spatial project of Zionism, which even while retaining its European political and aesthetic models aimed to negate the European Jewish Diaspora and divorce the image of the empowered New Hebrew from the weak figure of the Eastern European Jew.

In the prologue of his critical work, *The Politics of Canonicity*, Michael Gluzman asserts that, “Zionism emerged from the outset almost as a literary utopia.”³⁸ Gluzman’s seemingly simple assertion underscores the obvious but non-negligible fact that, unlike many other “isms,” Zionist ideology—the word “Zionism” itself—is embedded in place. Cultivated for and by European Jews, Zionism sought an end to the suffering of Diasporic Jewry through the founding of a Jewish nation-state. This state would not only be a place, but also, as the word Zion intimates, a utopic haven. Gluzman’s statement evokes the complexity of an ideology that centered on the establishment of concrete nation-state that was implicitly a utopia, a non-place. In the interstitial years between the birth of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel, literature

37 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 48.

38 Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 4.

became the yearned for non-place that unified the Diaspora and allowed for the imaginary forging of the triad of “nation, territory, and language.”³⁹

The revival of the Hebrew language fueled the Zionist movement. From the Zionist perspective, the multiplicity of vernaculars spoken by Jews across Europe reinforced their existence in the Diaspora. Thus, the Hebrew Language Revival promised to gather the dispersed communities of European Jews into one nation using a single unified tongue. The Hebrew revival negated the Diaspora by textually rooting the Jews to the land of Canaan—a mythic time and place of nationhood.

The revival of the Hebrew language was not only regarded as a preliminary means of uniting a scattered European Jewish community into a nation; just as Eastern European literature was assigned a political task, Hebrew literature was also used as an ideological tool legitimating and announcing the singularity of Jewish culture to the rest of the Western world. Along side it came the aggressive denunciation of vernacular literatures such as Yiddish, “a rejection so resolute that it has come to be described in military terms: the Battalion of the Defenders of the Hebrew Language Hebrew in what has come to be known as the “language war” (milchemet ha-leshonot).”⁴⁰ Despite the fact that some of the most accomplished Hebrew writers continued to write in Yiddish, the vernacular languages of the Jews living in Europe were in ideological tension with the Zionist project: regional vernaculars such as Yiddish and Ladino exposed the fractured existence of the Jewish nation living in the Diaspora—so fractured that they could not communicate with one another.

Ostensibly the “language war” fought to consolidate the disparate Jewish language communities into one. To the Eastern European Jewish community that was

39 Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity*, 3.

40 Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity*, 143.

pioneering Zionism, Hebrew was positioned in marked contrast to Yiddish, which was not only “the language of home, family events, and intimacy,” but also a marker of Eastern-ness.⁴¹ Yiddish was the language that belonged to the Jews imagined by Western Europe, an image that the Zionist project sought to overwrite with the creation of the New Jew.⁴² In other words, Hebrew was not only the language that would unify the Diaspora, but also the literary tongue that would represent the aesthetic and cultural values of a new, strong Jewish nation to the rest of the world. Though the revival of the Hebrew language is often conflated with the birth of modern Hebrew literature, it is fruitful to consider “Hebrew” and “literature” in separate terms. It is important to remember that early Hebrew writers were European. The anxiety of being schooled within the European literary traditions, and the desire to masterfully employ Western literary forms in a newly revived language, all while disowning the European Diaspora, complicates the place of Hebrew literature as a “Zionist utopia.”

Hanan Hever argues that “the Zionist principles of the negation of the Diaspora and the creation of a national majority culture became the central criteria of the aesthetic that dominated Hebrew literature and culture”; however, this national majority culture and its literature, while spatially severing itself from West, still embraced the same European aesthetics as the secular Jewish communities in the Diaspora.⁴³ The genres adopted by Hebrew writers first in Europe and Palestine, and later Israel, were European.

41 Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity*, 168.

42 “Traveling east from Minsk, through present-day Belarus, Coxe took shelter for the night from a storm in the barn, and there saw that ‘several figures, in full black robes and with long beards, were employed in stirring a large cauldron.’ [...] As [Coxe] demonstrated his own enlightenment [...], he suggested to his readers the disturbingly enlightened character of Eastern Europe and the Jews.” Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, 29.

43 Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 6.

Bailik's Romanticism, Tchernihovsky's Neo-Classicism, and Brenner's Modernism all indicate that "Jewish literature attempted to catch up with the developments of the European literary tradition since the Renaissance (including its flashbacks toward classical literature) and to spread out over the whole range of genre, both in original works and in translation."⁴⁴ Undeniably rooted in European aesthetic standards, Hebrew literature embodies the spatial and conceptual paradoxes of the Zionism: an ideology that attempted to reject the European Jewish experience, while simultaneously creating a Hebrew nation on even more European terms.

If we return to Gluzman's definition of Hebrew literature as a Zionist place that harbored the seeds of statehood, then it is imperative to fully examine its geography. In order to do so, we must trace its borders, which, within the context of the Zionist ideology, is synonymous with the physical territory of the new Jewish homeland. At these borders, we remember that literature is itself, not just a disseminator of culture, but also a cultural product, and for that reason, it is at this liminal space that Zionist ideology and Hebrew literature clash. As a cultural product, Hebrew literature is deeply inscribed into a multitude of European capitals, from Odessa, to Berlin, to Rome, where literary culture was foremost disseminated. Thus, mapping the space of Hebrew literature inevitably means charting a map of Europe.

Hebrew literature adopted genres and forms that were fundamentally European. The historical moment of the Hebrew language revival, the mid-nineteenth century, determined Hebrew's relationship to Jewish nationhood in ways that Zionism could not account for. At this time, the nature of the European metropolis was changing.⁴⁵ As the

44 Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 127.

45 "For a number of social and historical reasons the metropolis of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century moved into quiet new

city began to transform, so did the relationship between language and nation. Immigrants from the provinces as well as from other countries moved to European capitals seeking work and education. A multiplicity of languages echoed through the streets of European cities, and most of their residents, such as Brenner in London, or Bialik in Berlin, were polyglots. What bound these people together was not their language but their art:

Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or native visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of medium; of their own practices.⁴⁶

At a time when Zionism intentionally adopted Hebrew as the official Jewish language, the Hebrew writers living in European metropolises—many of whom were part of the first generation of Jews to participate in European secular culture—found themselves in a milieu that regarded language as hap chance:

Thus language was perceived quite differently. It was [...] in many ways arbitrary and conventional. To the immigrants especially, with their new second common language, language was more evident as a medium—a medium that could be shaped and reshaped—than as a social custom.⁴⁷

In order for Hebrew to enter the world stage as a literary language, it had to also enter the “community of medium,” which made language a secondary concern to the artistic project itself. The milieu of literary production in the modern metropolis made the Hebrew literature a fundamentally fraught place to support the Zionist triad of

cultural directions. It was now much more than the very large city, or even the capital city of an important nation. It was a place where new social and economic and cultural relations, beyond both city and nation in their older sense were being formed. Raymond Williams, “The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism,” in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. Peter Brooker (New York: Routledge, 1992) 90.

46 Williams, “The Metropolis,” 90-1.

47 Williams, “The Metropolis,” 91.

language, nation and territory. As Hever points out, “a careful reading of the literary historical narrative can pressure it to reveal moments of rupture and reversal that have the effect of undermining and diverting efforts to construct a hegemonic Zionist story.”⁴⁸ This “rupture” can be traced to the modes of the literature itself. Many Hebrew writers, such as Uri Gnesin, abandoned the Zionist ideal and chose to remain in the diaspora in order to create “art for art’s sake.” However, even those Hebrew writers who saw literature as a socio-political medium for the propagation of Zionism still utilized European literary models, including genres such as modernism, which attempted to sever the connection between language and state. Even in nascence, the literary utopia of Zion espoused two opposing ethos: in content, it played into the Hebrew national project; in form, it divorced literature from all socio-political concerns.

Nevertheless, the commitment to cementing the ties between the Hebrew language and the nation persisted after the founding of Israel in 1948. “Two weeks after the declaration of Israeli independence, the daily *Al Ha-mishmar* reported that the provisional government was looking at Hebrew terms for the words ‘passport’ and visa [...] All areas of life were soon to be Hebraized.”⁴⁹ Once statehood was achieved, the Zionist ideal of severing Hebrew culture from its associations with the Diaspora was made geographically feasible. Hebrew literature, which now distinguished itself as Israeli literature, was a logical extension of this national project. Moshe Shamir’s famous opening line to *Elik’s Story*, “Elik was born of the sea,” encapsulated the post-Statehood ideological demands of fiction. In early Israeli literature, the New Israeli Jew emerged from a mythological time and an indiscrete space, cut from all familial and cultural ties to

48 Hever, *Hebrew Canon*, 2.

49 Michael Gluzman, “Sovereignty and Melancholia: Israeli Poetry after 1948,” *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 3 (2013): 166.

European Jewry. After the War of Independence, protagonists like Elik disseminated the new Jewish national narrative, a narrative that was now institutionally sanctioned by the Israeli government.

In 1949, David Ben-Gurion addressed a group of Israel's most prominent writers, defining literature's role in the national project: "We must forge a new Hebrew style that could not have existed in the Diaspora. We shall have to solidify our connection with our past, [but] also pave our way toward the messianic vision of peace on earth."⁵⁰ Ben Gurion's speech re-emphasizes literature's role in the creation of national unity; however, it is not the literary content but its "style" that concerned the Prime Minister. While calling for the production of a national literature, Ben Gurion intimates the inherent foreignness of the Hebrew literary aesthetic underlying its content.

Immediately after the War of Independence, however, the position of literature, especially of poetry, was recalibrated within the national ideology. The waves of immigrants moving to Israel after 1948 dramatically changed the demographic of the country, shifting poetry's role in the propagation of national culture to the margins. Gluzman addressed the disillusionment with the Zionist project that marked the national-intellectual zeitgeist of the period, and refers to it as the "melancholy of sovereignty." No more than four years after Israel's independence, the *Likrat* generation of poets—amongst whom were some of Israel's now canonical writers, such as Yehuda Amichai—announced their "political noncommitment." Turning away from Zionist ideology, the poets published verse that cast its gaze back to the West in "an effort to form links with European and Anglophone modernism."⁵¹ These European literary movements were

50 Gluzman, "Sovereignty and Melancholia," 167.

51 Gluzman, "Sovereignty and Melancholia," 172.

fundamentally anti-institutional and anti-establishment, privileging the individual's subjective experience to the collective consciousness of the nation.

The new literary “styles” that Ben Gurion envisioned to mark the singularity of Israeli culture never came to fruition. In fact, Hebrew culture was so essential to, and deeply embedded in, the European literary models that any experimental aesthetics that would have been deemed avant-garde would have also been taken from Europe. While the State gained sovereignty, Yerach Gover argues that Israeli literature “lack[ed] the degree of autonomy—of text, genre, significance, and position—that is normally attributed to what is usually called ‘literature.’”⁵² When speaking of literary “autonomy,” Gover refers to Israeli literature’s entrenchment in Zionist culture; however, as the *Likrat* generation proves, Israeli literature demonstrated cultural allegiances that were not singularly Zionist, allegiances that continued to maintain European aesthetic standards at the cost, consciously or unconsciously, of the national ideology.

If we are to regard Hebrew literature in Hever’s terms, not as a Jewish but as a “Western modernist national phenomenon,” then we must also take into account that Hebrew literature was born into an age when the intellectual project of nationalism was on the wane.⁵³ The onset of modernism, both aesthetically, and as it concretely manifested and reinforced itself in the metropolis, shattered the traditions, ideals, and narratives associated with nationhood. The idea of creating a community through mutual intelligibility was shattered. Gluzman quotes the Viennese poet, Abraham Ben-Yitzhak: “here devastation begins. Language has done its deed, and behind it there is nothing.” Gluzman goes on to note that, “whereas European modernism witnessed the

⁵² Yerach Gover, *Zionism: The Limits of Moral Discourse in Israeli Hebrew Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 2.

⁵³ Hever, *Hebrew Canon*, 3.

crisis of address around the turn of the century, in Hebrew this crisis surfaced belatedly, only after 1948.”⁵⁴ The crisis of address in Israel points to the fissures in the linguistic representation of human or national experience, undermining the neat national narrative that supported Israeli ideology. Similar to its appearance in the Russian literary tradition, it testifies to the existence of an ineffable counter-narrative of trauma that permeated through Israel in the years following independence. Thus, Hebrew literature—while it adopted modernist literary tendencies—did not, and could not, undergo this ideological identity crisis until the State of Israel came into existence.⁵⁵

Within the first ten years of Israeli statehood, Leah Goldberg publishes her “Four Sons” sequence, and Yehuda Amichai, his poem “And This is Your Glory”:

I’ve yoked together my large silence and my small cry

Like an ox and an ass. I’ve been through low and through high

I’ve been to Jerusalem, in Rome. And perhaps in Mecca anon.

But now God is hiding, and man cried, Where have you gone.⁵⁶

Amichai’s speaker sequentially, and seemingly chronologically, moves from Zion back to the Diaspora, and from the Jewish to the Christian and Muslim faiths. In four lines of verse, Amichai unifies the three capitals of religion under a singular condition: man’s incapacity to find faith in the modern era. Whether referring to god or the national idea,

54 Gluzman. “Sovereignty and Melancholia,” 177.

55 European Modernism reached its height as a response to historical events of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: Western imperialism and subsequently, World War I. In this respect, the modern metropolis should be regarded as both a space for these ideas to be explored, and also a phenomenon that demonstrated the splintering of traditions and languages. Likewise, the crisis of address in Hebrew literature reflected the post-1948 intellectual climate, which grappled with the horrors of the Holocaust and the War of Independence.

56 Amichai, Yehuda. *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 11.

the intertextual question echoing Psalms, “where have you gone?” does not receive an answer.

The silence that Amichai writes about encapsulates the modernist view of the human condition. It is not that man has lost faith, but rather, it is the institutions that are expected to provide solace to man that have failed. Amichai’s speaker is the poetic prototype of the “secular pilgrim” protagonist, who will appear in Israeli fiction ten years later: “A pilgrim [...] is someone who visits a holy place. The hero we are discussing here is a secular pilgrim, a pilgrim who has no holy place. His pilgrimage is a movement of the soul, a certain thirst, a silence, a revolt.”⁵⁷ In “And This is Your Glory,” Amichai’s pilgrim strips Jerusalem of its messianic exceptionalism. It is no different than Rome or Mecca—spaces where truth is ultimately absent. At the level of language, Hebrew itself fails. As a biblical and a modern language, as the language of religion and of ideology, Hebrew is incapable of providing the answer to man’s most urgent question. Ending his seemingly interrogatory sentence with a full stop rather than a question mark, Amichai suggests that the inquiry itself cannot be posed.

While fiction continued to play an essential role in the Zionist project, it did so through government-sanctioned, institutionalized readings of canonic texts. These sanctioned readings masked the surfacing of the crisis of address in Israeli poetry, which was coupled with the poets’ growing ambivalence towards nationalism. The *Likrat* generation’s conscious decision to form ties to the European literary tradition reengaged them with the community of medium fostered within the European metropolis. In the first

⁵⁷ Yitshak Orpaz, *Hatsalyan hahiloni* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1982), 13, quoted in Yigal Schwartz and Jeffrey M. Green, “The Person, the Path, and the Melody: A Brief History of Identity in Israeli Literature.” *Prooftexts* 20, no. 3 (2000): 327.

fifty years of the twentieth century, however, the very nature of the European city had changed yet again:

There could hardly be a greater cultural contrast than that between the technologies and institutions of what is still mainly called ‘modern art’ — writing, painting, sculpture, drama, in minority presses and magazines, small galleries and exhibitions, city-center theaters—and the effective output of the late twentieth-century metropolis, in film, television, radio and recorded music. Conservative analysts still reserve the categories “art’ or “the arts’ to the earlier technologies and institutions, with continued attachment to the metropolis as the centre in which an enclave can be found for them or in which they can, often as a “national’ achievement, be displayed. But this is hardly compatible with a continued intellectual emphasis on their ‘modernity’, when the actual modern media are of so different a kind.⁵⁸

The metropolis had become the space of technological innovation. The production of “art” in the classic sense of the term had become secondary to the output of media. Israeli writers looked to Europe for an aesthetic direction that would help them grapple, not only with the ethical role of poetry in the post-Holocaust age, but also with the very position of poetry in the age of technology, commercialism, and globalism.

In “And This is Your Glory,” we see elements of this struggle. Technology comes in the way of the speaker’s spiritual quest. Though the poem begins with the speaker’s travels across ancient capitals, he quickly becomes mired in everyday objects, “t-shirts,” “fridges.” All the while, “knights” and “ancient statues” are treated as relics of outdated cultural ideals. Read in the context of the Zionist canon, a satirically echo of Tchernichovsky’s “Before the Statue of Apollo” is heard. Amichai’s speaker remarks that the statue of the Greek god, which Tchernichovsky’s regards as the model for the New Jew, “without deeds and heroes, has greater charms.” Ultimately, the speaker is no knight and God is no grand omnipotent being, but a handy man “always repairing.” Amichai subordinates the aesthetic tropes of “high” literature, making them subject to the

58 Williams, “The Metropolis,” 83.

mundane realities of commonplace technologies that mark the modern world. His prose style, seemingly simple and readable, underscores his rejection of Ben Gurion's call for a literature that would bring on the messianic age. In his verse, allusions to Judaic texts are juxtaposed with the rhetoric of twentieth century media, intimating an equivalence in the cultural status of the two linguistic formats.⁵⁹ Simultaneously, his poem reveals how commonplace objects have become deified in the modern age, and utilized as a panacea that masks the failures of both religion and the Zionist project.

Amichai's verse romanticizes neither Europe nor Israel; instead, his poetry attests to the existence of cultural and economic roadways to the West that made the permeation of global culture inevitable and even preferred by the Israeli government. The European postmodern trend toward globalization became integrated into Israeli nationalist political and economic models. As Ilan Pappé notes, "The nation, which in the process of its own consolidation suppress regional [...] affiliations of all kinds is today on the decline in the face of rising supra-national and infra-national tendencies. Where it had earlier conducted an offensive against localities, it has itself become 'the local' and is on the defensive."⁶⁰ As part of its function, the modern metropolis absorbs the "local," creating a cultural and technological hegemony resting on media and consumerism. Thus, the Israeli project of nation building necessitated that it create a space for the global marketplace within its ideology.

59 This is a rhetorical move that we will see again in the Castel-Bloom's prose: "[Castel-Bloom's language] is informed by biblical allusions, clever word game, and an awareness of the ideological dynamics of language. Moreover, the Hebrew resonates with readers because it acknowledges and incorporates its own perpetual development through television, slang, new technologies and the languages of immigrants." Karen Grumberg. *Afterward to Dolly City*, by Orly Castel-Bloom. (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010), 163-4.

60 Uri Ram, "The State of the Nation: Contemporary Challenges to Zionism in Israel," *Constellations* 6, no. 3 (1999): 327.

Ilan Pappé's discussion of Israeli media examines the fine balancing act between media and nation building: "Israeli media [is characterized by] a self-imposed national censorship on one hand and an attempt to act as a liberal marketplace of ideas on the other."⁶¹ Pappé's turn of phrase "liberal marketplace of ideas" does not connote the freedom of expression. Rather, Pappé implies that ideas must first be filtered through machine of Zionist ideology, and be made consumable for the masses. Israeli writers, such as Amos Oz, who had entered the national canon, and who hold the status of public intellectuals, embody this intersection between ideology and the liberal market place of ideas.

Nevertheless, the advent of globalization brought with it new modes of expression for minority groups. The experiences of marginalized Israeli demographics—Holocaust survivors, Palestinians, and Mizrahi Jews—began to be scripted in Hebrew as early as the nineteen sixtie. So as to suppress Diasporic and subaltern voices from inserting themselves within the national spaces, especially after Israel's defeat in the Yom Kippur war, the State and its national writers pressed for an ideological return to the Hebrew literary canon. It was not until the nineteen eighties, when the Zionist narrative was re-evaluated by the New Historicists that the "specters of heterogeneous subjects and 'unaesthetic writing'" could be heard.⁶² A new wave of Israeli academics and writers, promoting an alternative, post-Zionist discourse, contested the rubric of this canon.⁶³ Just

61 Pappé, Ilan. "Post-Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians Part II: The Media." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 26, no. 3 (1997): 42.

62 Hever, *Hebrew Canon*, 4.

63 A detailed discussion of the Kashua's and Castel-Bloom's novels in the context of the Postzionist dialogue is outside the scope of this project; however, it is important to gloss the term. Postzionism refers to an academic and literary discourse that aims to critically reexamine and deconstruct the Zionist narrative and ideology. Calling into question the historical and ethical foundations of Zionism, and citing it as the root cause of Israel's

as Amichai's poetry rejected the "high literary" aesthetic of Zionist nationalism and adopted a modern metropolitan readability, so too do many contemporary Israeli fictions writer choose to write in a "thin Hebrew"—a language which, in its simplicity, strips itself of Zionist ideology.⁶⁴

The locally and internationally renowned writers Sayed Kashua and Orly Castel-Bloom are amongst the contemporary Israeli authors who choose to employ an unadorned Hebrew in their prose. As a Palestinian Israeli and a Mizrahi woman respectively, Kashua's and Castel-Bloom's identities script them into the margins of Israeli society and the national narrative.⁶⁵ Their thin Hebrew reflects both their cultural status and their aesthetic intervention into the national ideology.⁶⁶ By looking at the opening pages of Castel-Bloom's *Human Parts*, we begin to see the manner in which her use of flat language reveals the fundamental alienation of contemporary Israeli society from its

most pressing socio-political problems, Postzionism argues that Israel's social, cultural, and political realities demand the definition of the Jewish State be reworked.

64 "Thin Hebrew" is a term primarily associated with Orly Castel-Bloom's fiction. First used as a pejorative, the term was later reappropriated by literary critics to signal the innovation of the author's prose: "Without acknowledging the negative connotations of the terms, critics have praised her unique style by labeling it 'schizophrenic' and 'autistic' (Gurevitz 1990), 'flat' and 'thin' (Naiger 1993), 'anorexic' (Miller 1990), and 'dead' (Miron 1989)." Deborah A Starr, "Reterritorializing the Dream: Orly Castel-Bloom's Remapping of Israeli Identity," in *Mapping Jewish Identities*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein (New York: NYU Press), 223.

65 It is important to note that, unlike other renowned Mizrahi writers such as Sammy Michael, Erez Biton, or the new generation of Ars Poetica poets, Orly Castel-Bloom herself does not directly participate in the discourse about Mizrahi identity politics. Born in Tel Aviv to Egyptian parents, Castel-Bloom grew up speaking French, not Arabic, and can easily pass for Ashkenazi. Until the publication of her latest book, *An Egyptian Novel* (2015), her literature has focused on portraying the experience of the women in Israel's militarized society.

66 Their unembellished prose not only makes their fiction accessible to a wide Israeli readership, but also makes their literature more translatable, in turn giving both writers access to the global literary marketplace.

spaces. Castel-Bloom's protagonists are mired in the commercial and ideological culture of the nation, both of which distract them from confronting and coping with the wave of terrorist attacks that are destroying their country. Castel-Bloom begins her novel with a lengthy description of the unexpected cold front for which Israel is infrastructurally unprepared. While most of the country's demographic suffers from the inclement weather, media men take advantage of the situation:

The weather forecasters, especially those appearing on television, became celebrities, and the public couldn't get enough of them. This being the case, they began to take part in commercials for heaters, umbrellas, raincoats and other accessories for the protection of Israelis taken by surprise by the cold and the moisture, and thus made a lot of money on the side, which made them all the more popular and expensive.⁶⁷

Only after discussing the television forecast and the commercials does the narrator reveal that the real source of anxiety in the country is the terrorist attacks of the Second Intifada. Yet, even as the narrator turns our attention to the suicide bombings, the tone of the novel does not change: "People who had wrapped themselves up well against the cold before leaving home, and felt more or less protected, were blown up in the nearby streets." Castel-Bloom's Israel is one in which citizen cannot tell the difference between the threat of cold and of terrorism.⁶⁸ In such an absurdist manner, she reveals the gravity of the milieu in which she is situating the reader.

Yet, this absurd tone is only a thinly veiled critique of the ideology imbued in Israeli commonplaces. In the first pages of her novel, Castel-Bloom not only provides background for her readers, but also places us within the contemporary psychological landscape of the country. The author's fixation on the mundane lives of Israelis in a time

67. Orly Castel-Bloom, *Human Parts*, trans. Dalya Bilu (Boston: David R. Godine, 2003), 5.

68 Castel-Bloom, *Human Parts*, 6.

crisis testifies to the fact that “the way Israelis interact with the vernacular places of their day-to-day lives potentially reveals as much about their identity as does the relationship they have with the nation.”⁶⁹ In her novel, Castel-Bloom scripts a myriad of characters each of whom is positioned to play into “national, social, and personal plot” constructed for them by the Israeli political machine.⁷⁰ The spaces that they inhabit are all ridden with government-sanctioned forms of consumerism and escapism that act as palliatives for the national crisis. This, Castel-Bloom intimates, is the culturally accepted antidote to fear in a country that can neither protect its citizens from the cold nor from terror.

Castel-Bloom’s unornamented prose separates her fiction from the Zionist literary aesthetic, which “is riven with a distinctive figurative language, particularly evident in literary texts, that correspond to the need to represent contemporary Israel as a totality and as a living utopia— an actually existing Zion.”⁷¹ In the proceeding chapter, I will examine how Castel-Bloom and Kashua employ thin Hebrew as a mode of addressing and negating the latent ideological systems disseminating kitsch through Israeli spaces. Their focus on the pervasiveness of kitsch in Israeli culture reveals how the “atopic spatial discourse resulting from the disregard of material, concrete elements of space lead to an unjustified and misleading erasure of differences and, finally, to a dangerous conflation of vastly different experiences and identities.”⁷² Their texts simultaneously disrupt the construction of the Hebrew canon and unmask the social forces that perpetuate the Israeli mythology and homogenize the identity and phenomenological experiences of its demographic. Rather than bolstering the Israeli

69 Karen Grumberg, *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 25.

70 Castel-Bloom, *Human Parts*, 47.

71 Gover, *Limits of Discourse*, 6.

72 Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 24.

literary tradition, their literature explores the uncanniness and foreignness of Israeli everyday realities, and in doing so, points to the absence of an authentic national aesthetics.

Today, the ties between Eastern Europe and Israel have never been stronger. After the collapse of the USSR, Israel received a wave of Russian-Jewish immigrants who were granted Israeli citizenship, but, like the Mizrahi and Palestinian population, were stigmatized and treated as outcasts of Israel's hegemonic society. Many of the renowned contemporary authors and intellectuals from this demographic, such as Dina Rubina, continue to write and publish in Russian. This wave of immigrants testifies to the presence of pluralism in both nations and undermines the contemporary ideologies and political aesthetics of both countries, reminding Israel of its Diasporic origins and Russia of its minority populations. Yet, at no point in history have the markers of these actualities been so quickly erased through collective cultural amnesia as they are today. No tool propagates forgetting and levels cultural idiosyncrasies more effectively than kitsch.

Chapter One: Kashua's Parliments and Castel-Bloom's Map

On January 21, 2015, Hamza Muhammed Hassan Matrouk, a Palestinian with an Israeli work permit, boarded Egged bus number 40 armed with a knife. On any given morning, the bus line, traversing the length of Tel Aviv, is packed with commuters making their way to school and work. That day, the transportation company temporarily suspended the route after Matrouk took out his knife and began assaulting passengers. Thirteen people in total were reported wounded.

It was 13-year-old Liel Suissa, and not Matrouk, however, who made the headlines of Israeli newspapers that day. The high school student was one of the passengers aboard the number 40 bus on the morning of the terrorist attack. When he saw Matrouk approaching with a knife, the teenager hurled his backpack at the assailant and broke a window to help the other commuters evacuate the bus. By the end of the evening, Suissa had become the poster boy of national trepidation in the face of terrorism. YNet, one of Israel's most widely read online newspapers, immediately published an interview with Suissa on both their Hebrew and English websites. Although there were no reports of Suissa being stabbed, the article featured a photo of the teenager, prominently displaying his bandaged arm. Recounting his experience of the attack, the high school student was quoted saying, "It felt like a movie, not like something real."⁷³

The national press capitalized on Suissa's narrative: the teenager embodied a brand of Israeli youthful valor uniquely bred in a country incessantly plagued by terrorism. Yet, while the newspapers used Suissa to propagate their own ideological agenda, the high school student's testimony revealed an unnerving psychological

73 Yaron Kelner, Eli Senyor, and Gilad Morag, "I threw my bag at a terrorist," Ynet News, January 21, 2015, accessed January 21, 2015, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4617582,00.html>.

dissonance that predicated his act of bravery. Threatened with violence, the teen coped with his dangerous situation by treating it as though it were fantasy; Suissa adopted the scripted part of a hero learned from films—a role reinforced by the Israeli political machine to disseminate hegemonic clichés of victimhood and resilience. Unbeknownst to the teenager himself, Suissa intimates his inculcation into a political aesthetics rampant in Israeli culture, which dilutes and placates its turbulent actualities through the proliferation of foreign and local media and commercialism. Rather than curbing violence, such a mediation of reality perpetuates hostilities, reducing the Israeli demographic to actors playing out a pre-scripted national narrative, and transforming the lives of others into disposable extras on the set of a mythologized history continually enacted in the present.

Kitsch in Zion

Both in content and in register, Suissa's interview with Ynet News reads like an excerpt from an Orly Castel-Bloom novel. She and her contemporary, Sayed Kashua, are among Israel's most prominent authors whose fiction is committed to a critical discourse of the everyday. Both authors glean their material from commonplace Israeli practices and discourses such as Suissa's. Adopting and reflecting the rhetoric of these discourses, they defamiliarize their readers from the pervasive nationalistic tropes and kitsch objects that circulate through even in the most mundane spaces of their country. In doing so, Castel-Bloom and Kashua reveal the multifarious, often masked forms of Israel's omnipresent ideology, an ideology that not only governs the public sphere, but one that also structures the private places and internal logic of the nation's residents.

Consumerist culture shapes the landscape of Castel-Bloom's and Kashua's novels, and, therefore, is just as essential to the discussion of their texts as the writers'

choice of literary register, or the political climate to which these works respond. At the heart of this discussion is the consideration of commodity culture as kitsch, or politically aestheticized disseminators of the dominant ideology. Using Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City* (1992) and Kashua's *Dancing Arabs* (2002) as case studies, this chapter aims to reveal how these authors work to reconfigure and, thereby, defamiliarize the relationship of these quotidian items to their characters. Unadorned by literary flourishes, the material goods that litter the pages of their novels are presented without sentiment, and are, thus, offered up for the sober scrutiny of the reader. Stripping these objects of their neutrality, Castel-Bloom and Kashua's novels reveal the dangerous political charge of kitsch. Distracting the protagonists from their violent political situations, consumerism offers a mode of escapism from their current realities, and by extension, lends the promise of political stability and civil liberties. The circulation of these commonplace goods defines and objectifies the identities of their novels' protagonists and is endemic of their civic and personal plights. As these characters strive to achieve a normative existence through the consumption of popular media and goods, they find themselves evermore entrenched in their country's political trappings.

Castel-Bloom's and Kashua's critical novels combat Hebrew literature's institutionalized role in the propagation of the Zionist national project.⁷⁴ Though the nature of the Zionism has changed since the founding of the State of Israel, the ideological fervor of the national project may be stronger today than it was seventy years

74 In 2015, Binyamin Netanyahu dismissed three judges on the Israel Prize committee, claiming them to be "anti-Zionist." Left-wing artists and intellectuals, these judges, including Chaim Sharir, Avner Holtzman, and Ariel Hirschfeld, have made tremendous contributions to the fields of Israel film and literary studies, and are by no means extremists. In protest to their removal, thirteen of the fifteen Israel Prize judges resigned from their committees. For further details, see: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.641912>

ago. As argued in the Introduction, Hebrew language played an essential part in the “grandest ambition” of the Hebrew cultural revival, “namely, the creation of a modern and distinct Hebrew national culture by rewinding history and reconnecting the indeterminate Jewish subject to a determinate Hebrew soil [...].⁷⁵ Superimposing language upon land—a task designated to the Hebrew national writers— was an act of “linguistic husbandry” or “literary conquest.⁷⁶” Buttressing the Zionist national narrative, this linguistic demonstration of knowledge-power ownership sought to legitimate the reclamation of the Hebrews’ mythologized home in the land of Canaan. While this idealized symbiotic relationship between literature and land has been disrupted by many politically disinterested Hebrew authors in the post-nation period, Castel-Bloom’s and Kashua’s contemporary fiction actively works to challenge the contemporary Zionist utopian narrative with stark, linguistically Spartan depictions of contemporary Israel’s kitschified dystopian realities.

This imperative is a product not only of their literary ethos but also of their identities. A Mizrahi woman and a Palestinian Israeli respectively, Castel-Bloom and Kashua represent their country’s minority demographics, which are occluded from participation in the national narrative, and by extension, from the Hebrew literary canon.⁷⁷ Though encountering disparate socio-political challenges, both minority groups

75 Yaron Peleg, “Writing the Land: Language and Territory in Modern Hebrew Literature,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12, no. 2 (2013): 297.

76 Peleg, “Writing the Land,” 298.

77 While this chapter, in its discussion of Sayed Kashua, gives consideration to Palestinian actualities, it does not, at length, discuss the status of Mizrahim in Israel. In part, this omission is due to the fact that critical writing on Castel-Bloom’s fiction focuses on her “postmodern” prose, or her unsettling depiction of motherhood in Israel. It is important to note, however, that the Mizrahi Jews, or Jews of Middle Eastern origin, remain social, economic and political outliers in Israel’s Eurocentric culture. Though, as Jews, they receive kinder treatment than Palestinian Israelis, Mizrahim, too, are racially stigmatized as a result of their hybrid identity. To give evidence to fact, it serves to

suffer from institutionalized racism, and continue to be relegated to the margins of society. Their contributions to Israeli culture and its aesthetic production are denigrated if not dismissed altogether. Castel-Bloom's and Kashua's fiction, thereby, emerges, at least in part, vis-à-vis their liminality. Both authors use this position to script an alternative narrative of their country. Their ostensibly simplistic prose fall outside the stylistic parameters of the Hebrew literary canon, creating space for socio-political critique. In their novels we see a violent Israel ruled by government-propagated xenophobic anxieties; an Israel that is lulled into dangerous political complacency by media; an Israel where the freedom of consumption is substituted for civil rights. Both authors employ the quotidian in order to combat the forces of Israel's sweeping ideology. Shifting away from the mythological scale of the national narrative, Castel-Bloom and Kashua set their novels in vernacular spaces, exposing the discrepancy between their country's homogenized collective consciousness and the lived experiences of Israeli residents.

Highlighting the ubiquity of commodity culture in Israeli society, and calling into question the very existence of an authentic Hebrew culture, Castel-Bloom's "thin Hebrew" and Kashua's journalistic prose emulate the commonplace rhetoric of local and foreign newspapers, television programs, and advertisements. Like Dubravka Ugrešič, whose work will be discussed in the following chapter, Castel-Bloom and Kashua adopt and mimic the language of *poshlost*, or kitsch, that circulates through their common places.⁷⁸ They "estrangle *poshlost* by responding in kind: [their] work crackles with

mention that the first Mizrahi Hebrew writer to win the Israel Prize was Erez Biton in 2015.

⁷⁸ Nabokov writes that *poshlost* is "especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is not obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the highest level of art, though or emotion." Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions Books, 1971), 68.

digests, reworked and parodied public opinions.”⁷⁹ By borrowing from multiple “low” linguistic genres, Castel-Bloom and Kashua script the hackneyed rhetoric that perpetually inundates Israel’s public and private spaces. Their everyday language disrupts the master narrative of language and land, and counters the Zionist literary agenda. These verbal clichés, however, represent only part of their country’s system of political aesthetization⁸⁰. Of greater threat than the overt jargon of propaganda is the latent, silent ideology of consumer products. The Israeli common places scripted in Castel-Bloom’s and Kashua’s novels are saturated with Western media and commodities. More than innocuous objects, these material goods are revealed to have a political charge that dictates the identities and fates of Castel-Bloom’s and Kashua’s protagonists, all of whom are conspicuous consumers in their own right.

Contemporary Israeli cultural theorists, such as Tom Segev, have written extensively about the mutually reinforcing interplay between Western commercialism and Israeli national ideology. In *Elvis in Jerusalem*, Tom Segev gives anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon, which he calls “Americanization”:

Theodor Herzl’s statue at the entrance to the city [Herzliya] that bears his name looks out over an array of tall glass-and-steel office buildings. They are breathtakingly ostentatious, exuding success and luxury. Most of their tenants are giant high-tech companies, both Israeli and international, all in the spirit of the prophet: he dreamed of a flourishing urban culture. Herzliya has fancy stores and exclusive restaurants of the kind that Herzl himself craved. The stores have names

79 Dragana Obradović, “The Ironic Eternity of Objects in Dubravka Ugrešić’s *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*,” *Russian Literature* 7, no. 3 (2011): 417.

80 It should be noted that by mimicking the language of mass media, Kashua and Castel-Bloom also make a statement about the current position of literature in Israeli culture. Though ostensibly hailed as one of the pillars of the national project, the influence of literature on contemporary Israeli society is marginal. Instead, it is now the language of mass media that controls the collective consciousness of the nation, as well as its literature.

like Tophouse, Columbus, and Beverly Hills, and there's a McDonald's as well. It's all in the spirit of the American century that Herzl heralded[...].⁸¹

Segev uses the modern Israeli metropolis to expose the incongruity between language and land. Herzliya is suspended between two seemingly disparate spatialities: in name, Herzliya is a city-monument to the country's history—a continual reminder of a national vision topographically made real; however, in practice, Herzliya lacks all markers of a unique local culture, and intimates the Diasporic ethos that underlies of the Zionist project. If “Zionist thought and practice in the six decades preceding statehood transformed Judaic conceptions of *ha-makom*, the Place, the Land of Israel, from an ephemeral dream-site to a concrete national homeland”,⁸² then Herzliya, as a spatial embodiment of this ethos, defines the mythologized Land of Israel as a heterotopia.⁸³ Inside the city spaces is a simulacrum of the Western world, kitschified and made ready for consumption. Though in name, Herzliya reifies the Israeli national project, in its everyday societal practices, the city caters to demands of “Americanization.” Structured around the mandates of global capitalism, Herzliya exemplifies the aesthetics of a commercial machine that fortifies the country's paradoxical ideology.

Dolly City or a Hyperreal Common Place

Such a heterotopic metropolis becomes the hyperreal setting of Castel-Bloom's novel, *Dolly City*. While Segev's post-Zionist critique dissects the systems of control—

81 Tom Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem: Post-Zionism and the Americanization of Israel*, trans. Haim Watzman (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 14-5.

82 Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 33.

83 Foucault defines heterotopia as “a counter-site, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.” Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (1986): 24.

commercial and ideological—that predicate the construction of Israel’s urban spaces, Castel-Bloom’s novel testifies to the phenomenological madness that these spaces induce in their residents. Dolly City is a place named after the novel’s sociopathic narrator/protagonist, Dolly, who occupies the thirty-seventh floor penthouse in one of the city’s high-rises. This disorienting fictional metropolis “at times resembles Tel Aviv, at other times London, and mostly an oddly Israeli-ish place called Dolly City.”⁸⁴ Portrayed from the perspective of the protagonist, the grotesque, violent cityscape is as much a reflection of the Dolly’s mental landscape as it is of the dystopic modern Israeli metropolis. Dolly is doctor who received her degree at the University of Katmandu, and her mental stability is as questionable as her medical practices. The novel follows Dolly as she obsessively vaccinates, radiates, and operates on her adopted son, whom she found in the garbage. In graphic detail, Dolly delineates her incessant, manic medical procedures—no short of torture—which she performs on her son in attempt to inoculate him against all possible diseases.

While the novel thematizes familial relationships— mother-son and father-daughter—*Dolly City* predicates the dynamics of these relationships on the space of the titular metropolis. These warped family ties could only take place within the limits of Dolly City, which is “chaos and ugliness. Dolly City, a fragment of a city, and cross-hatched city, one motherfucking city.”⁸⁵ As the title suggest, Castel-Bloom’s novel meditates on the subjective interconnection between person and place, as well as the manner in which place, and the objects that circulate within it, engender intra- and interpersonal relationships. As Peleg suggests, the true disease that circulates through

84 Todd Hasak-Lowy, “Postzionism and Its Aftermath in Hebrew Literature: The Case of Orly Castel-Bloom,” *Jewish Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 92.

85 Orly Castle-Bloom, *Dolly City*, trans. Dalya Bilu (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010), 38.

Dolly City is a mental one: “Indeed, if there was any doubt as to the Israeli present in question, the novel serves it up in a distorted and noxious concentration of ills, disasters, conflict, and continued nightmares [...]. All these deep disturbances eventually take the form of a ubiquitous cancer that spreads throughout the real, as well as the imaginary, world of the narrator.”⁸⁶ Thus, *Dolly City* intimates that the practices fostered by space are intrinsically connected to the ethics of human relationships within it.

Panophobia and Urban Cancer

To make room for the most relentless critique of Israeli contemporary culture, Castel-Bloom purposely sets her novel in an imaginary, heterotopic city, while retaining details that characterize her fabular city as unambiguously Israeli. An abstract, fictionalized metropolis, Dolly City serves as generic model of Israel’s urban landscapes, and Dolly, in complementary terms, functions as a prototypical Israeli city dweller. Dolly’s ostensible psychosis allows her to candidly voice the collective consciousness of the nation, as well as its societal ills: “I discovered a new type of phobia in Dolly City—Arabophobia, fear of Arabs. I had lots of those. The ones with the compulsive fears I harassed the most, because I read somewhere that you should tackle fear head-on. Fuck Arabs, if you’re afraid of them, you fuck them—and you see that the devil ‘s not as black as he’s painted, they’re just like everybody else.”⁸⁷ Racism is part and parcel of the city’s social structure, as well as the city-dweller’s mental landscape. Disseminated through ambiguous pathways, Arabophobia cannot be linked to any traceable propaganda outlet; without any perceivable loci, this ubiquitous form of racism circulates ceaselessly through the metropolis. Collectively reinforced and perpetuated by the city’s

⁸⁶ Peleg, “Writing the Land,” 309.

⁸⁷ Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City*, 61.

demographic, the Arabophobia cannot be contained or stymied. Racism rescripts anxiety as valor; by designating the Arab as the common enemy, the city's residents are granted the opportunity to "tackle fear head-on," and in doing so, play out their role as modern Hebrews. This dynamic reveals the social structure of city to be predicated on the Zionist narrative, and exposes Israeli urban spaces to be propagators of the hegemonic ideology. Castel-Bloom not only delineates this construction, but further complicates it. The narrator regards Palestinians no differently than all the other residents of Dolly City, whom she similarly hates. In Dolly City, everyone is "othered," and Dolly's crass, uncensored treatment of others, whether they be her own son, Palestinians, or other Israeli mothers (whom she equally detests), inverts and defamiliarizes the discriminate nationalistic rhetoric of brotherhood and peace. A model of the Israeli metropolis, Dolly City is the breeding ground of an all-encompassing, disaffected xenophobia, which its inhabitants contract like a disease. In cosmopolitan spaces of Dolly City, the blasé attitude goes awry.

In his essay, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Zimmel defines the blasé attitude as a psychological mechanism for coping with modern city life:

The essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived, as is the case with the half-wit, but rather that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and gray tone; no one object deserves preference over any other.⁸⁸

Dolly City delineates a brand of blasé attitude particular to the Israeli metropolis, in which not only objects, but also people are experienced as insubstantial. This sensibility

88 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. Richard Sennett (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 52.

echoes Relph's definition of kitsch as "an attitude of inauthenticity in which places are treated as things from which man is largely alienated."⁸⁹

Thus, complete, indiscriminate objectification rules the social structure of the city, producing a hazardous environment that similarly afflicts everyone and everything within it. Dolly sees "cancerous growths on the faces of blond women, barrels, on bus wheels, street poles, trees, newspapers."⁹⁰ In this description, the leveling of the subject-object distinction is just as threatening as cancer. Castel-Bloom defamiliarizes cancer as a disease that only afflicts living organisms. In doing so, she equates the value of human life with that of objects. This metaphorical cancer intimates a noxious structural mutation in the very fabric of Israeli culture, a mutation that physically manifests Israel's socio-ideological illnesses. Everything that exists within Dolly City displays cancerous tumors, suggesting the various levels at which the malignant growths of Israel's violent, hateful ideology is spread: the metropolis' residents, its infrastructure, and well as the material goods that circulate through its spaces all display marks of the disease.

A Fleshy Map of the Promised Land

The malaise bred in the city is both all encompassing and self-propagating. Cancer is but one of a litany of diseases against which Dolly attempts to inoculate her son. As the novel progresses, however, her medical procedures become increasingly less scientific, and the ailments against which Dolly attempts to protect her son grow evermore abstract. This tendency culminates in the most written-about scene in Castel-Bloom's oeuvre, wherein Dolly carves a biblical map of Israel onto her son's back,

89 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 82-3.

90 Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City*, 60.

physically inscribing him into the country's mythological history. Recapitulating Castel-Bloom's authorial intent in this scene, Peleg writes: "The act of mutilation [...] becomes a loud cry, a terrible lament of prophetic proportions about the dismal state of the county, its politics and its culture."⁹¹ Peleg argues that this moment, the determinate Hebrew soil violently conquers the Jewish subject, inverting the Zionist trope of linguistic husbandry. Yet, to examine this moment purely in terms of language and land is to limit the scope of Castel-Bloom's message. After all, much of this scene's power is derived visually. Taking the concept of a revived ancient homeland literally, Dolly carves the map of Israel into the flesh of her living child. Even within the context of Dolly's dubious professional practices, this operation is completely void of all medical merit. Rather, this absurd act is nothing if not aesthetic, and hyperbolically suggests the political aestheticization of her clinical practices. By carving map of Israel into his back, Dolly dehumanizes her son, turning him into a tool for the dissemination of the national ideology. Stripped of his personal identity, the baby's body transforms into a propaganda poster. At the hands of his mother, the baby is reduced to the living consequence and embodiment of tyrannical kitsch.

Yet, read metaphorically, the map Dolly etches into her son's body can be considered her greatest medical success. In the critical body of writing on kitsch, many cultural theorists, including Svetlana Boym and Saul Friedlander, have noted the juxtaposition of kitsch and death as a trope of nationalistic rhetoric, particularly in the rhetoric of governments with an extremist bent. In tumultuous periods of political upheaval, kitsch runs rampant and is readily consumed. Representing order, futurity, and normalcy, kitsch quells anxieties about the looming presence of death: "all of us live

⁹¹ Peleg, "Writing the Land," 309.

among kitsch; we are plunged into it up to our necks. Hence the importance and the hold this type of imagery and sentiment has on us, a hold that is formed into frisson thanks to the counterpoint of death and destruction.”⁹² Death relentlessly looms over Dolly City. Though Dolly’s son is too young to comprehend its threat, the protagonist is hyperaware of its ubiquitous presence. Like all her other gruesome attempts at preventive medicine, the map of Israel that Dolly etches into her son’s back is intended to calm her own motherly anxieties about her son’s future, rather than actually ensure his health. Ironically, Dolly, who is hell-bent on eradicating the signs of death from her son’s body, cannot see that her medical procedures are contributing to his destruction. This is, indeed, the very function of kitsch, whose “mechanisms [...] are directed at pacifying and sweetening the contradictions of life.”⁹³ By kitschifying her son, Dolly preserves him, granting him the extended lifeline as an object that he would not receive as a person. So as to further thwart her baby’s development into personhood, Dolly even makes it a point not to teach her son how to speak. In such a manner, Castel-Bloom’s protagonist employs kitsch as an antidote to death, and in doing so, participates in the proliferation of the politically aestheticized governing ideology. This move, however, is not without its perverse rationale: in landscape of Dolly City, the narrator’s son has a better chance of surviving as a kitsch object than as a human.

Of course, the brutal imagery that defines this challenging moment makes it difficult to find any logic behind Dolly’s actions. Nevertheless, Castel-Bloom’s sophisticated manipulation of the subject-object distinction in this scene demands a closer look:

92 Saul Friedlander, *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. Thomas Weyr (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 39.

93 Boym, *Common Places*, 16.

I drew a biblical map of Israel on his back the way I remembered it and marked all those Philistine Cities, like Gath and Ashkelon, and I drew the Sea of Galilee with the blade, and the Jordan flowing into the Dear Sea, which evaporates nonstop.

Small drops of blood began to collect on the river beds that were etched across the land. The sight of the map of Israel, drawn clumsy on my baby's back, made me shudder with pleasure. My baby screamed with pain—but I wasn't moved.⁹⁴

Two ontologically distinct objects are produced from this single act of fusion. The first is the objectified baby-as-map discussed above; the second is an anthropomorphized map-as-baby. Here, Castel-Bloom plays cartographer, charting a category-defying, alternative terrain of Israel. Just like Dolly City itself, the bleeding, screaming map, clumsily etched and unbearably gruesome, reflects the true state of Israel. Carved into the back of the baby, the ancient, mythologized land of Israel, the foundational image of Zionist ideology, comes to life; yet, in its present revived state, this map is monstrous. In a dual act of defamiliarization, Castel-Bloom simultaneously objectifies and anthropomorphizes, both suggesting the difficulty of distinguishing subject from object in Israel's ideological landscape, and attesting to the wretched condition her country and its people.

A Pepsi to Settle Our Nerves

Castel-Bloom's language points beyond itself, towards the silent discourse of people and objects, and the systems of control that bind and define them. Her graphic imagery also serves to show the speed at which ethical registers of discourse, including our own, could be muted. *Dolly City* de-privileges the reader's omniscient position within its moral framework. Over the course of the novel, the ceaseless, overwrought

94 Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City*, 36.

violence that initially shocks readers becomes commonplace. In order to progress through the novel and cope with the senseless brutality that is omnipresent in Dolly City, it is psychologically necessary for the reader to stop reflecting on the city's gruesome realities. After some time, its dehumanizing violence becomes quotidian, even for the reader. By plunging its readers in the midst of the metropolis' grotesque landscape, *Dolly City* forces us to adopt the same mechanism of psychology dissonance that its fictional residents employ, demonstrating the readers' own susceptibility to the objectifying blasé attitude of such an environment.

Commercial objects help acculturate readers to the environs of Dolly City, and facilitate our desensitization to its violence. The onslaught of nightmarish images that initially assault the psyche of the reader is mitigated by the inclusion of Western commodity products, which lend a semblance of normalcy to the maddening cityscape. Between surgeries on her son and experiments on animals, Dolly sips a Diet Pepsi or watches a soap on TV. These moments of reprieve almost always feature some foreign commodity or programming that briefly distracts both the protagonist and the reader from Dolly's next impending rampage. Material goods imbue the spaces of Dolly City with a sense of realism, providing the reader with a locus of stability in Dolly's otherwise disorienting world. It is the very familiarity of these products that allows Castel-Bloom's readers to stay in Dolly City a little while longer, until they, too, have become part of it. While initially lulling the reader into Dolly's universe, the commodities, just like everything else in Dolly City, add to the chaos and ugliness of Castel-Bloom's heterotopia.

In comparison to the atrocities that permeate the pages of the novel, the threat of these commodities may seem negligible; however, the truly ominous character of these objects is fully revealed when they are used by Dolly. "I drugged people," she admits.

“When I couldn’t get hold of sedatives or analgesics, I injected them with Pepsi-Cola, and I have no idea what it did to them.”⁹⁵ Dolly’s confession comes halfway through the novel, when the reader has grown desensitized to the unnerving permutations of Dolly’s unorthodox medical practices. Yet, Dolly’s confession, which is pivotal to understanding Castel-Bloom’s stance on commercialism in her country, warrants critical treatment. When lacking the appropriate drugs, Dolly injects her patients with Pepsi-Cola. Though Dolly herself does not understand the neurological mechanism that produces Pepsi-Cola’s analgesic effects, she does intuit that a dose of the soft drink has the same psychosomatic results as a drug. An alternative, unsettling form of consumption, Dolly’s Pepsi-Cola injections defamiliarize the soft drink, exposing its larger ideological function as an opiate for the masses. Though Dolly is aware of Pepsi-Cola’s effects, she continues to drug herself and her patients. Thus, in the framework of Castel-Bloom’s novel, Dolly, just like the reader, plays a morally dubious, but not entirely unsympathetic, role. Seduced by kitsch, she and we buy into Israel’s dangerous vernacular places, in spite of our outsider status. Despite the psychosomatic violence incurred by living in Dolly City (and reading *Dolly City*), we remain within the domain of the metropolis, and in doing so, participate in the proliferation of its actualities.

Scripting Israel’s Quotidian Fiction

An allegory of contemporary Israeli culture at large, Dolly’s manic microcosm ruthlessly replicates the various forms of commonplace physical and psychological threats that circulate through Israeli society. As Hasak-Lowy remarks, “Dolly herself is the counterpart of the State, madness lines up with the conquering Israeli army. The sites

⁹⁵ Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City*, 94.

of madness in Dolly are equivalent to Israel's occupied territories."⁹⁶ Indeed, the narrator of *Dolly City* functions as both the mouthpiece and doppelganger for Castel-Bloom's overt socio-political critique of her country. The disparities and commonalities between author and narrator extend the schismatic character of the cityscape to the novel's meta-textual whole. For this reason, scholars such as Hasak-Lowy, Yaron Peleg, and Smadar Shiffman have focused on the novel's postmodern intervention in the Zionist singular, homogenizing narrative, as well as the novel's complex representation of motherhood in Israel. These considerations are unquestionably central to the critical study of Castel-Bloom's experimental novel. Found in the backdrop of the overt societal ills that plague Dolly City, commodity goods appear to make but a minor contribution to the violence of the cityscape. Unlike many of Castel-Bloom's other novels, such as *Taking the Trend* (1998), *Human Parts* (2002), and *Textile* (2006), in which kitsch is abundant and the author's attack on material culture is blatant, the role of commercialism in *Dolly City* is more subtle, but equally as important as it is in her other novels.

In *Dolly City*, Castel-Bloom makes it impossible to separate the subject from the object. As the title suggests, Dolly represents a person, an urban landscape, and the objects that circulate within it. In order to fully understand the full scope of the author's socio-political critique, a material reading of her novel is therefore imperative. If Dolly is a counterpart of the State, as Hasak-Lowy asserts, it follows that her objectifying gaze is synonymous with the nation's. Within her metropolis, the blasé attitude runs rampant. Here human relationships are not just predicated on commodity culture, they are the commodities that circulate in the spaces of the city. With Pepsi- Cola running through

⁹⁶ Hasak-Lowy, "Postzionism," 94.

their veins, the city's residents are transformed into what they consume: politically aestheticized, kitschified pawns of the Zionist agenda.

Such a material reading of *Dolly City* does not forego stylistic considerations. Commodity culture informs not only the content of the novel, but also its literary register. While literary critics have dubbed Castel-Bloom's work postmodern, *Dolly City* does not display the linguistic or narrative difficulty characteristic of European and American postmodernist fiction. Reflecting on the author's hybrid postmodernism, Shiffman writes, "Even when it deconstructs the collective narrative or the meta-narrative, [it] does not actually give up the attempt, desperate as it may be, to cling onto the narrative [...]."97 To further Shiffman's argument it is important to note that it is not only Castel-Bloom's narrative structure that remains intact, but also her language. While postmodernism limits its readership by denying access to meaning and language, Castel-Bloom's novel refrains from total fragmentation and retains a narrative totality. Castel-Bloom's use of "thin Hebrew" and popular culture make her novel not only readable, but also commercial. Though bearing characteristics of postmodernism, *Dolly City* also displays elements of more marketable literary genres such as science fiction, pulp fiction, and noir. Thus, *Dolly City* both critically portrays Israeli commodity culture and is itself a commercial product, one that Peleg equates to films like *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*.98 Comparisons to such blockbusters intend to highlight the accessibility Castel-Bloom's novel; however, they also overstress the most hyperbolic, pulp elements the author's fiction. Though seemingly hyperreal, *Dolly City*, in actuality, portrays the quotidian Israeli mentality structured on the clichés dispelled by such commercial Hollywood films.

97 Smadar Shiffman, "Orly Castel-Bloom and Yoel Hoffmann: On Israeli Postmodern Prose Fiction," *Hebrew Studies* 50, no. 1 (2009): 216.

98 Peleg, "Writing the Land," 307.

Recalling Suissa's statement in his interview with Ynet News, we start to understand the veracity of Castel-Bloom's literary project. Her fiction adopts and defamiliarizes the rhetoric and tropes that form the latent basis of Israeli propaganda. In doing so, the author produces a novel that meets the demands of the Israeli marketplace. Just like her contemporary, Kashua, Castel-Bloom creates a commodity object that exploits, and works against, the very economic systems that contribute to the dissemination of Israel's hegemonic ideology.

Life on the Green Line or Kitsch-22

Though Kashua's *Dancing Arabs* is grounded in a realism that reads almost like reportage, his fiction is similarly concerned with exposing the treacherous role of commodity culture in the proliferation of the Zionist narrative and in the objectification of Palestinian Israel actualities. In *Dancing Arabs*, Kashua's unnamed protagonist recounts his downward trajectory into the margins of both Israeli and Palestinian society. Born in Tira, a Palestinian village in Israel proper, the narrator is inculcated into a fractured value structure, one that simultaneously struggles to preserve Palestinian national identity and that is saturated with Israeli cultural influences. Tira is located on the Green Line, the border separating Israel from the West Bank. The village's liminal geographic position represents but the most superficial layer of the binary ideologies disseminated through its spaces. The narrator's family history reveals a deep-rooted commitment to their Palestinian identity: Kashua's protagonist hears tales of his freedom-fighting grandfather and learns of his father's political activism; he spends the majority of his childhood days with his devout grandmother, who frequently regales him with stories of another, older generation of Palestinians. Yet, these stories merely form an abstract

family legacy, one that does not reflect the current social or cultural realities of the narrator. The protagonist is told that “the people of Tira used to be braver.”⁹⁹ He accepts the fact though he is never a first-hand witness of his family’s heroic acts on behalf of their nation: his grandfather dies in battle and his father’s feverous dedication to the Palestinian cause all but dissipates by the time the protagonist is a child.

Instead, the narrator grows up in a different era marked by the weakening of national and cultural ties. History is rarely up for discussion; “we do not talk of those days,” the narrator notes.¹⁰⁰ The Tira that the protagonist knows is a place where no local heroes are to be found, and consumerist objects—the most coveted of which are Western commodities—are used as the criteria to determine the prestige of a family. The narrator recalls that his father “was the first in [their] neighborhood to buy a VCR. [Their relatives] came to congratulate [them] and brought bags of rice and big packets of coffee.”¹⁰¹ The acquisition of the VCR is treated as a feat to be celebrated, and the foreign object is regarded with respect and wonder. Neither the source of the object, its embedded ideology, nor its effects on the local culture is considered.

The VCR comes to affect all aspects of family life. It becomes the locus of social activity. Family and friends flock to the protagonist’s house and sit in front of the television watching movies, usually violent in nature. Watching films on repeat, the children then act out scenes from these movies during their gameplay. At first, these movies feature Muslim protagonists; however, over time, the narrator’s father begins to

99 Sayed Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, trans. Miriam Schlesinger (New York: Grove Press), 33.

100 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 40.

101 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 23.

bring home Western and Israeli films, which portray IDF soldiers holding Uzis that could “shoot down seven Arabs at once.”¹⁰² The children’s games evolve accordingly:

at first we used swords—I mean sticks—like the movies about the wars of the Prophet Mohammed. [...] When we were growing up, father would bring us *Rambo* and commando movies, and that’s when we moved to heavy artillery. [...] But after watching *Aziz the Paratrooper Dog* [...] we switched from *bang* to *brrrr*.¹⁰³

The VCR, thus, becomes one of a myriad of items that shape the narrator’s bifurcated “Arab Israeli” identity. As Gil Hochberg points out, the foundation of this identity is an “internalized racism [...], a self-abjection that is far more powerful than the protective mechanisms offered by acts of mimicry, performance, and passing.”¹⁰⁴ Growing up in front of the television, the young boy learns to construct Arabs as villains and Israelis as victors. In the vacuum of a strong male role model, the television offers the protagonist disparate and irreconcilable templates for the construction of his personal and cultural identity.¹⁰⁵ As childhood fantasies evolve into adult aspirations, the narrator strives to inscribe himself into the dominant culture that he learns to valorize from the television: he “wants to be a Jew.”

Kashua’s protagonist, like the author himself, is representative of a generation that struggles to rectify its Palestinian identity with its progressively more “Israelified” environment. As Western products continue to permeate the spaces of the village, Tira further succumbs to the influence of commodity culture, which is propagated as part of the Israeli national project. The villagers are largely indifferent to their national heritage;

102 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 28.

103 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 27-8.

104 Gil Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be an Israeli Arab: Sayed Kashua and the Prospect of Minority Speech-Acts,” *Comparative Literature* 62, no.1 (2010): 76.

105 “Yochai Oppenhiemer, for example, notes in his review of *Dancing Arabs* that ‘this brave book [...] draws attention to the paternal violence and the absence of a reliable father figure in the narrator’s life.’” Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be,” 69.

as a result, the protagonist and his generation are divorced from their Palestinian roots¹⁰⁶. All the meanwhile, the villagers' consumerism perpetuates the presence of the oppressive majority culture. In such a manner, the Western products that fill the spaces of the village not only support the Israeli economy, but also its ideology.

In 1987, almost twenty years before Kashua published his novel, Anton Shammas delineated the threat of kitsch to Palestinian actualities, naming the phenomenon "Kitsch-22" and defining it as follows:

The State of Israel defines itself as a Jewish State (or even the State of the Jews) and demands that its Arabs citizens fulfill their citizenship. But, when they do so, it promptly informs them that their participation in the State is merely social and that for the political fulfillment of their identity they must look elsewhere (i.e., to the Palestinian nation); when they do look elsewhere for their national identity, the State at once charges them with subversion, and, needless to say, as subversives they cannot be accepted as Israelis—and so on, in circles, ad infinitum."¹⁰⁷

No place exemplifies the problematic processes of Kitsch-22 better than Kashua's Tira in *Dancing Arabs*. The commodity goods that pervade the village are not normatively neutral; rather, they reinforce the political and social hierarchy of the governing state. Though the oldest villagers attempt to keep their Palestinian identity ground in their land, the subsequent generations are swept up by the currents of consumerism that tie them to the Israeli political machine. As a result, their "eyes have lost their visual confidences

106 "Once, our history teacher in Tira asked if anyone in the class knew what Palestine was, and nobody did, including me. Then he asked contemptuously if any of us had ever seen a Palestinian, and Mohammed the Fatso, who was afraid of having his knuckles rapped, said he'd once been driving with his father in the dark and they'd seen two Palestinians. That day, the history teacher rapped every single one of us on the knuckles, launching his attack with Mohammed the Fatso. He whacked us with his ruler, ranting, 'We are Palestinians, you are Palestinians, I'm a Palestinian!'" Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 204.

107 Anton Shammas, "Kitsch 22: On the Problem of the Relations Between Majority and Minority Cultures," *Tikkun* 2, no. 4 (1987): 25

and no longer know what it beautiful.”¹⁰⁸ Mass-produced Israeli and foreign goods replace objects that buttress the local aesthetic, resulting in the weakening of the entire social structure of the village. This phenomenon dissolves the markers that make Tira an authentic, culturally stable Palestinian space.¹⁰⁹ In other words, Tira itself comes to represent the polarized Israeli Arab identity.

The Riddle of the Parliaments

Although born in a historical Palestinian village, the protagonist is raised in a state of cultural exile. The story of the narrator’s life in Tira is, thus, the story of the village’s deepening entrenchment into Western media and Israeli commodity culture, a process that bears grave consequences. Access to Western media fundamentally changes the character of the village, and results in what Gertz and Khleifi call the “shrinking of Palestinian space.”¹¹⁰ Television is elemental to village life and is a staple presence in the narrator’s story. The centrality of the television to the narrator’s biography becomes reinforced in the chapter titled “Parliaments,” which recounts the fateful events that unfolded after cable TV is set up Tira. From the perspective of the narrator, cable comes

108 Shammas, “Kitsch-22,” 23.

109 “The Israeli Palestinian’s presence on the land is what fails his authenticity as Palestinian. This confused and confusing identity, suspended between a clearly Israeli one and a clearly Palestinian one, gives rise to a new identity that is not so much a hybrid but more of a superficial collage of various components identified with “authenticity.” Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 153.

110 “Gertz and Khleifi’s discussion of the “shrinking of Palestinian space” in general and the connection they identify between the loss of public (national) space and the loss of private space, refer to cinematic spatiality, but are applicable to literary representations of space as well (2005, 331). The interstitial existence of the Israeli Palestinian reemerges, then, in the tension between tradition (family, community, people) and individual desire (privacy, release from obligation), a tension that literally brings down the house.” Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 142.

to Tira by seemingly mysterious pathways. Only in passing, when we learn that “someone from Taiyiba connected the houses to cable TV,” is the reader prompted to consider the event as an infrastructural project, sanctioned by unseen, colonizing powers.¹¹¹ The protagonist himself is oblivious to the political machine at play.¹¹² “Every single house that was in the village was hooked up. Nobody watched anything else, only closed-circuit cable TV.”¹¹³ Thus, television programs quickly become village-wide events on par with traditional holidays. Neither the narrator nor any of the other villagers is able recognize the advent of cable TV as a politically calculated move, covertly facilitating the dissemination of the dominant ideology. As Greenburg notes, “The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to integrate themselves with their subjects.”¹¹⁴ In such a covert manner, Tira turns into an evermore-governable petri dish of kitsch.

During Ramadan that year, the cable channel hosts a month-long quiz show that holds the attention of the entire village. The quiz show quickly turns into a “battle of honor” between families. No one in Tira can think of anything else, and the show come to take precedent over the holiest month in the Muslim calendar. As the questions increase in difficulty, the families all but forget that it is a time intended for spiritual reflection: “People got into squabbles on the air or shoved each other, and every now and then

111 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 75.

112 These infrastructural changes are reminiscent of de Certeau’s writing consumerism and television: “The enigma of the consumer sphinx. His products are scattered in the graphs of televised, urbanistic, and commercial production. They are all the less visible because the networks framing them are becoming more and more tightly woven, flexible and totalitarian. They are thus protean in form, blending in with their surroundings, and liable to disappear into the colonizing organizations whose products leave no room where consumers can mark their activity.” Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 31.

113 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 75.

114 Greenburg, “Avant-Garde,” 19.

someone would let out a salvo of curses that could be heard in every home in the village.”¹¹⁵ Though in semblance the quiz show creates unity among the villagers, in practice the benign competition transforms into real antagonism among members of the community. In this respect, the program not only distracts the villagers from the month of Ramadan, but it also undermines, inverts, and dilutes the spirit of the holiday.

During a month marked by abstinence, the television program latently exploits the villagers’ identity as consumers, not only of media, but also of Western products. This exploitation occurs in the most surreptitious manner. The earliest, easiest, and least time-consuming quiz questions—“When was the Prophet Mohammed born?”—appear to be in the spirit of Ramadan; however, the final and most difficult question is of a different character: “From the land of Uncle Sam. Blue as the sky. Brings nothing but trouble. Can begin with two letters. And Abd el-Wahab lives there.”¹¹⁶ The structure of this question warrants a deeper examination. Distinguishing this final question from those that preceded it is its format: a riddle. The formulation of the final question as a riddle results not only in its difficulty, but also in the complexity of its implied meaning.

For days, the villagers can think of nothing but the question. The protagonist’s father, growing anxious in his struggle to find the solution, sends his son to buy a pack of cigarettes. Returning from the store, the narrator realizes that the answer to the riddle, “Parliaments,” is actually in his hand. Arriving home, the narrator explains: “Parliament is an American cigarette [...].The pack is blue as the sky. Cigarettes cause nothing but trouble. You can write Parliament in Arabic either with a P or a B. And Abd el-Wahab Darawsheh is a member of the Knesset, the Parliament.”¹¹⁷ As it turns out, the final

115 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 77.

116 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 77.

117 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 78.

question was a form of product placement. Yet, neither son nor father stops to reflect on the ideology embedded in the answer or question. In a frenzy of excitement, the protagonist's father immediately rushes to call the network with the solution.

In this respect, the protagonist has solved the "Big Question," but has not arrived at, what Victor Shklovsky calls, the "true answer" of the riddle:

The task of the solution is to renew meaning through a rearrangement of signs. As we solve the riddle, we reposition the signs and get excited over the fact that before we did not know the meaning of disunity. The assembled object is something that we recognize. So the riddle is a pretext of the excitement of recognition. But the riddle usually has two answers. The first one is a literal solution, but it is wrong. The second one is the true answer.¹¹⁸

In Shklovsky's examination of the riddle, the theorist never reveals how to attain the elusive second solution. The riddle of the Parliaments, however, may offer some guidance.

While the literal solution to the question is "Parliament," the second "true" answer is enclosed in the riddle itself. To use Shklovsky's term, the central function and goal of the riddle is to defamiliarize, turning the Parliaments into "an artifact that has been intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception. It is 'artificially' created by an artist in such a way that the perceiver, pausing in his reading, dwells on the text."¹¹⁹ In this process of defamiliarization, the first and literal solution is merely the hinge in the riddle's linguistic apparatus; the solution itself does not estrange, only the riddle does. Just as the riddle shrouds an object, so too does the riddle then unveil it. Through the "rearrangement of signs" the decipherer is primed to undergo a phenomenological shift. In this case, removing the Parliaments from their commonplace

118 Viktor Shklovsky, *Bowstrings: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*, trans. Shushan Avagyan (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2001), 81.

119 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 12.

context, the riddle estranges the cigarettes and offers them up for scrutiny. (This process only begins once the object of the solution, or the ‘literal answer’ is identified.)

By stripping the Parliaments of their quotidian descriptors, the riddle defamiliarizes the cigarettes and reveals their alternative, but nonetheless true, ontology. The riddle presents the Parliaments as more than neutral, passive objects, and exposes the cigarettes as a conflation and reflection of the multiple socio-political systems that facilitate, and benefit from, the circulation of the commodity, including: the American consumerism that has been adopted by Israeli society, the otherness of the Arab language that conflates the “P” of the “Parliaments” with a “B,” and the stateless condition of the Palestinian nation that results in its unavoidable ties to the Israeli government, the Knesset. Thus, the riddle prompts the solver to recognize the cigarettes as tyrannical kitsch. Had the protagonist examined the implications of the riddle itself, he would have found that it alludes to and synthesizes all the latent forces that hold control over the village.

Kitsch, however, not only hinders its own recognition, but stymies self-reflection. It produces a form of inauthenticity which Relph defines as “largely unselfconscious and subjective in which the individual is unwittingly governed by the ‘anonymous they’ without reflection or concern about it.”¹²⁰ As the narrator brings home the pack of Parliaments, neither he nor his father is cognizant of the fact that they are puppets of a successful marketing ploy. Nor can they sense the cultural erasure that occurs as they shift from being observers of Ramadan to observers of a television show. They become the unaware subjects and proliferators of tyrannical kitsch. The meaning of riddle is lost on the father and the son, and they are deceived into associating Parliaments, not with

120 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 81.

oppression, but with victory. As Gillo Dorfles states “the recognition of the kitsch ‘tone’ requires a lived familiarity with cultural material and meaning, so that recognizing kitsch in unfamiliar material is basically impossible.”¹²¹ The villagers’ inability to recognize kitsch—their kitsch tone deafness—not only makes them more vulnerable to its latent homogenizing power, but also marks them as outsiders of the dominant culture. Kitsch cements the villagers’ Arab Israeli identity. Rather than granting them cultural fluidity, kitsch imprisons the villagers in an interstitial space outside both cultures.

Media, thus, accomplishes what it is intended to do: it mediates, both the spaces of the village and the psychology of its residents. Subject to the ubiquitous influence of media, Kashua’s narrator grows up governed by undetectable, but increasingly polarized, ideologies. What the protagonist cannot sense continues to hurt him. More than an isolated incident marking the protagonist’s childhood memories, the Ramadan quiz show dictates the trajectory of his life. Having learned that the narrator had solved the final quiz show question, a representative from a new Israeli school for gifted children comes to Tira to recruit the protagonist as a potential student. The representative encourages the teen to take the entrance exam for the school, which the protagonist passes. As the narrator enters the new school in Jerusalem, his fractured identity grows irreconcilable. Since his childhood, the narrator has been caught among a sea of objects that pull him away from his Palestinian roots and attach him to the dominant culture. Negotiating these dual forces of influence, the protagonist “inevitably experiences [him]self and [his] reality as schizophrenic.”¹²² Yet, the narrator’s draw to the majority culture ultimately trumps his commitment to his Palestinian identity.

121 Dorfles, “Kitsch,” 36.

122 Hochberg, “To be or Not to Be,” 70.

The Identity Consumers

Though the narrator has Israeli citizenship, his desire to self-construct as a Jew echoes the behavior of an exiles: “Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.”¹²³ The protagonist’s stationary experience of exile is characteristic of many Palestinian Israelis who were never forced to leave their land, yet continually experience displacement as cultural, social, and political minorities. Though he is an Israeli citizen, the protagonist strives to achieve the normalized, stable existence that was never granted to him in Tira. As Kashua time and again stresses, the politics of citizenship are not only expressed through overt bureaucratic processes, but also, and more importantly, through the cultural forces that shape identity. Thus, the protagonist aspires, not to become more Israeli, but to become a “Jew.” This desire is ingrained in him from such a young age that he cannot remember a time when he did not want to be a Jew, “that’s what I always wanted to be, after all: a Jew. I’ve worked so hard at it[...].”¹²⁴

What is most unsettling about the protagonist’s candid remark is not his desire to be a Jew, but his belief that he can actually become one. In a single sentence, the narrator addresses the central issue of Kashua’s novel: the self as a cultural product. As Hochberg notes: “But if Kashua’s writings focus on the schizophrenic experiences of the Palestinian citizen of Israel, they are never simply descriptive accounts of those experiences. Rather, they explore the production of the figure [...].”¹²⁵ In other words, just like in *Dolly City*, in Kashua’s novel we witness a leveling of the subject-object relationship. Material goods

123 Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 177.

124 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 90.

125 Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be,” 76.

shape the psychology of their consumers; in turn, identity becomes a commodity that can be bought into.

Kashua's protagonist does just that. He is the embodiment of what Bishara calls "an identity customer." After his move to Jerusalem, the protagonist learns to rely on commodity objects to shroud all signs of his otherness. He boasts, "I have no accent. You can't tell by looking at me. I've got sideburns and Coke-bottle sunglasses. Even the Arabs mistake me for a Jew. I even speak Hebrew with the house-keeping staff."¹²⁶ By adopting the Hebrew language and Western dress, the protagonist believes that he is exercising agency over his identity, his sociopolitical status, and his fate. The narrator, however, does not detect that such attempts at self-fashioning are the only expressions of volition available to someone deprived of political agency. As Said writes, "Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorientating loss by creating a new world to rule."¹²⁷ These adopted markers of the dominant culture do not, however, grant the protagonist the "control" he is seeking; rather, they momentarily mask its lack.

And though the protagonist convinces himself that his self-construction is willful, what he does not perceive is that he is all but mirroring the pre-packaged image of the Arab Israeli created the Israeli Jew:

Bishara admits the Israelization has become part of the Israeli-Arab culture. Yet he does not see it as a solution, but rather as the element that perpetuates discrimination. He sees the Israeli-Arab identity as based on the imitation of an image created by Israeli Jews. Adopting this identity instills the satisfaction of becoming part of the Israeli culture. By being an 'identity customer,' the satisfied Palestinian-Israeli deludes himself that Israel is his home. However, this delusion is temporary, warns Bishara, for Palestinian-Israelis will never be fully accepted by Jewish-Israeli society.¹²⁸

126 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 135.

127 Said, "Reflections on Exile," 181.

128 Adia Mendelson-Moaz and Liat Steir-Livny, "The Jewish Works of Sayed Kashua: Subversive or Subordinate?" *Israel Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (2001): 124.

Unbeknownst to the narrator, all of his efforts to become a Jew result in the kitschification of the self. Buying into the reproducible aesthetics of the dominant culture, he transforms himself into a cliché, a quintessential Arab Israeli—an evermore-governable object of the Israeli sociopolitical system.

Thus, the more the protagonist tries to masquerade as a Jew, the further he veils himself in objects that disseminate an Arab-phobic ideology. This self-perpetuating cycle becomes increasingly destructive as the narrator adopts the Israeli system of discrimination, and comes to revile everything and everyone easily labeled “Arab.” In the process of Israelization, the protagonist grows distant from his family in Tira and finds his wife’s “Arabness” to be repulsive.¹²⁹ He is left without a community and, in his adult life, only has one friend who shares his particular predilection for Western culture: “Shadia is the first Arab girl I met who knew about Tom Waits [...]. Because of her, I realized there was a different kind; they’re not all the same. But apart from her, I’ve yet to meet an Arab who likes the same music as I do.”¹³⁰ Just like the protagonist, Shadia “can’t stand the sight of all these Arabs.”¹³¹ Theirs is an exilic friendship defined by “an

Azim Bishara is a Palestinian academic, writer, and public intellectual. Born in Galilee, Bishara was a former member of the Knesset. Under accusations of treason, Bishara was driven to exile, and today lives in Qatar.

129 Although he does marry, the narrator treats his wife with antagonism. His model of a healthy romantic relationship is borrowed from the western culture. He holds a very different understanding of the commitments and responsibilities of marriage than his wife. Ultimately he concludes that he is “not made for love.” The protagonist destructive interpersonal tendencies are endemic of exile. “There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish out of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness.” Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 183.

130 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 173-4.

131 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 174.

exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may be in the same predicament as [them].”¹³² Though Palestinians themselves, Shadia and the narrator negate all affiliations with the “ugliest people in Jerusalem.”¹³³ Their niche, curated taste in Western music allows them to entertain the belief that their reality is somehow closer to that of a Jew than to that of other Palestinian Israelis. Thus, the foundation of their relationship is based on two quotients: a mutual love for Western music, and a hatred of Arabs. These two quotients are not mere correlations; rather, they are the twin axes of Western aesthetics and political ideology along which it is possible to plot the trajectory of the Israeli national project. These twin axes circumscribe the workings of foreign aesthetics on the psychology of their consumers. Western aesthetics sever the organic kinships bonds of minority groups, replacing them with surrogate relational ties that are based solely on taste. Neither Shadia nor the protagonist detect that their aesthetics are tied to the Israeli national mythology and its institutionalized racism. Hence, Shadia and the narrator relate as two self-loathing identity customers. By validating each other’s musical tastes, they also validate each other’s internalized racism, submitting to a cultural trap they mutually reinforce.

The Un-homely Walls of Aesthetic Loss

In practical terms, however, the narrator’s and Shadia’s musical predilections do not change their socio-political status as second-class Israeli citizens. When the Second Intifada breaks out, life for Palestinian Israelis living in East Jerusalem becomes impossible. Shadia packs her suitcases and leaves Jerusalem, embarking on a journey

132 Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 178.

133 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 175.

without a clear destination. The narrator and his family move back to Tira. Examining the spaces that he is now forced to inhabit, the narrator reports:

Our home is ugly. There are electric wires sticking out of the living room wall, and a bell that never rings. Next to it is a clock made of gold-covered plastic inspired by a lion's mane. Hanging next to the clock is a deer's head, also made of plastic. There used to be two sabers too, but they broke long ago. Three brown wooden plaques hang unattractively on the wall across from me, with the inscription Allah in black lettering. On the wall to the left, there's a painting by Ismail Shammout with the inscription *Uda*, and next to that is a picture of a mother and a baby with a flight of ravens hovering.¹³⁴

Over the years, the protagonist's childhood home has turned into a den of kitsch. This detailed catalogue of tchotchke alert the reader of another kind of stationary displacement that contrasts with the narrator's forced physical relocation back to the village. Though the house and the land it sits on have belong to the protagonist's family for multiple generations, its aesthetic grounding has been uprooted. "Is beautiful," asks Shammout, "the wall which has obeyed the command of aesthetic loss of nerve vis-à-vis the majority culture, and which is hung with cheap reproductions (often a weeping child) [...]"¹³⁵ Shammout laments the loss of the bare Arab wall. Replacing this authentic aesthetic is one embodied by the walls of Kashua's childhood home—walls that are covered with mass-produced bric-a-brac. These walls disseminate sentimental images of cliché tropes whose origins are unspecified. Animals rendered in plastic, broken sabers that cannot protect, these objects produce and reflect the disempowered and artificial environment in which they are found. Placed along side them—and most egregious of all—the inscription of Allah reverts to kitsch.

Just like Dolly City, the childhood home of Kashua's narrator is a space that perpetually others, a space filled with objects that impede belonging. For the protagonist,

134 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 210.

135 Shammout, "Kitsch-22," 23.

a true return home is thus impossible since the home itself has been kitschified. Returning to Tira, the protagonist experiences the inauthenticity of place. In Relph's terms, this Tira is placeless. Relph argues that

the meaning of 'home' has been weakened not only through increased mobility and splitting of the functions associated with it, but also by sentimentalisation and commercialization. There is a wealth of kitschy bric-a-brac exploiting the general home-sweet-home theme, a theme captured especially well in the German *Heimwahn*, or homesickness, *Heimat*.¹³⁶

When the cliché trope of *Heimwahn* is translated onto the physical space of the narrator's home, the space becomes *unheimlich*. In the narrator's description of his parent's house, the home is unwelcoming in its unnaturalness; it is un-homely. Its uncanniness underscores Relph's definition of kitsch as "an attitude of inauthenticity in which places are treated as things from which man is largely alienated."¹³⁷ The hackneyed, manufactured foreign commodities filling the protagonist's childhood home supplant local objects that could affirm the family's ties to their tradition and culture. In such a manner, kitsch erases the historical consciousness of the minority group. As Grumberg writes, "The description [of Kashua's house] is firmly rooted in the present moment, transforming traces of the past and hints of the future into kitsch."¹³⁸ The plastic wall decorations remove the protagonist's house from the flow of time, suspending it in a destabilizing petrification, and denying its inhabitants a past nor a future.¹³⁹

136 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 82.

137 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 83.

138 Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 139. In the chapter "The No-Man's-Land of the Israeli Palestinian," Grumberg examines the Palestinian house as a spatial metaphor. In her extensive reading of this scene, Grumberg shows how Kashua intentionally corrupts this spatial metaphor by scripting his protagonist's house as kitsch.

139 The anachronistic blend of objects that fill Dolly City also suggests that its landscape is removed from the space-time continuum: "I tried to wipe out the terrible din of the metropolis, the chugging of machines, the clanking of its transportation venues which

This uncanny aesthetic permeates all of Tira's spaces. In his wife's house, the protagonist notes that a *Beverly Hills 90210* poster, a remnant of her high school days, still hangs on the peeling walls of her childhood bedroom.¹⁴⁰ The poster is reminiscent of the portrait of Ben Gurion that hung in the cobbler shop belonging to Shammass' father:

Given the reality of a cultural and political threat, in the atmosphere of military government and land expropriations one can hardly expect a man to devote much attention to the inner decorations of his walls, his house, and himself. Metaphorically speaking, the Jewish-Israeli reality, under the new guise of power, not only expropriated the son's walls, with the help of his neighbors, but forced him to hang upon them things he never thought to hang on them—a poster of Ben Gurion hung in my father's cobbler shop—much as it forced him to carry a permit of passage from place to place.¹⁴¹

In *Dancing Arabs*, we find this dynamic exemplified in more subtle terms. Shammass' poster of Ben Gurion morphs into the poster of *Beverly Hills 90210*. As ideologically saturated as the poster of Ben Gurion, the poster of the American TV show is an updated iteration of the more overt forms of propaganda that circulated in Israel after the founding of the State. The two posters reveal the ongoing presence of the same governing political machine, the latter covertly homogenizing the Palestinian imagination to fit the demands of the dominant culture. Even the narrator's wife, who is perceived to be much more traditional than her husband, is revealed to be an "identity customer."

By the end of the novel, Palestinian- Israeli tensions reach a point of crisis. In response to the violence of the Second Intifada, the Israeli government begins to relegate Palestinian Israel villages to the West Bank, stripping their residents of their citizenship, and placing them under Israeli military control. Once again glued to their TV set, Kashua's family despondently follows the news coverage of the county's political

have taken over the city: roller-coasters, steam engines, jet trains, ships, streetcars, places cares, trucks, motorcycles [...]" Castel-Bloom, *Dolly City*, 37.

140 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 214.

141 Shammass, "Kitsch-22," 24.

situation. Though Tira remains part of Israel proper, the villagers' future is bleak. Stigmatized by their Palestinian identity, the residents of Tira must now confront their status as "seventh-class citizens of the Zionist state."¹⁴² In these final pages, it becomes clear that all of Kashua's characters have been made victims of the tyranny of kitsch. The political realities of the protagonist instantaneously reveal the socio-political limitations of his constructed identity and the stability he tried to secure through conspicuous consumption. By consuming the spoon-fed kitsch of the Israeli government, and relinquishing their grasp of Palestinian culture—however stigmatized it may be—Kashua's characters find that their already fracture identity collapses on itself; though they remain Israeli citizens, they are neither Israeli nor Arab. Their home and their identity have been completely hollowed out.

Presenting and Representing Tyrannical Kitsch

Just as Shammas directs our gaze to the walls of the Palestinian Israeli household, so, too, does Kashua point at the material world that surrounds his characters. Though language, and the acculturation that occurs through language, are thematically central to *Dancing Arabs*, the threat of kitsch looms much large. Indeed, it is impossible to ignore Kashua's linguistic mode in the examination of his novel. As a Palestinian Israeli writing in Hebrew, Kashua forefronts the discussion of what language can reveal about Palestinian Israeli realities. In their treatments of Kashua's novel, scholars such as Gil Hochberg, Yair Adiel, Adia Mendelson-Moaz and Liat Steir-Livny all address the issues of identity through the lens of language. Though such an analysis is salient, it is also

142 Kashua, *Dancing Arabs*, 224.

limited. Unlike Shammas' fiction, Kashua's literary project is not a linguistic one.¹⁴³ In *Dancing Arab*, the Hebrew language is just one of the many tools the protagonist uses to mask his Palestinian identity. Just as often, the narrator uses commodity goods, such as cars and clothes, to mark himself Jewish. Hence, language is only one quotient that expresses the protagonist's fractured identity.

As in *Dolly City*, in *Dancing Arabs*, the tyranny of kitsch that latently shapes the fate of Kashua's characters is pre-linguistic. While Hochberg argues that the narrator's immersion into the culture of the colonizer occurs mainly in the classroom, the protagonist's Israelization begins at a much younger age.¹⁴⁴ Before the narrator formally enters the Israeli education system, he has already been inculcated into the ideology of the dominant culture via the products and media that he consumes. It is important to note that much of the commonplace goods that the protagonist consumes are not Israeli in origin. From the *Rambo* films the narrator watches in his youth, to the Parliaments and Subaru he purchases in adulthood, the products that shape the protagonist's identity are not intrinsically tied to the Hebrew language. Rather, they belong to the world of global commodity culture that non-verbally signify social status. Had the protagonist not spoken Hebrew, these foreign objects would still be central elements of his identity formation as an Arab Israeli.

143 Though Shammas could write in Arabic, his exquisite Hebrew prose aimed to "Un-Jew the Hebrew language, making it more Israeli." (Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*, 87.) In contrast, Kashua, educated in Jewish boarding schools, openly admits that his mastery of Hebrew exceeds that of his written Arabic. (Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be," 82). In other words, Kashua cannot write fiction in any other language but Hebrew, and his literary project is, therefore, not necessarily one of linguist appropriation, or as Hochberg would call it, "deterritorialization."

144 Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be," 74.

Unlike the high literary register of Palestinian Israeli Hebrew writers who precede him, Kashua's writing is markedly unadorned. While his sparse literary style draws our attention to language, it also makes room for other considerations. In *Dancing Arabs*, language compliments the physical environment. The "vernacular spaces," to use Grumberg's term, that are portrayed in Kashua's novel are as quotidian as the language that is used to describe them.¹⁴⁵ These are not spaces that inspire lyrical reverie; the kitsch objects that define these spaces stymie aesthetic production. In lieu of a language that could mask the world of uninspiring objects that surround his characters, Kashua's flat Hebrew unveils a reality wherein commodity products shape the imagination, desires, and fates of their consumers.

Kashua's artistic production demonstrates a deep understanding of the Israeli cultural economy and its links to the nation's political project. Both Kashua's novels and his television show, *Arab Labor*, have successfully entered the Israeli marketplace, earning a widespread readership and audience. Rather than protest against the socio-political system that proliferates tyrannical kitsch, Kashua meets its demands. As Hochberg argues, "Kashua's choice of working with, rather than directly opposing, stereotypical representations must be understood, I suggest, as an attempt to redistribute and thus defuse the power with which they are endowed."¹⁴⁶ Imbued with humor and a popular culture sensibility, Kashua's work presents a glimpse of Palestinian actualities to

145 "Vernacular place in Israel, I argue, serves or reacts to ideology implicitly or explicitly. The sometimes jarring combination of the ideological elements of the Israeli vernacular on the one hand and its commonplace, ubiquitous, and unremarkable nature on the other hand speaks to the complexity of the Israeli identity it helps to shape. [...] I propose then, that the Israeli spatial vernacular as it is represented and produced in literature not only complements the Israeli political landscape but is inextricably entangled in it." Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 4-5.

146 Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be," 85.

an Israeli audience. Just like the products that his protagonist consumes, Kashua's novels and TV shows are commodity objects. By entering the Israeli mass marketplace, they exploit the aesthetic standards of the dominant culture, counter-infiltrating the latent mono-directional system of the socio-political control that governs the lives of Palestinian Israelis. In doing so, Kashua's work puts holes in the national mythology and estranges his consumers from their construct of the "Israeli Arab."¹⁴⁷

The commercial goods ubiquitous in the pages of *Dolly City* and *Dancing Arabs* build bridges to diverse readerships. Western commodity goods offer a sense of universal familiarity, helping the authors' regional and foreign audiences situate themselves within Castel-Bloom's and Kashua's localized milieu. Yet, the comfort of material recognition that these writers lend to their readers is just as quickly retracted. Both authors attempt to reveal the political charge of seemingly neutral commodity goods. *Dolly City* and *Dancing Arabs* thematize the frequently overlooked threat of commercialism to their region, exposing its link to their protagonists' tumultuous socio-political actualities. Rather than resisting commoditization, the Castel-Bloom and Kashua produce fiction in a literary register that allows for the widespread circulation and consumption of their novels. Both authors recognize that "between the person [...] and these products [...],

147 "When asked in an interview published in Al-Nahar (July 14, 2004) to respond to the accusation voiced by some Arab readers that he uncritically adopts Israeli terminology in referring to himself and his Palestinian characters as Israeli Arabs, Kashua replied that the question of identification with which Palestinians carrying Israeli citizenship are faced is not a simple one and does not 'boil down to a matter of choosing between self and other, authentic or false.' The designation 'Israel Arab,' he further suggested, is the one that best captures the difficulties associated with this identity, which is always already suspected of treachery: 'simply by being an Arab who carried Israeli citizenship, one is accused of being a traitor. The accusation comes from both Jews and Arabs.'" Hochberg, "To Be or Not to Be," 78.

there is a gap of varying proportions opened by the use that he makes of them.”¹⁴⁸ By including and highlighting Western products in their fiction and partaking in commodity culture, Castel-Bloom and Kashua battle against the homogenizing national narrative that is disseminated via these seemingly innocuous quotidian goods. In doing so, they “metamorphize the dominant order: they make it function in another register.”¹⁴⁹

148 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 32.

149 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 32.

Chapter Two: Jergović's Marlboro and Ugrešić Threads

Just like their Israeli contemporaries, the ex-Yugoslav authors Dubravka Ugrešić and Miljenko Jergović write fiction that reflects their socio-political and cultural realities in and against the national upheaval and historical re-scripting that continues in the aftermath of the Bosnian War. Though responding to disparate regional concerns, these authors, much like Castel-Bloom and Kashua, position the cataclysmic events of their countries as the backdrop to the constellation of domestic objects that allow their readers to enter the internal and external spaces of their protagonists' daily lives. These quotidian goods both express the personal narratives of their characters, and extend to the larger ideological forces that govern the structure of their protagonists' memories and common places.

Once citizens of former Yugoslavia, Ugrešić and Jergović have both experienced their own forms of exile. In the advent of the Bosnian War, Ugrešić, then amongst Yugoslavia's most acclaimed writers, was publicly attacked by Croatia's political, literary, and academic institutions for her anti-nationalist sentiment. Declared to be one of the five "Witches of Rio" who supposedly plotted to use their public intellectual status to upend Croatia's nation-building project, Ugrešić was accused of being a "denouncer of her homeland."¹⁵⁰ In the subsequent months, Ugrešić suffered from an onslaught of vilifying media and press attention, which ultimately destroyed her reputation and career in her country. By 1992, she found it impossible to remain in Zagreb. Surreptitiously forced into exile, she took up residence in Berlin before finally settling down in Amsterdam.¹⁵¹ In 1993, Jergović, a Bosnian Croat who grew up in Sarajevo, fled from

150 Dubravka Ugrešić. "A Question of Perspective," in *Karaoke Culture*, trans. David Williams (Rochester, Open Letter, 2011), 215.

151 Ugrešić recounts her personal and professional struggles during this difficult period in a number of essays and interviews. A full discussion of the "witch hunt" that

his besieged hometown to Croatia. Today, he resides in Zagreb where questions about his national identity continue to foreground his professional achievements.¹⁵² Ugrešić's and Jergović's biographies are but two of the millions that are marked by exile as a consequence of the Bosnian War. Consequently, displacement is thematized in Ugrešić's and Jergović's fiction; regardless of their characters' final destinations, the experience of exile thematically unifies their protagonists.¹⁵³ This displacement is marked not only by the physical movements of their characters across new and old national borders, but also by the material objects that their protagonists lose and retain along the way. Photographs, tchotchke, and quotidian Western goods function as repositories that preserve pieces of these characters' uprooted, shattered lives. The objects that survive, as well as those that are lost or destroyed, become receptacles for their owners' identities, memories, and desires.

ultimately forced her to leave Croatia can be found in her essay "A Question of Perspective," as well as in her interview with Natasa Kovacevic, "Yugoslavia, an 'Almost Forbidden Word.'"

152 In his article, "The Ideal Yugoslavia," Jergović describes his encounter with the Croatian Minister of Culture, "Minister Marlaux," at a film festival in Istria. "Beat it, you piece of Bosnian garbage," the minister is quoted saying to Jergović, "go back to where you came from or we'll pack you off ourselves." Neither Jergović nor Ugrešić tolerate national identity labels—an endemic byproduct of the Bosnian War, and a marker of the subsequent rise of institutionalized racism. In the same article, Jergović writes, "our lives are not determined by flags." For both writers, Yugoslavia is representative of a country and time that did not base its national ideology on the project of ethnic purity. As a result of their ethical and political stance, both authors have been accused of displaying another pejorative, "Yugo-nostalgia." Miljenko Jergovic, "The Ideal Yugoslavian,"

Signandsight.com, July 26, 2007, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1450.html>

153 Ugrešić even considers displacement as a trans-temporal experience, citing Victor Shklovsky's meditations on exile in *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.

Fragments to Freedom

In Ugrešić's *Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and Jergović's *Sarajevo Marlboro*, material goods are used to intercept the construction of post-Yugoslav national narratives of ethnic purity. Like Castel-Bloom and Kashua, Ugrešić and Jergović write from the margins of society, a position that is reflected in their fiction's liminal forms of genre. On ethical grounds, they resist playing the part of the "poet [as] the nation's old school PR man."¹⁵⁴ Instead, they intervene in the homogenizing scripting of their former homeland by reconstituting it in fragments, stressing the hodgepodge of material goods that circulate through its private and public spaces. The origin of these objects is as variegated and difficult to trace as the ancestry of their consumers.¹⁵⁵ Local as well as Western products, these objects are personal and mass-produced, intimate and ideologically saturated. In their fiction, consumer items are revealed to facilitate historical erasure, support neo-nationalistic claims to cultural exceptionalism, and perpetuate the Balkan's complicated cultural and economic ties to the West.¹⁵⁶ All too aware of the global marketplace's latent but continuous role in the ideological structure of their former country now divided, Ugrešić's and Jergović's fiction addresses the civic dangers of government-sanctioned material culture in today's "amnesiac society."¹⁵⁷

154 Dubravka Ugrešić, "What Is an Author Made Of?" in *Europe in Sepia*, trans. David Williams (Rochester: Open Letter, 2013), 205-6.

Ugrešić goes on to write, "The Poet is always a plaything, putty in the hands of Politicians and Priests."

155 Ugrešić's mother is Hungarian, and Jergović's grandfather is German. In their essays, interviews and fiction, both authors readily discuss their pan-European ancestry, and use their genealogy to give evidence to the absurdity of Croatia's project to ethnically cleanse their demographic.

156 In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym delineates and historically contextualizes the Balkan's love affair with Europe in the chapter "Europa's Eros."

157 Ugrešić, "A Question of Perspective," 229. Many of Ugrešić's essays deal explicitly with the effects of "McDonaldsification" on contemporary culture at large, and the marketability of minor literature in particular. Among the best of examples of this

Yet, neither author's treatment of material goods is strictly ominous. As opposed to the Hebrew novels discussed in the previous chapter, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1996) and *Sarajevo Marlboro* (1994) wade through the tyranny of commercialism to arrive at a discourse of objects as potential loci of personal freedom. While the reproducibility and disposability of consumer items propagate forgetting, material goods also testify to the phenomenological experiences of those who possess them. Utilized as tools for documenting what Boym calls "countermemory," kitschy, outmoded commercial goods serve as accumulated reference points against which the malleability and fallibility of human memory are tried and contested; through these material objects remembering is made possible.¹⁵⁸ This chapter will examine Ugrešić's and Jergović's sophisticated, object-oriented literary projects as they address the multifaceted workings of tyrannical kitsch. In addition, this chapter aims to show the manner in which Ugrešić and Jergović complicate the discourse on kitsch by using material goods to give "value [to] the life stories of anonymous people and to rescue memories of Yugoslavia from the institutionalized waste dump of history."¹⁵⁹

discussion is "What Is an Author Made Of?" in the essay collection, *Europe in Sepia*. Furthermore, in the titular essay of this collection, Ugrešić addresses the commodification and kitschification of Balkan culture by the West. Jergović speaks to similar concerns in his essay, "The Merchant of Europe."

158 "Countermemory is not merely a collection of alternative facts and texts but also an alternative way of reading using ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, private intonations that challenge the official bureaucratic and political discourse. Objects serve as accumulated reference points against which the malleability and fallibility of human memory is tried and contested; through them remembering is made possible." Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 63.

159 Stijn Vervaeke "Whose Museum? Whose Histories? Whose Memory? Remembering in the Work of Dubravka Ugrešić," *Comparative Critical Studies* 8, no.2-3 (2011): 296.

Europa's Gift

Published in 1994, *Sarajevo Marlboro* reads as an alternative war narrative intended to intercept official post-Yugoslav histories before they cement in the collective consciousness of present and future generations. Like Ugrešić and Kashua, Jergović combats totalizing national narratives by turning the reader's attention to the polyvalent, commonplace realities of his protagonists.¹⁶⁰ As Alcalay writes, "it is out of contempt for historical truth that Miljenko Jergović has molded a writing of the quotidian, a writing of everyday history whose details interrogate myths and lacerate the heart."¹⁶¹ A blend of genres—essay, reportage, and fiction—the twenty-nine stories that comprise *Sarajevo Marlboro* manage to simultaneously defamiliarize and foster empathy for the shared human condition.¹⁶² Jergović's stories inch toward reality, not with the cold, calculated pen of a Realist writer, but with the language of a humanist. By committing to narrative

160 In his article, "The Merchant of Europe", Jergović writes passionately against the official histories circulating in former Yugoslavia: "In the Balkans, myths and legends serve those ends which are elsewhere served by history, whether we are talking about the official history taught in schools, or the unofficial history of everyday life. Which is why the destruction of every kind of individual and collective memory is so important in the Balkans of today. Important, that is, to the rulers, nationalist fraudsters that they are, and their cultural elites. Memory contains the roots of subversion and the potential to overturn the ruling order, which is why memory has to be forbidden[...]. In the Balkans, and especially in Croatia and Serbia, nationalism is based on falsified, counterfeited, fictional history, on things which never even happened, but in which the whole of society has to believe. The non-believer has to be excluded, driven out and eliminated. Miljenko Jergović, "The Merchant of Europe," *Eurozine*, May 8, 2013, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-05-08-jergovic-en.html>.

161 Alcalay, "Introduction," xiv.

162 Dragana Obradović writes, "Important for Shkolvskii's formulation of *ostranenie*, however, is that this dissonance marks the point of distinction by which art asserts its autonomy from life so that it cannot be so easily moulded and dissimulated by political aims. Such a position remains relevant for the Yugoslav republics of the 1990s during which literary discourse functioned as an analogue to political rhetoric of ethno-nationalist dimensions." Dragana Obradović, "Aesthetics, Spectacle and Kitsch in Literary Representations of the Sarajevo Siege," *The Slavonic and Eastern European Review* 90, no. 2 (2012): 260-61.

modes that depart from the high register of his national literature, Jergović writes prose that resists appropriation into the national mythology.

Like his Palestinian Israeli counterpart, Jergović writes from the margins of post-Yugoslav society.¹⁶³ Cynthia Simmons notes, "Jergović's profession as a writer only emphasizes his borderline status, as an artist (in the broad sense) who abides, by definition, on the limen."¹⁶⁴ The author's "borderline status," however, is a byproduct not only of his profession, but also of his national identity and politics. Jergović is a Bosnian Croat. His identity exemplifies the confluence of Balkan nationalities and ethnicities, a reality that was considered the status quo in in former Yugoslavia.¹⁶⁵ Thus, Jergović publicly rejects the neo-nationalistic models of ethnic purity that are central to the ideologies of post-Yugoslav countries, and his fiction and articles reflect his political stance. It is, therefore, not surprising that in *Sarajevo Marlboro*, the Bosnian capital is not only depicted as a war site, but also as a culturally cross-pollinating metropolis that epitomizes the character of the author's now divided country. In his book, Jergović strings together a prismatic tableau of his former hometown, and each of his stories further underscores the truly variegated ethnic population of the capital. Yet, Jergović's

163 Though separated by geography, Kashua and Jergović share biographical details and political actualities that offer non-negligable links between the writers and their literary production. Both journalist, Kashua and Jergović infuse their prose with elements of reportage, resulting in a deliberate clarity of style that is predicated over literary flourishes. Theirs is a fiction that is intended to communicate with, and relate to, a wide-ranging and diverse audience. The ostensible simplicity of their prose belies the complex and intrepid project of their fiction: to fracture any singular, homogenous portrait of their regions, and capture the pluralistic experiences of life threatened by the violence of political conflict.

164 Cynthia Simmons, "Miljenko Jergović and (Yugo)nostalgia," *Russian Literature* 66, no. 4 (November 2009):458.

165 For a detailed autobiographical essay outlining Jergović's political stance on his Croatian citizenship, see "The Ideal Yugoslavian."

stories also stress the presence of an external cultural force shaping the structure of Sarajevan society: Western media and consumer products circulate freely through the spaces of the capital city, feeding the imagination and desires its residents.

While wartime Sarajevo has been treated in a similarly pluralistic fashion by many writers, most notably by Semezdin Mehmodinovic in *Sarajevo Blues*, Jergović's portrayal of life in the besieged capital is marked by its attention to material culture. Jergović's protagonists find commonality through their material possessions. Fiats and Beetles, Coca-cola and Chanel No. 5, these are the products that define the habits, social practices, and identities of Jergović's characters, whether they be Bosnian or Croatian, Muslim or Christian. Just as it does in *Dancing Arabs*, the ubiquitous presence of commercialism in *Sarajevo Marlboro* appears as a feature of the region's complicated relationship with the West, and underscores the effects of Western commodities on the psyches of their consumers. These objects, Jergović intimates, contribute to Balkan liminality, which arises not only through the conflation of local cultures, but also through the ongoing process of Westernization.

In various iterations, *Sarajevo Marlboro* thematizes commercialism as a problematic and incomplete form of Westernization. Commonplace commodities not only lend realism to Jergović's portrayal of everyday life in Sarajevo, but also, and perhaps more importantly, expose the false Europeanization of Yugoslav society. Once representing civic ideals, Europe offered the Balkans "a defiant strategy of liberation and political change against distinctly late-twentieth-century forms of authoritarianism and nationalism."¹⁶⁶ *Sarajevo Marlboro* points to the absence of such democratic freedoms.

166 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 221. Boym goes on to write, "alternative thinking urban dwellers in these cities could find more in common among themselves than with their own countries. In the countries of the former Soviet bloc and Yugoslavia, nostalgia for Europe was a way of resisting the Soviet or Tito-style version of official internationalism

In their place are commodity goods, tools of the political machine, which mask and distract from the societal ills of the nation. Rather than promoting civic reform, Europeanization in the form of commercialization thwarts political dialogue altogether. As Boym notes, “While the availability of American entertainment in Eastern Europe [...] was greeted at first as a sign of new openness, its expansion and ubiquity became more problematic over time, especially when Western popular culture gradually became synonymous with democratization and supplanted other experiments with democracy.”¹⁶⁷ Jergović’s stories show the repercussions of this dynamic on the individual. Instead of endorsing pluralism, Western commodities not only homogenize Sarajevo’s multicultural society, but also kitschify it, allowing it to be sold back to the West. The result is an aesthetic and cultural leveling that facilitates the proliferation of a politically aestheticized national mythology, creating an objectified society vulnerable to government control.

Tito’s Lego Land

Jergović begins his exploration of these processes in the first story of his collection, “The Excursion.” “The Excursion” is story set in peacetime, and traces a day in the life of a young Sarajevan boy who takes a day trip with his mother to the town of Jajce. The trip is an organized outing by the Public Accounts Department where his mother is employed. Renowned for its natural beauty and historical import, Jajce is the perfect destination for a government office excursion. Built in the fourteenth century, the

as well as nationalism.” (231) Sarajevo, with its multicultural demographic, is the perfect example of such a city. Though nostalgia is not the central focus of my reading of *Sarajevo Marlboro*, the novel does come to show that the Balkan enamourment with Europe resulted in little political change for the countries of former Yugoslavia.

¹⁶⁷ Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

town was once the capital of the Kingdom of Bosnian. In the twentieth century, Jajce once again gained a place in the national narrative. In November of 1943, the town became the location of the second convention of the Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) led by Tito; on the 29th of the month, the AVNOJ announced the creation of a Democratic Federal Yugoslavia. A site ripe for the construction of collective memory and the strengthening of national pride, Jajce is a tourist destination that emblemizes the homeland, wherein “‘home’ has become a marketable, exchangeable, and sentimentalized good.”¹⁶⁸ Addressing the protagonist using the second-person pronoun, the narrator transcribes and contextualizes the boy’s thoughts, highlighting the child’s susceptibility to the propagandistic agenda of the trip,

As the bus weaves through the Bosnian countryside, the boy gazes at the landscape spreading before him. Almost immediately, the unconscious workings of the national ideology begin to impress themselves on the boy’s psychology: “Through the glass you notice things—people, scenes, aspects—that will become, much later, ten years on perhaps, the more or less familiar images of your homeland. Such things you will describe with fervor and exaggeration to strangers from other countries.”¹⁶⁹ Taking a tone that is neither critical nor ironic, the narrator provides the reader with a hindsight perspective of the excursion, labeling it as formative event to the child’s national identity. Although the trip is taxing on the boy—he feels sick, witnesses a fatal car crash, and hears tragic stories of suicide—the narrator intimates that the visceral unpleasantness of the excursion will be forgotten in the fog of time. Only the pastoral vignettes of his country will remain cemented in his memory.

168 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 83.

169 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, trans. Stela Tomasevic (New York: Archipelago Books, 2004), 4.

Among the other government employees on bus is a man named Džemo. Džemo is a drunkard who spends most of the trip to Jajce sipping from his army flask. He regales the young boy with personal anecdotes from his tumultuous past, attempting to educate the child about the facts of life. Happy to receive the attention of the seemingly sole male on the bus, the young boy befriends Džemo, lending him the attention that the middle-aged drunkard does not receive from any of the other adults. Upon arriving at their destination, Džemo takes on the self-appointed role of tour guide, informing the excursion group of Jajce's underground labyrinths, and recounting a story about star-crossed lovers who took their lives at the town's famed waterfall. While Džemo's monologues veil Jajce in the smoke and mirrors of a fabled history, the boy's initial impression of Jajce paints a different portrait of the town: "Jajce is made of giant Lego, as if a mighty pair of hands had assembled the bricks after reading the instructions on the back of a toy packet. Nothing is real, except the waterfall perhaps, which is massive and terrifying."¹⁷⁰

The child, who is dragged along on the trip by his mother so that he can see the waterfall, arrives to Jajce without romanticized nationalistic preconceptions. Attempting to comprehend his new environs, he draws analogies to familiar, quotidian objects, Legos. Unknowingly, his naïve perspective pierces through Jajce's layers of ideological aura that captivate the adults. Bearing the plastic, pre-packaged qualities of a Lego set, the landscape that the child perceives is a perfect example of what Relph calls "museumisation": "a particular form of disneyfication is the preservation, reconstruction, and idealization of history or museumisation. The manifestations of this process are reconstituted, restored pioneer villages, castles and forts. Museumised places are almost

170 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 6.

inevitably made suitably tidy and bowdlerized to correspond with the ‘immutable past.’” Ralph goes on to write that such places are “‘kitschified’” and “strive for accuracy of replication in their visible detail, but so long as they meet the general demand of historical atmosphere it does not seem to matter whether they are genuine or complete fakes and facades.”¹⁷¹ Museumisation is a permutation of disneyfication, a process of controlled place-making that produces spaces that Relph characterizes as a “small totalitarian states.”¹⁷² Although the boy is incapable of deconstructing the ideological function of Jajce, his gaze comes closer to exposing the inauthenticity of space that is largely undetected by the adults.

Yet, the child’s initial impressions of Jajce do not inoculate him against the onslaught of nationalistic propaganda. Later in the afternoon, the excursion group visits a museum commemorating Tito’s Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia. In this scene, the boy’s inculcation into the national narrative of Yugoslavia is made evident:

You visit a museum with portraits of national heroes. This is where Comrade Tito made Yugoslavia. You ask Džemo if Tito also made Jajce. The old man replies, ‘Yes and no—which is to say that he didn't, but he might as well have.’ You can't understand Džemo's answer. Tito, you imagine, was the only person in the world strong enough to assemble the Lego bricks above the waterfall.¹⁷³

As the child tries to consolidate his impressions of the town with its history, he forges his own mythology that complements the warped institutionalized historical narrative propagated by the museum.

The boy’s construction of his whimsical fantasy parallels the process of historical falsification or ‘restorative nostalgia,’ which “rebuilds lost homes and patches up the

171 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 102.

172 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 99.

173 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 7.

memory gaps.”¹⁷⁴ Comrade Tito made Yugoslavia and made Jajce—in the most basic terms, this is the very message the museum wants its visitors to believe. Yet, even Džemo, the patriotic espouser of folklore, cannot entirely validate such an interpretation of events. In this instance, Džemo’s age and experience seem to undercut his nationalistic fervor. The child’s fanciful interpretation of the past does, however, contain a seed of truth. It is found, not in content, but in diction—namely, in the verb “made”. The boy’s intuition that “nothing is real” applies not only to space, but also to history; both are “made,” prefabricated, and objectified so as to be consumed and shaped into a neat Lego utopia.¹⁷⁵ As it turns out, the young boy, who reconstructs the past with the molded blocks of information given to him, is an ideal consumer. The malleability of the national narrative, which molds to the contours of the child’s imagination, signals its kitsch. After all, availability and accessibility are two of the defining characteristics of tyrannical kitsch.¹⁷⁶

In the “The Excursion,” multiple mythologies—Džemo’s, the child’s, the museum’s— can be condensed into two utopic models that are superimposed upon one another: the plastic utopia that can be constructed with a Lego set, and the nationalistic utopia constructed out of Jajce. In the mind of the child, the two fuse into one. Legos are not only a foreign commodity, but are also a toy that embodies placelessness. The depiction of Jajce as a Lego set serves to defamiliarize the reader from the landscape: the

174 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

175 Ugrešić, too, notes that Western commercialism and media was a tool used to deploy Tito’s communist ideology: “How was it that Hollywood films were my childhood entertainment? A few years after Tito’s historic NO to Stalin, Yugoslav cinemas were flooded with Hollywood films, the best kind of ideological support.” Dubravka Ugrešić, “Nostalgia,” in *Europe in Sepia* (Rochester: Open Letter, 2013), 15.

176 Greenburg argues that kitsch is always available to the oppressed to ensure they never stray from the oppressor. “Avant-Garde,” 21.

toy blocks' plasticity undermines the ostensible natural grandeur of the scenery, while their foreign origins belie the rich national history of the town, intimating the inauthenticity of place. Rather than emblemizing the saturated, organic past of the tourists' homeland, Jajce exemplifies a premeditated, monumentalized space that "makes a claim to immortality and eternal youth, not to the past."¹⁷⁷

For the young boy, however, the act of conflating the commercial and spatial utopic models is instinctive. Legos function as a concrete and familiar references points, which help the child understand and cope with his new surroundings. In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugrešić's protagonist recalls that her childhood imagination was structured around a similarly indiscriminant blend of mythologies:

Eksena, Pavlen Vasilka, Tsvetanka, and Anastasiya—along with Pandora and her box, King Midas, partisan tales, the Argonauts and their search for the golden fleece, with children's stories about Tito, [...] with the unhappy Medea, with Russian folk tales, with the boy Nemecek out of *The Hero of Pavlova Street* and Audie Murphy, the American actor, hero of Westerns—would be preserved in the enduring fund of my childhood myths.¹⁷⁸

In both Jergović and Ugrešić fiction, the child's mind conflates legends and commonplace objects are into one cohesive, glorified world-order. Thus, the disparate mythologies that circulate in "The Excursion" facilitate, rather than complicate, the boy's inculcation into the national narrative. Ultimately, the excursion aggrandizes Tito into a larger than life character in the young boy's imagination. A Lego Jajce made by Tito, therefore, recapitulates the character of Yugoslavian nationalism, which, even then, employed Western commodity goods to meet its political agenda.

177 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 78.

178 Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth (New York: New Directions, 2002), 71.

Before boarding the bus back to Sarajevo, the visitors spend their final hour in Jajce dining at a restaurant. The boy eats shish kebab, which he then throws up on the trip home. The banality of the meal interweaves mythologized and mundane time, an experience endemic to tourism: “From folktale to descriptions of residences, an exacerbation of ‘practice,’ actuates the stories narrating tours in places that, from the ancient cosmos to contemporary public housing developments, are all forms of an imposed order.”¹⁷⁹ Even the food the tourists consume signals a kitschified cultural essentialism that does not sit well in the stomach. Yet, the fabricated past and its quotidian expression in present are unable to create order out of the cataclysmic future. Falling asleep on the return trip from Jajce, the child wakes up “when the sky is red, like a burning roof over the lights of Sarajevo.”¹⁸⁰ In last line of the story, the narrator portents the dark course of events to come. In this future, the mythologies of space are set on fire by the realities of war, sparing not even Tito’s plastic Lego land.¹⁸¹

“The Excursion” is the only story in “Unavoidable Detail of Biography,” the first section of *Sarajevo Marlboro*. Like Kashua, Jergović intentionally does not name his first protagonist. The narrator’s use of the second- person pronoun intimates that the child’s experiences are both singular and universal—the “you” addresses both the protagonist and the reader. In the broadest terms, “The Excursion” is about the condition of childhood, in which the incomprehensible world of adults is pieced together through a makeshift logic that is root in the material objects that constitute daily life. Hence, Jergović’s opening story provides a detail of shared biography that links the reader to the child. Similar to the protagonist of *Dancing Arabs*, the child in “The Excursion” does not

179 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 121-122.

180 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 8.

181 During the Bosnian War, Jajce suffered heavy damage, and many of its notable sites were destroyed.

detect the ideological network of systems that control the construction of his identity or of place. The Lego set ingrains the child with an aesthetic rubric for the evaluation of space, wherein normalcy is characterized by plasticity. This sensibility neatly complements and buttresses the fabricated nature of the country's national narrative; however, the limitations of socio-political stability granted by these object is revealed by the onset of war.

Objects of the Siege

In "A Reconstruction of Events," the second section of *Sarajevo Marlboro*, the reader moves to wartime Sarajevo. It must be noted that Jergović's reconstruction is markedly not a restoration. The title of the second section characterizes Jergović's authorial project as an intervention in the scripting of the collective memory of war, which "tends to make a single teleological plot out of shared everyday recollections. The gaps and discontinuities are mended through a coherent and inspiring tale of recovered identity."¹⁸² Predicated on fragmentation, the twenty-eight stories in this section attest to the impossibility of consolidating the experiences of war into a "single teleological plot." These snippets of everyday life not only enumerate the material objects destroyed in the war, but also show the objectification of human lives, which themselves are shards left in the trail of war's destruction. Rather than sweeping these ruins away, Jergović preserves them, emphasizing their cracks and splinters.

Material goods are as central to the stories in "A Reconstruction of Events" as the characters themselves: without these objects, the stories of Jergović's protagonists could not be told. While war rages around them, the protagonists of the stories in "A

182 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 53.

Reconstruction of Events” find stability in the foreign commodities that permeate their public and private spheres. The siege allows Jergović to highlight the psychological function of Western commercial goods and media, which provide their consumers with a semblance of normalcy in the face of inconceivable destruction. The story “The Ring” exemplifies this coping strategy.

“The Ring” contemplates the nature of mourning in wartime. The title of the story refers to the protagonist’s grandmother’s wedding band. Her ring was given to the family at the mortuary before her funeral in June of 1986. This event frames the protagonist’s reflections on bereavement. That summer, the entire city was preoccupied with the World Cup. Although his grandmother is sick, the protagonist still closely followed the soccer matches. While the teenager awaited the return of his mother from the hospital where his grandmother is being treated, he “discussed the previous night’s matches with [his] friends or [found] other ways of killing time until nightfall, when the familiar cycle of waiting for death and watching late-night soccer games would begin all over again.”¹⁸³ The soccer games demarcated the progression of his grandmother’s decline. Years later, the protagonist’s memory of her death and of the World Cup meld into a single event, trivializing the former, while lending import to the latter.

After his grandmother’s funeral, a wake was held at the protagonist’s house, though he did not participate. Instead he

switched on the TV in order to see the World Cup final. [...] On the other side of the world a huge stadium burst into life in an orgy of excitement. [...] In the absence of my own feelings, it was possible to be happy watching a spectacle that made me forget about reality, just as it is sometimes possible during orgasm, for example, to pretend that nothing else matters.¹⁸⁴

183 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 32.

184 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro* 34.

More than a form of entertainment, the television acts as a panacea for bereavement, inoculating the adolescent against the pain of loss. Inducing forgetting, the television forms holes in the adolescent's memory that are filled by the proceedings of an international sports spectacle—a confluence of commercialism and nationalism in its own right. Swept up by the collective euphoria of mass spectatorship, the teenager loses sight of his personal grief. In “The Ring,” Western media is presented as an instantaneous and pervasive sedative that ameliorates tragedy without being able to prevent it. The adolescent learns to rely on Western programming to placate trauma, both personal and collective. Years later, the protagonist finds himself amidst a war whose tragedy has likewise been turned into a mass media spectacle, shaping the local demographic into a society that has “made a habit of death without sadness.”¹⁸⁵

Thus, war has made Jergović's protagonists both the consumers and subjects of Western media. With cameras pointed at Sarajevo, the international press exploits the horrors of war. Each newspaper scripts its own narrative of events according to the demands of its political and economic agendas. As Obradović writes, “The siege presented an intersection of localized ethno-nationalist conflict and international vectors of capital, constituted by scores of journalists, politicians, philosophers and celebrities.”¹⁸⁶ These “international vectors of capital” stimulate the local war economy, and journalist, both foreign and domestic, profit from the political upheaval. “Declension” enters the home of one such local journalist, whose professional practices force the reader to consider the ethics of war reportage.

185 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 34.

186 Obradović, “Aesthetics,” 230.

The story opens with a domestic scene. Dino, a schoolboy, is diligently doing his Latin homework in the living room. In the background, Zoka, his stepfather, a local correspondent for the American press, is editing war footage:

His stepfather was chain-smoking cigarettes and rewinding the videotape of a massacre he has filmed in central Bosnia. The speeded-up images of suffering and tears played on your nerves, dispelling the memory of emotion. He had to think of a commentary in a hurry in order to dispatch the report to the United States the next day. Briefly he thought it would be a good idea just to record the sound of the boy declining *terra, terram, terrae*...and blood.¹⁸⁷

In this scene, Jergović is undoubtedly calling into question the ethical standards of his own profession. For Zoka, the suffering of others translates into his material gain. His task is to commoditize bloodshed for the consumption of the American audience, and to do so as quickly as possible: the demands of his job require speed rather than accuracy or depth of reporting. Instead of fostering compassion, his camera lens objectifies the victims of the massacre, transforming them into characters on a gory movie set. Here, we hear the echo of a sentiment expressed in Kashua's second novel, *Let It Be Morning*: "All the wars on television look the same lately."¹⁸⁸ Played ad nauseum, Zoka's footage loses its emotional resonance for even Dino, turning him into a spectator of the war. The boy can calmly continue to do his homework because the television psychologically distances him from the persistent threat of violence right outside of his door. The dissonance that Dino experiences reflects "[...] the complexity of telecommunication and televised mediation—one of three strands in Derrida's neologistic 'teletechnoscience' military complex— [which] is a recent component of representation and, it must be added, actual experience of war."¹⁸⁹ With Zoka's massacre footage playing on the television, war

187 Jegovic, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 149.

188 Sayed Kashua, *Let It Be Morning*, trans. Miriam Shlesinger, (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 33.

189 Obradović, "Aesthetics," 229.

paradoxically seems to be happening elsewhere, far from the quotidian family scene in the apartment.¹⁹⁰

Meanwhile, the stepfather struggles to pitch his story at the right register. For the desensitized viewer of Western media, inundated with images of war, tears and blood alone will not suffice; the stepfather must add a narrative to his footage that will re-infuse his recording with a sentimental bent. Agonizing over his storyline, he momentarily considers scrapping it altogether. In its place, he deliberates sending the news network a disturbing but nonetheless kitschy image of Dino superimposed with blood. As an experienced reporter, Zoka knows that a single death, especially that of a child, sells better than a thousand. It is clear that no space, not even his home, is sacred to the journalist, who is willing to gesture at his stepson's death in order to get a good story.

The stepfather, who perceives everyone and everything as a potential news headline, recognizes that Dino would make the perfect poster child of war. In this instance, the journalist restrains himself, but not for long. Later in the story, Dino's mother finds a letter that the boy wrote to his grandfather:

Had it been anybody else's son, the sentences would have looked stupid and banal. As it were, they were perfect to cry over. The mother told the stepfather about the contents of the letter. He nodded and later told his friends about them. He translated the words for the American editors, and they replied that they were wonderful and moving.¹⁹¹

In the end, Zoka finally finds a way to exploit his stepson. Jergović makes it a point not to divulge the details of the child's letter because they are irrelevant. All that matters is

190 This scene recalls the conclusion of Kashua's novel, *Let It Be Morning*, wherein the residents of the Palestinian Israeli village turn on their television and find that "they are filming the village." (263) The reader soon learns that village has made national news headlines because it has come under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority, effectively revoking the Israeli citizenship of all the villagers.

191 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 153.

that it is imbued with the readily commoditized “human factor.” Thus, the journalist feeds the boy’s letter to the American media, branding it as the ruminations of an innocent child caught in the crossfires of war—a cliché perfect for pulling the heartstrings of the masses.

Like Suissa, Dino is involuntarily scripted into his country’s national mythology. In such a way, Zako sensationalizes and homogenizes the complexities of war into digestible nuggets to be circulated by Western media. As a local journalist, Zoka is an essential accessory for foreign news networks since he is able to access spaces that international reporters cannot enter. His exploitation of life in these intimate settings highlights his moral dubiousness. Clichés sold as truths, these representations of his country are not only fed to the international audience. They are also reflected back to, and consumed by, his countrymen. At his hands, massacres and private letters become the subjects of public discourse, forming the basis of collective memory and proliferating a brand of regional kitsch. These kitschified portraits of his war-torn homeland find two lifelines: not only are they used by American media channels, but they are also readily incorporated into the national ideology. Thus, Zoka’s treatment of death also follows the rules of the kitsch-death formula, a formula that, as Obradović confirms, was a staple of the national rhetoric during the Sarajevo Siege. Delineating the ideological uses of kitsch, she writes:

The insinuating power of kitsch in the hands of political and national ideology goes beyond a vulgar expression of commodification. This position has already been explored historically by Saul Friedlander whose work demonstrates, by drawing specifically on the ideology behind Nazi propaganda, how the implementation of kitsch in public discourse neutralizes extreme situations, particularly death, by turning death into a sentimental idyll. Friedlander is concerned with the aesthetic *frisson* that arises out of ‘the opposition between the harmony of kitsch’ to ‘the constant evocation of themes of death and destruction’; this, he goes on to add, is achieved through the neutralization of ‘the

contemporary mind by artifices of language, displacement of meaning, aestheticization, inversion of symbols.' Death and other motifs of warfare are [...] never concerned with fact or verifiable detail.¹⁹²

“Declension” allows us to take Obradović’s argument a step further. Zoka sentimentalizes death, turning human suffering back into a “vulgar expression of commodification” that is consumed by foreigners and locals alike. His sensationalized journalism constructs people as objects. Such dehumanization is imbedded in the structure of war journalism, and results in the erasure of the subject–object divide. Furthermore, the commodification of the subjective human experience by Western media transforms the psychology of those who consume it: they, too, learn to objectify their neighbor, and, ultimately, themselves. The dangerous repercussions of this psychological phenomenon, especially during war, are echoed in many of Jergorvić’s other stories such as “Muslim Doll.”

Ćipo, one of the two protagonists in “Muslim Doll,” is a curmudgeonly vagabond. Through the good graces of his aunt, he is allowed to live in her otherwise uninhabited five-bedroom apartment. With all the extra space, Ćipo first decides to adopt a stray dog, who dies, and then a cat, who runs away, until he finally finds a human lodger, Mujesira. Mujesira is a seventeen-year old Muslim girl from Foča, who found herself alone in Sarajevo after her family was killed in a massacre. Though he gives her lodging, Ćipo is repulsed by Mujesira’s ethnicity and wants nothing to do with her. Mujesira tends to the apartment, and tries to befriend her landlord; however, to all of her extensions of friendship, Ćipo replies with brutish silence. Months later, Ćipo finds himself plagued by his conflicting feeling for the girl:

She stuck him as being very beautiful yet foreign. Before the war, he had never met such a doll in the underground cellars that he used to frequent. Yet there she

192 Obradović, “Aesthetics,” 258.

was in wartime, in his aunt's apartment, like a gift from God, an open invitation to lead a better life. On the one hand, the situation was very promising; on the other, it was kind of disgusting."¹⁹³

Even as his feelings toward Mujesira begin to change, Ćipo cannot humanize her. Mujesira's ethnicity makes her all the more susceptible to objectification. Perceiving her as a doll, Ćipo transforms her into talisman of hope. This construction offers a perfect example of the manner in which ideology is proliferated through commercial goods; only conceived as an object can she represent the promise of a better life.

Torn between attraction and revulsion, Ćipo toys with the idea of a romantic relationship with Mujesira, but never expresses his feelings. Later that summer, Mujesira dies in the hospital after a mortar shell blows off her legs. Ćipo, consumed with grief, is heard in the hospital courtyard crying, "Come back, my Muslim doll!"¹⁹⁴ Ćipo is as much the tragic figure in this story as Mujesira. Granted the opportunity to make a real and meaningful human connection in a time marked by death and destruction, Ćipo chooses to continue treating Mujesira as an object, and thereby, retains the fantasy of an idealized future. Even her gruesome injury is unable to convince Ćipo that she is made of flesh and blood. At end of the story, Ćipo is depicted as a bereaved child who has lost his toy, a disturbing, tragic echo back to the boy in "The Excursion." In a culture where commercialism is embedded into the national ideology, it is not only space, but also the people who inhabit it, that are commoditized. Such a society, structured on homogenizing plastic models, prevents Mujesia from being anything other than a plastic, kitschified doll.

193 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 54.

194 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 55.

The Riddle of the Marlboro

Yet, *Sarajevo Marlboro* not only diagnoses societal ills; in “The Gravedigger,” it prescribes a remedy. Titled after its protagonist, and told in first-person, the story recounts an interaction between the gravedigger and an American journalist who has come to interview him. The gravedigger has been digging the graves of Sarajevo’s deceased for countless years. It is not a morose disposition, but a deep appreciation for life and the history of his land that commits the gravedigger to his profession. Despite being a polyglot and world traveler, the gravedigger does not suffer from wanderlust. He is content to walk his daily path up the hill of the cemetery where he diligently performs his job.

The story opens atop this hill, with the gravedigger mid-monologue such that it is unclear who is speaking and who is being addressed. In his soliloquy, the gravedigger discusses the placement of the tombstones alongside the hill. Being buried atop the hill, the gravedigger argues, is preferable to being buried in the valley:

Let’s say you meet a stranger idling through though the deep grass and he expressed an interest in the life story of a person buried up there—well there you have it! At least on the hillside, you don’t have to regurgitate the story. You can actually map out the life history of the deceased as it moved through the downtown area, from shop to bar toward grave. [...] You point your index finger so the visitor can see.¹⁹⁵

The hillside offers a vista that connects the world of the dead, the cemetery, to the city of the living, Sarajevo. From this vantage point, one is able to remember the life of a person, and not only their death. Taking no pleasure from “regurgitating the story” of the deceased, the gravedigger does not wish to speak for the dead. In contrast to the mediated historical narratives of Jajce, or the journalist’s dehumanizing gaze, this form of commemoration demythologizes the dead, and restores their humanity.

¹⁹⁵ Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 97-8.

The gravedigger tells the story of the departed by tracing the movements of their everyday lives. Out of these variegated paths, the gravedigger evokes a different picture of Sarajevo, still murky but dense, recalling de Certeau's writing on the phenomenological experience of the city: "The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of space: in relation to representation, it remains daily and indefinitely other."¹⁹⁶ The gravedigger relinquishes authorial control over both the biographies of the dead, and the history of Sarajevo. Focused on the quotidian lives of the deceased, his "manifold story" departs from the official narratives of Sarajevo, producing an authentic, ideology-free history of the capital.

Creating neither an official map nor a totalizing narrative, the gravedigger merely points to the city on the horizon. His finger simultaneously gestures at reality and obfuscates it. As his hand moves from house, to bar, to cellar, the paths that he marks cannot be retraced. More than delineating the biography of the deceased, the gravedigger evokes the "practice of space," in which

"space is existential" and "existence is spatial." This experience is [...] situated by desire, indissociable from a "direction of existence" and implanted into the space of a landscape. From this point of view "there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences." The perspective is determined by a 'phenomenology' of existing in the world."¹⁹⁷

The gravedigger's finger points beyond the limits of our vision and our knowing. As we follow his hand in our mind's eye, we are able to construct a 'spatial story' of Sarajevo whose truth lies in its fragmentation and opaqueness.

196 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

197 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 118.

For several pages, the gravedigger's monologue takes us across the spaces of Sarajevo in the distance. His anecdotes finally segue from the world of the dead to the world of the living. One day, the gravedigger recalls, he is approached by an American journalist who thinks the gravedigger "might be able to explain to him what has happened to the people of Sarajevo." The gravedigger inquires whether the journalist wants to know about the dead or the living since "you cannot talk about the living and the dead at the same time."¹⁹⁸ It is evident that, like Zoka, the American journalist is looking to pitch the war from a fresh angle; who better to supply him with a sensationalize story about death than the gravedigger? Their conversation, however, quickly falls apart. Neither sentimental nor disinterested, the gravedigger rambles pseudo-philosophically about death, and speaks about his great fortune of being alive. Soon, it becomes obvious that the protagonist will not provide the reporter with the material he is looking for.

The American prods with more leading questions, hoping to hear stories of patriotism and carnage:

The American asks me to describe the change in people's faces. I tell him that I can't, but I have noticed that somehow they look more beautiful and festive. [...] I understand that he is researching the subject for his article, except he can't write the piece because he already knows what it is going to say. I tell him he shouldn't gaze into people's faces so intently if he doesn't understand what he sees.¹⁹⁹

The American is not interested in the truth, nor does he care to hear the gravedigger's personal opinions: the protagonist is but an object that serves to fill the reporter's agenda. Caring nothing for honest reporting, the journalist is a disseminator of kitsch. Rather than grappling with the complexities of war, his gaze reduces people to clichés.

198 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 100.

199 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 102.

Unsuccessfully fishing for quotes that would support his pre-scripted narrative, the American grows frustrated with the gravedigger's responses.

Hoping to reveal the limitations of the journalist's Western purview, the gravedigger takes out a pack of cigarettes. The carton is white. The protagonist explains that the package is blank "because there isn't anywhere in Bosnia to print brand names and logos. I bet you think we're poor and unhappy because we don't have any writing on our cigarettes. Know why? [...] Because you haven't a clue where to look." The gravedigger unwraps the new pack of cigarettes, knowing that there is something printed on the inside of the package, "it might be the label from a box of soap or a detail from a movie poster or part of an advertisement for shoes."²⁰⁰ Just like the Parliaments in *Dancing Arabs*, these cigarettes, too, bear a riddle, the true answer to which only the gravedigger knows. What is on the inside of the cigarette carton? The first and "false" answer to the riddle of cigarettes is revealed by simply opening the package. As chance would have it, the print on this pack of cigarettes is from an old Sarajevo Marlboro wrapper. The journalist stares at the carton, completely missing the point. To him, the cigarettes signal the backwardness of a country that has not even learned to brand their cigarettes properly.

The gravedigger does not bother to explain his point further to the American. The protagonist knows that he is unable to disabuse the journalist of his preconceptions. Nevertheless, the gravedigger makes the second, true answer to the riddle available to the reader. The unbranded package marks the point where commercialism loses its grip over its consumers. Sarajevo Marlboros are cigarettes created to suit the local tastes of the smokers. The tobacco was grown locally and then bought up and branded by Philip

200 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 103.

Morrison. Both their production and their consumption exemplify the full system of Western commercial control over the region, a system that is undetectable to the average consumer. “When you look at the advertising billboards, fifty feet high,” the gravedigger remarks, “you don’t have clue what Sarajevo Marlboro is or isn’t.”²⁰¹ Found inside of a cigarette package, however, these advertisements are decontextualized, and, thereby, physically and psychologically deconstructed. One of many recycled advertisements, the Marlboro advertisement is stripped of its commercial cache and reduced to trash. In this form, Marlboros lose their agency over their consumers, and return power back to the human. In such a way, the gravedigger facilitates the reader’s defamiliarization not only of the product, but also of the clichés that it bears.

The gravedigger presents an alternative way to seeing and living in Sarajevo: he is able to discuss home with succumbing to nationalistic fervor, and smoke cigarettes without submitting to the homogenizing powers of commodity culture. He is not only impervious to the hackneyed tropes that objectify his homeland and its people, but he is also capable of reversing them. Thus, in his narrative, all the locals are referred to by their proper names, while the journalist remains “an American.” Switching the knowledge-power dynamic, the gravedigger kitschifies the journalist. One of the thousands of foreign correspondents that exploit the suffering of the besieged city for a headline, the American represents a “type,” and, therefore, does not deserve to be humanized with name.

Importantly, the protagonist is also not named. Yet, his anonymity is of a different nature. The gravedigger exemplifies the ethos of Jergović’s literary project. More than a gravedigger, he is a storyteller who grants his audience physical and psychological

201 Jergović, *Sarajevo Marlboro*, 104.

entrance into spaces that the journalist cannot access. He represents Sarajevo not as what de Certeau calls an official “place” but as a “practiced space,” privileging the phenomenology of experience. In such a way, the gravedigger stymies the production of collective memory. Through his monologue, the everyday is rescued from the onslaught of multiple homogenizing mythologies that threaten to turn it into kitsch. As such, the gravedigger’s narrative mode aligns with the author’s, and his abstract audience becomes us, the readers.

In the “The Gravedigger,” Jergović unpacks his literary project. The story creates a site of resistance against all reductive narratives, intimating that “the past of the city is not entirely legible; it is irreducible to any anachronistic language; it suggests other dimensions of the lived experience that haunt the city like a ghost.”²⁰² Thus, scholars such as Ammiel Alcalay, Andrea Lešić-Thomas, and Cythia Simmon explore the interplay between memory and language in their critical writing on Jergović’s fiction. Stijn Vervaeke states that Jergović’s literary register allows *Sarajevo Marlboro* to be read as an “oral history.”²⁰³ Although it is undeniable that Jergović’s narrative mode and literary register create alternative production sites of memory, much of the success of Jergović’s literary project stems from its exploration of material culture. *Sarajevo Marlboro*, even in its title, draws the reader’s attention to the commodity goods that permeate the pages of its stories, demanding a material reading. Marlboros, after all, appear on the binding that keeps the stories together.

In *Sarajevo Marlboro*, Jergović intimates that it is impossible to paint a portrait of wartime Sarajevo without exploring the psychological and societal effects of Western

202 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 76.

203 Stijn Vervaeke, “Writing War, Writing Memory: The Representations of the Recent Past and the Construction of Cultural Memory in Contemporary Bosnian Prose,” *Neohelicon* 38, no. 1 (2001): 5.

commodity culture. His fiction suggests that material goods and foreign media, though readily utilized to facilitate systems of oppression, can also be defamiliarized. In such a form, material objects voice an alternative narrative of war that humanizes the residents of Sarajevo, and honors their everyday lives. It is thus no surprise that, from among all of his stories, Jergović takes the title of his book from “The Gravedigger.” Whether it is atop a hill or inside a pack of cigarettes, the gravedigger insists that the actualities of life in Sarajevo can only be understood with a change of perspective. To tell the story of Sarajevo authentically, it is necessary to acknowledge all that is foreign, prefabricated, and kitschified within the city’s spaces. Kitsch, however, is but part of the city’s reality and history. For the gravedigger and Jergović alike, material objects are capable of both veiling and unveiling reality. Thus, both the protagonist and the author choose the image of Sarajevo Marlboro to represent their city. This image testifies to the existence of an authentic local culture and aesthetic, despite the rampant presence of commercialism.

In *Sarajevo Marlboro*, Jergović reveals commercialism to be an indispensable tool for nationalistic projects of re-scripture. His fiction attempts to thwart these already ongoing projects of historical erasure by privileging the individual memories of those who have suffered in the Siege of Sarajevo. Yet, unlike his Israeli counterparts, Jergović also offers a means of locating and preserving authentic identity, culture, and memory using the same commodity goods that enslave their consumers to tyrannical ideologies. Thus, *Sarajevo Marlboro* reaffirms the ethos of the regional literature, an ethos that Boym eloquently recapitulates: “While writing about memory, East Central European writers refute the idea that a national community or a nation-state is the sole treasurer of memories. Their idea of a memory museum is based on social and cultural frameworks of lived experience, on the creative and personal recollection of a

common text, not on ethnic memory.”²⁰⁴ This mnemonic gallery becomes the central conceit of Ugrešić’s novel. In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, she explores and theorizes memory through the lens of materiality, cataloguing kitsch in an intimate archive of a lost past and an exilic present.

Ugrešić’s Quilt

Materiality lies at the core of Ugrešić’s aesthetic ethos, and manifests textually, as well as metatextually, in her prose. In order to underscore the physicality of her artistic process, Ugrešić has created a personal genre of literature that she calls “patchwork fiction.” In a 2002 BOMB magazine interview with Svetlana Boym, Ugrešić defines a patchwork novel as follows:

Like a real patchwork is made of different parts, the novel is made of different parts, which, when put together, are supposed to make a cheerful warm and ‘beautiful’ piece of art. The word patchwork suggests other meanings as well: the triviality of the everyday—patchwork, as a craft, does not belong to so-called high art; if it is not made by a female collective, as in my case, it presupposes a “woman’s world”; tradition—in making patchwork we respect and follow traditional patterns, done before us; and the old formalist rule or making the device bare—one can clearly see how patchwork is done.²⁰⁵

Ugrešić’s patchwork genre broadens the ontology of literature by stressing its materiality: as words anchored to a physical page, as a craft, as a book. By privileging the physicality of the novel, patchwork fiction moves literature out of the realm of the imaginary and into the realm of the concrete. The genre’s preoccupation with materiality not only aims to make rhetorical devices bare, but also works to defamiliarize romanticized notions of literature. A patchwork novel does not strive to project artistic genius; it privileges the

204 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 245-6.

205 Dubravka Ugrešić, interviewed by Svetlana Boym, *BOMB* 80 (Summer 2002), 77.

“trivialities of the everyday.” Among these quotidian considerations are the practical, often-overlooked, commercial dimensions of literary production and circulation. Indeed, the “ethno-business” of literature is one of the central concerns of Ugrešić’s fiction.²⁰⁶ In her novels and essays, Ugrešić draws attention to the industries that commoditize fiction, and in doing so, dismantles the idealized, purist notion of literature that is frequently upheld by politically aestheticized ideologies.

Patchwork fiction is predicated on the recognition of the political, social, and economic forces that delegate artistic merit. Ugrešić acknowledges these spheres of influence, and by creating her own genre, positions her fiction in and against them. As a result, the patchwork genre asserts the aesthetic and commercial worth of Ugrešić’s fiction on its own terms, by highlighting the structural integrity of her prose, and attenuating her readers to the craftsmanship of her work. Thus, the implied physicality of patchwork fiction both anchors the theoretical framework of her novels, and draws attention to the seemingly simple, commonplace, material goods that permeate her prose. Sewing together high and low linguistic, emotional, and conceptual registers, Ugrešić creates a truly variegated literary quilt. Thus, though Ugrešić consciously situates her novels outside of the realm of “high” art, her genre is both aesthetically and intellectually demanding.

No work displays the rigor of Ugrešić’s literary project better than *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Composed of multiple formats including lists, short stories, dairy entries, and literary citations, Ugrešić’s 1996 novel may appear to be postmodern. The narrative “I” remains elusive, and the lives she describes seem fractured beyond recognition. Yet, as the patchwork genre suggests, Ugrešić’s fiction requires a material

206 Ugrešić, “What Is an Author Made Of?” 207.

reading. Moving through the novel, commonplace objects, bric-a-brac, and kitsch begin to manifest as motifs giving meaning and continuity to the protagonist's fragmented autobiography. These objects serve as both the pattern that emerges out of each constituent part of the novel, and the thread that holds the pattern together.

Faltering Photographs, Verbal Albums

Ugrešić's novel is the fragmented autobiography of an exiled ex-Yugoslav living in Berlin. Over the course of seven chapters, the first-person narrator recounts her life through an amalgamation of unordered textual snippets. The odd-numbered chapters of the novel constitute an ongoing list containing impressions of Berlin, literary quotations, and descriptions of family photographs and memorabilia. The even-numbered chapters take on disparate genres, appearing as short stories, diary entries, and anecdotal sketches from the narrator's childhood. These longer chapters are set in the past, and provide the reader with autobiographical information about the protagonist, as well as her family and ancestry. The list, as well as the remaining chapters, are devoid of temporal and spatial continuity, and reflect the exilic condition of both the author and the protagonist. Rather than "overcoming the crippling of sorrow of estrangement," *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* dwells on Berlin's "acute" and "unambiguous loneliness."²⁰⁷ At the formal level, the estrangement of exile is expressed through defamiliarization. Shifting between the past and the present, often within the space of one page, the narrative jumps between Berlin, the protagonist's diegetic city of residence, Yugoslavia, her former homeland, and various other travel destinations and places of genealogical import. The lack of plot or any other traditional mode of narrative makes the experience

207 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 106.

of reading *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* “difficult.” Though Ugrešić prefaces her novel with the promise that “connections will establish themselves of their own accord,” the fractured modalities through which the protagonist conveys her memories obfuscate the chronology of her biography, and make it impossible to trace her movements in the world.²⁰⁸

In form and content, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* reads as Ugrešić’s manifesto on the materiality of memory. It is not only the reader, but also the narrator who is burdened by the need to make sense of her impressions and remembrances. “‘How do we measure biographies?’” inquires narrator’s friend, Goran. “The problem is that there is no hierarchy: there is no ‘important’ and ‘unimportant’. Nor is movement linear: there is no ‘start with’ or ‘get to,’ says Zoran.”²⁰⁹ This casual dialogue encapsulates the protagonist’s central struggle. The structure of the novel reflects her half-hearted attempts to organize her biography into a neat narrative—a project that, from the outset of the novel, the protagonist recognizes to be antithetical to the authentic workings of memory. Nevertheless, the lists and chapter subheadings that the narrator provides signify her attempt to give some superficial semblance of order to her past and present experiences.

Her preoccupation with photographs, which becomes evident in the first pages of the novel, encapsulates this anxiety. The narrator ceaselessly sorts through family photographs, which, since her Yugoslav childhood, have been stored in disorganized piles at the bottom of a closet in her mother’s old threadbare bag. The narrator recalls how her mother once unsuccessfully attempted to arrange the photographs into albums that would neatly document their family history:

208 Ugrešić, *Museum*, xi.

209 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 107.

Mother's albums—the way she set out 'the facts of life'—revised before my eyes an everyday life—I had forgotten. This everyday life was arranged (by the mere fact of being posed), then it was re-sorted (through the selection of photographs), but—perhaps just because of an amateur artistic impulse that the facts of life should be nicely arranged—it sprang up in the gaps, in the mistakes, in the method itself, touchingly authentic and alive. [...] An unwritten history of everyday life emerged, which judging by these pictures, so innocent and universal, could be taken place anywhere, but nevertheless did take place here.²¹⁰

Although photographs anchor the past, providing precious empirical evidence of personal and familial history, these snapshots are unable to offset the fallibility of human memory. Even the protagonist's mother, with her "amateur artistic impulse," cannot designate the proper arrangement of photographs within an album. Ultimately, "the principles of a chronology of events and their significance in her life [are] destroyed," and "her inner sense of things" leads her to abandon the project.²¹¹

Yet, the protagonist does not regard her mother's efforts as a failure. Her mother's desire to give order to the family photographs speaks to the narrator's own need to stabilize her identity through the arrangement of the past. Despite her mother's earnest attempts to order the album, her inability to cement the "facts of life" into an incontestable order reinforces the protagonist's understanding of authentic memory as a subjective process that warrants continual revision. To borrow Boym's terminology, this anecdote reveals both the protagonist and her mother to be "reflective nostalgics," who "

suggest new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on the recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation of history and passage of time. To paraphrase Nabokov, these kind of nostalgics are often 'amateurs of Time, epicures of duration,' who resist the pressure of external efficiency and take sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars."²¹²

210 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 21-2.

211 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 17.

212 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

Witnessing her mother's frustration with the photo album, the protagonist concludes that the self manifests obliquely, not through the album itself, but in its margins and errors; it is precisely from the unique markers that signify the fallibility of individual memory that the self emerges.

This anecdote comes at the beginning of the novel, and doubles as instructions for the audience, guiding our reading of Ugrešić's "verbal album."²¹³ Like her mother's photo albums, the shifting, fractured still frames that comprise of the protagonist's narrative do not amalgamated into a totalizing autobiography. As the novel progresses, this metaphor is drawn into a conceit: "both the album and the autobiography are by their very nature amateur activities, doomed from the outset to failure and second-rateness. [...] Autobiography has similar problems [to albums] in the technology of remembering; it is concerned with what once was, and the trouble is that what was once is being recorded by someone who is now."²¹⁴ Knowing this, the protagonist does not attempt to reconcile her past with her present. Her treatment of photographs reflects her treatment of her own autobiography. Like Nabokov, whom the protagonist cites on numerous occasions in her narrative, she "refuses to accept the literal truth of the photograph. Instead, [she] questions documentary evidence, dwelling on renaming and imprecision."²¹⁵ Thus, the narrator remains elusive, scattered: her biographical details line up with Ugrešić's, and yet, their narratives are separated by the film of fiction; at times, the protagonist sees herself in the likeness of her mother, and at other times, the narrator claims her mother to be unknowable.²¹⁶ Psychologically straddled between a country that once was and now is not—former Yugoslavia—and a country that once was

213 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 19.

214 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 28.

215 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 263.

216 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 56, 84-5.

not and now is— unified Germany, the narrator is existentially fractured. Hence, like a photograph, the textual images of the protagonist are deceptively commonplace. She remains opaque. Examining narrator’s verbal album, the reader must not overlook the margins.

The protagonist is not only unable, but also unwilling to consolidate her past and present into a holistic portrait of the self. Just like Jergović’s collection of stories, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* employs fragmentation to resist the neat scripting of Croatia’s post- Yugoslav national narrative, which forms the basis of the country’s collective memory. Hence, the protagonist’s fractured remembrances protest against the upsurge of patriotic rhetoric in her former homeland. Although “Ugrešić’s novel bypasses the spectacle of the revolution in favor of small-scale remains and ruins of the epoch,” her narrator frequently meditates on her condition of exile; the discontinuities in her narrative are predicated on, and performatively demonstrate, the turmoil that is endemic to the experience of displacement.²¹⁷ Thus, it is possible to qualify the nature of Ugrešić’s verbal album. Her novel functions as an exhibit displaying the archive of a life shattered by exile. In her essay “Nostalgia,” Ugrešić directly address the purpose of such an archive:

But who gets to play supreme arbiter and rule on an exhibit’s *belonging* and *non-belonging*? The ‘archive’ itself produces nostalgia only while it remains in chaos. While used as a storeroom, only while its existence remains ‘illegal.’ The work of postcommunist (and in the Yugoslav case) postwar artists—self-appointed archivists, ‘collectors of ruins,’ ‘doctors of nostalgia,’ ‘archeologists of the everyday’—only makes sense as a voluntary undertaking, and only when accompanied by the artist’s recognition of the futility of his or her work.²¹⁸

217 Obradović, “Ironic Eternity,” 421.

218 Ugrešić, “Nostalgia,” 8.

Ugrešić suggests that the preservation of personal memory is also an act of political dissonance. In her novel, chaos is a means of safeguarding the authenticity of the narrator's memories against the ideological scripting of the past. It is the subjectivity, rather than the universality of these memories that give them veracity. In such a way, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* endorses Said's definition of exile, "not as a privilege, but as an *alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. [...] [The exile] must cultivate a scrupulous (not sulky or indulgent) subjectivity."²¹⁹ Hence, the narrator's disordered autobiography counters Croatia's post-communist project of historical erasure. Using the *momentos* found in her narrative archive, she is able to address her pan-European lineage and express her Yugonostalgia; in such a way, these objects both curate her personal past, and contest her former country's claims to ethnic purity.

The evasive character of the narrator, thereby, gives the reader access to an equally elusive history, one that is not found in official textbooks. The splintered identity the narrator extends the structural defamiliarization of the novel to include the figure of the protagonist, her memories, and her environment. In *Bowstrings*, Shklovsky's own fractured theoretical autobiography, the formalist examines the necessity of fragmentation in both life and art. Quoting Aristotle, Shklovsky addresses the issue of unity in the context of the literary protagonist: "Unity of plot does not, as some people think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action."²²⁰ Indeed, fragmentation is an intrinsic quality of the narrator's exilic identity, her self-representation, and her phenomenological

219 Said, "Reflections," 184.

220 Shklovsky, *Bowstrings*, 69.

purview. Recalling Castel-Bloom's Dolly, Ugrešić's protagonist experiences Berlin as a "criss-crossed," "chopped up," "mad," and "nightmarish city."²²¹ The narrator's awareness of the large demographic of refugees, immigrants, and exiles populating the metropolis, who experience the cityscape through their own subjective, fractured lenses, contributes to her own sense of spatial fragmentation.²²² Thus, through the gaze of the protagonist, the formal fissures of the novel spread to its content; however, as Ugrešić suggested in her preface, these ubiquitous cracks do not occlude the existence of a unified meaning within the text.

Roland the Walrus and the Singerduchess

Shklovsky's discussion of literary unity elucidates Ugrešić's modalities of meaning. He writes: "The unity of a composition is not based on whether it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but whether it creates a unique interrelation between its parts."²²³ Though the protagonist is incapable and unwilling to impose a unified meaning upon her narrative, a veiled relational unity does lie at the heart of Ugrešić's novel. True to the patchwork genre, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* demands that we prioritize the material world, shifting our search for meaning from the subject to the object. Ugrešić reiterates the need for such a material reading in the preface of her novel,

221 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 104,167-8.

222 "At dusk rose-sellers swarm through the city, dark Tamils with round childish faces and moist eyes. [...] White Jamaicans with hair woven into innumerable tiny plaits pass through the streets thick with the shadows of vanished lives like angels. In smoke-filled taverns on Oranienstrasse Turks listen to Turkish music and play cards. [...] Not far from the Cafe Eisenstein, a prostitute, a Polish woman, walks nervously up and down. An American Jew, a writer and homosexual, looks through the bar for male prostitutes and settles on a young Croat from Zagreb [...].Ugrešić, *Museum*, 105.

223 Shklovsky, *Bowstrings*, 68.

which begins with a description of an “an unusual display. In a glass case are all the things found in the stomach of Roland the walrus, who died on 21 August 1961.” The author catalogues the collection of bric-a-brac extracted from the stomach of the deceased animal, and then goes on to write: “The visitor [...] cannot resist the poetic thought that with time the objects have acquired some subtle, secret connections. [...] The chapters and fragments which follow should be read in a similar way.”²²⁴ The structural dissonance of the protagonist’s narrative, and the saturation of objects that appear in the proceeding chapters make it difficult for the reader to abide by Ugrešić’s instructions. Yet, by redirecting our attention to the material goods that permeate the novel, we are able to accomplish what the narrator herself cannot: trace the masked network of objects that lend cohesion to the novel’s variegated parts. It is the “poetic” task of the reader to resist the nihilism of fragmentation, and reconstruct meaning from the ruins of an exilic life.

By way of the zoo exhibit, Ugrešić first intimates that objects could serve as “repositories of mnemonic value.”²²⁵ Rather than being displayed as taxidermy, Roland is represented with greater realism by the collection of commonplace objects that he had consumed over the course of his life. It is in these trivial commodities that he endures. The contents of his stomach draw a temporal and spatial connection between the visitors of the exhibit, the Walrus, and zoo patrons to whom these objects once belonged. Thus, in her novel, Ugrešić underscores the materiality of memory, equating it to albums, archives, and storage rooms. Using these metaphors, the author attempts to make remembrance concrete. While memory is malleable and erroneous, material goods circumvent narrative structures, creating physical and symbolic patterns that lend

224 Ugrešić, *Museum*, xi.

225 Obradović, “Ironic Eternity,” 416.

continuity between the narrator's past, present, and future. In the novel, these objects emerge as viable sources of biographical details, more reliable than the errant workings of human memory. Roland's stomach is, therefore, of primary symbolic importance to the novel, and the image of his belly manifests in various forms throughout the text. It is evoked in the description of the protagonist's mother's handbag; it is even used as metaphor for the streets of Berlin: "Berlin is the most attractive rubbish heap in the world. Berlin is the world capital of rubbish. I sense the smell of decay at every corner. Here the whole global digestive process is so terribly and painfully obvious."²²⁶

It is therefore not surprising that the protagonist shapes her anecdotes around quotidian good. Recipes, postcards, and kitschy memorabilia fill almost every line of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. These objects form an autobiographical constellation in which the identity of the protagonist is slowly made discernable. Structurally, souvenirs and other everyday goods, including snow globes, apples, and angel figurines emerge as motifs, tying together the protagonist's fragmented narrative into the cohesion of the novel. As Michele Simeon writes, "The formal and topical coherence of the seemingly disjointed narrative is gradually and persuasively demonstrated through the unity of its motifs, themes and structure."²²⁷ The most significant of these motifs is expounded upon in the section "Singerduchess," which appears halfway through the novel.

The Singerduchess was the protagonist's revered childhood seamstress, whose body was so large that it melded with her Singer sewing machine. The dressmaker clothed everyone in the protagonist's community, from her family to her friends and even

²²⁶ Ugrešić, *Museum*, 166.

²²⁷ Michele Simeon, "Memory and Identity in Dubravka Ugrešić's *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*," *Slovo* 19, no. 2 (2007): 138.

their dolls. Despite her commonplace vocation, there was nothing quotidian about the Singerduchess: “We made clothes for our dolls from her scrapes, while the Duchess sewed clothes for our mothers and for us, little girls. The Duchess was a dressmaker and in that pre-ready-made-clothes era she was a very important person, almost as important as the doctor, if not more so.”²²⁸ The clothes sewn by the dressmaker were no average garments; rather, they were “treasures that glittered before our eyes.”²²⁹ The magic that the Singerduchess was able to wield upon a piece of fabric was an extension of her own character. Ceaselessly working in her tiny, fantastical sewing room covered with polychromatic scraps of fabric, the half-woman half-machine is scripted as a figure of mythological proportions.

Rather than objectifying the seamstress, her moniker highlights her otherworldly skill. Though the sewing machine is essential to the dressmaker’s craft, it is but a tool that allows the Singerduchess to turn her trade into an art. Ultimately, the sewing machine is what grants the seamstress her eccentric “auratic” persona. The symbiotic relationship between the seamstress and her Singer bridges the dichotomy between tradition and technology that Walter Benjamin defines as the marker of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.²³⁰ Practicing a traditional trade, the seamstress works harmoniously with her sewing machine without becoming redundant, or subservient to technology. While her clothes often borrow from popular Hollywood fashions, her garments are recycled, and not reproduced. With admiration, the protagonist recalls how the seamstress

228 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 65.

229 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 65.

230 “One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.” Benjamin, “Art in the Age,” 217.

took father's worn suit, turned the material inside out and made an elegant suit for my mother, and sometimes there was enough left over for me. The Singerduchess could make a blouse like the one Katherine Hepburn [...] wore in the film *The African Queen* and a dress like the one Ava Gardner [...] wore in the film *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*.²³¹

Neither discrediting trend nor succumbing to its commercial imperatives, the dressmaker utilizes her available resources to create luxurious, cinematic outfits. More than commodity objects, these clothes are works of reclamation, and transfiguration—nothing short of alchemy. It is clear that the seamstress and her garments encapsulate the very ethos of Ugrešić's patchwork fiction. Like the dressmaker, the author also ingeniously stitches together tethered pieces of textual fabric into the beautiful, coherent quilt of her novel. It is impossible not to see the figure of the Singerduchess as Ugrešić herself.

By entering the dressmaker's workshop, we also learn about Ugrešić's creative process. In the seamstress' studio "unstoppable threads advanced from everywhere, from all the corners, from the floor and the ceiling, they hung, crept, crawled—and they stuck to the Singerduchess's customers like leeches."²³² Like the strings spun by the Fates, the chaotic network of threads that inundate the dressmaker's workshop physically, metaphysically, and textually weave together time. Physically, the free-flowing threads signify process. Their origins and destinations are untraceable. They may be remnants of old garments, or the seams of clothing in the making. Furthermore, the threads, which the dressmaker also uses as divination tools, metaphysically gesture at the future. Indeed, the anthropomorphic threads seem to have a mind of their own, and cannot be confined to the dressmaker's studio.

A piece of thread first appears in the preface of the novel, as the final item of the Roland the Walrus exhibit. Henceforth, looking closely, we see that threads have crept

231 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 66.

232 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 67.

into every section of the text, stringing together the time of the novel. The most literal and abstract object-motif in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, thread appears again in the image of the “illegible lines” that reflect the narrator’s condition of exile:

[E]xile is the history of the things we leave behind, of buying and abandoning hair-driers, cheap little radios, coffee pots... Those little, firm facts, stamps in our passport, accumulate and at a certain moment they become illegible lines. Then they suddenly begin to trace an inner map, the map of the unreal, the imaginary. And it is only then that they express precisely the immeasurable experience of exile.²³³

Threads not only symbolize the protagonist’s own experience of displacement in Berlin, but also that of other writers and intellectuals. In item number 26 of her list, the narrator quotes Shklovsky: “I have walked a long time on the bridges over the tracks that intersect here, just like threads of a shawl drawn through a ring intersect. That ring is Berlin.”²³⁴ Threads, thus, encompass the most elementary and the most ineffable spatial and temporal dimensions of the text. Though they are seemingly negligible, without them novel does not hold.

Mnemonic Kitsch Presented and Represented

In such a manner, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* defamiliarizes, and thereby privileges, the most quotidian objects, divorcing their collective, ephemeral commodity value from their intimate, enduring mnemonic worth. The capacity to distinguish between individual and commercial systems of value is ultimately what allows exiles to retain their subjectivity and a degree of freedom. The protagonist makes this point evident in her own narrative, as well as in her choice of literary citations. In

233 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 113.

234 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 96.

item number 66 of her list, she quotes Nabokov: “Everything, every trifle, will be valuable and meaningful: the conductor’s purse, the advertisement over the window, the peculiar jolting motion which our great-grandchildren will perhaps imagine—everything will be ennobled and justified by its age.”²³⁵ The narrator expedites this process. By treating worthless bric-a-brac as repositories of memory, the protagonist also reassigns value to quotidian material goods. Yet, what separates the author and her readers from the narrator is our ability to perceive the pattern of meaning these objects form in the protagonist’s life. Knowing that the existence of such meaning is possible, the protagonist ceaselessly reevaluates the objects that circulate within her internal and external landscape, searching for the fragments that could trace the trajectory of her lost life.

This task is reactionary and requires recognition. Thus, time and again, the narrator refers to material objects as “trifles,” “trivialities,” and “kitsch.” This awareness is what separates Castel-Bloom’s and Kashua’s protagonists from Ugrešić’s. Unreflective consumers, the former are incapable of assessing the value of commodity goods. As a result, they buy into the dominant order, and become enslaved to the latent forces of governance that are disseminated through these objects. These objects reinforce the hybrid, fractured identities of Castel-Bloom’s and Kashua’s protagonists. They stymie recognition, entrenching Dolly within her nightmarish cityscape, and forcing Kashua’s narrator into a state of permanent stationary exile. In contrast, Ugrešić’s exilic protagonist utilizes her reflective nostalgia to escape the tyranny of kitsch. By critically engaging with the material world, Ugrešić’s narrator is able to impose her own metric of value upon it. To use de Certeau’s terminology, the intimate lens of the narrator’s subjective

235 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 163.

memories and experiences rescripts the “use” of these the everyday commodity goods. The narrator’s method of “consumption” is “characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstance), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short, by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products [...] but in an art of using those imposed on it.”²³⁶ The “clandestine nature” of this method complements the “illegality” of Ugrešić’s archive of the everyday.

The capacity to reassess the value of commonplace objects and make them serve the consumer’s everyday practices and conscious self-construction is an exercise in volition, one that Jergovic’s gravedigger also practices. Used subversively, the same commodities that propagate objectifying and displacing national narratives grant the exile freedom. In such a way, “without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.”²³⁷ Thus, by circumventing the sanctioned methods of consumption, the narrator locates what Benjamin calls “a quality beyond use value” in these everyday products.²³⁸ This quality, personal and redemptive, is symbolized by the recurring figure of the angel, the novel’s most transcendental motif, which manifests in white-winged Mickey Mouse figurines and souvenir snow globes. Although they are kitsch, these objects intimate the hope of the despondent exile, and are treated without irony. The narrator uses these gift shop items to express the “solitude and spirituality” that Said deems to be the characteristic markers of the exile.²³⁹

236 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 31.

237 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 30.

238 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed, Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin Mclaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 20.

239 Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 181.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, kitsch is neither an ominous form of covert governance nor, as C.E. Emmer argues, a necessary form of escapism from the strains of modernity.²⁴⁰ The novel defamiliarizes kitsch, treating it as an outlet for the intimate commemoration of quotidian life now lost.²⁴¹ Ugrešić does not pioneer this elegiac reconceptualization of kitsch. The English artist Richard Wentworth and the Russian “Artist of Rubbish” Ilya Kabakov are featured in the novel as fellow contemporary visual artists of the everyday. The narrator treats their art with knowing admiration. After visiting Kabakov’s studio, the protagonist gives a formal overview of his work: “Kabakov reveals the complex permeation of the system, politics, ideology, media, culture, education, the everyday and the personal life, and radically challenges official culture by the mere act of giving priority to ‘rubbish’ over the so-called great themes of high art.”²⁴² It is impossible to ignore the similarities between Kabakov’s conceptual art and Ugrešić’s patchwork genre. The Russian artist’s exhibit repurposes kitsch objects with the aim of cataloguing “countermemory, ” a task that Ugrešić undertakes in her fiction.

240 In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugrešić offers but one treatment of kitsch. In her body of writing, the author defines kitsch in positive terms only as long as its means of consumption are subversive. As soon as kitsch loses its dissident charge, it once again becomes a tool of government control. In her essay, “Nostalgia,” Ugrešić offers one such counterexample: “Today, Yugonostalgic exhibits are in vogue. One can buy everything from souvenir socks bearing Tito’s portrait and signature, to cookbooks with recipes for his favorite dishes. The theaters perform works with Yugonostalgic content; in documentaries interviewees speak freely of their Yugonostalgic impulses. Yugonostalgia, however, has lost its subversive quality, no longer a personal resistance movement but consumer good. In the intervening time, Yugonostalgia has become a mental supermarket, a list of dead symbols, a crude memento more, stripped of emotional imagination.” (11)

241 C.E Emmer, “Kitsch Against Modernity,” *Art Criticism* 13, no, 1 (1998).

242 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 36.

Wentworth abides by a similar aesthetic ethos: “Richard expresses his love for incompatible materials, marries unconnectable things, he places a rough builder’s spade on a soft pillow dressed in a pillow case of the finest line.”²⁴³ Wentworth’s exhibit stresses the materiality of domestic items, highlighting their physical properties through juxtaposition. Wentworth’s art is grounded in Shklovsky’s principle of dissimilarity, in which “a changed feature in the similar can change the entire system by its dissimilarity. Therefore, the dissimilarity of the similar is economical in its own way, because it uses the system as part of its new message without destroying the old message.”²⁴⁴ Utilizing the economy of dissimilarity, Wentworth defamiliarizes quotidian material goods, giving them a new lifeline. As Obradović notes,

once something is devalued, it is removed in order to make room for working, updated commodities. Waste, that which is out of place in this cycle of production, has a stubborn but dynamic afterlife as artists and writers reclaim its formal properties. The displacement of the object itself into an aesthetic system makes visible the structure and relations governing the object’s circulation.²⁴⁵

Contextualizing kitsch within Kabakov’s and Wentworth’s artistic projects, the narrator delineates alternative modes of consumption that allow generic objects to express subjectivity.

These sections of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* position Ugrešić’s novel within a larger artistic milieu, allowing her to cite works that inform her literary project. Furthermore, these sections intimate the author’s own contribution to the archeology of the everyday. In a conversation with Wentworth, the protagonist compliments his work, saying, “I’d like to be able to do that....” The artist replies, “I

243 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 165-6.

244 Shklovsky, *Bowstrings*, 57.

245 Obradović, “Ironic Eternity,” 420.

don't know how it's done with words.'”²⁴⁶ This conversation once again underscores the gap between the narrator and the author. While the protagonist aspires to turn the commonplace into art, the author actually does so. Ugrešić resituates the personal, interpersonal, and ideological systems embedded in kitsch in order to evoke a new, intimate relational meaning between subject and object. Thus, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* functions as a scrupulous textual archive, a gallery in which kitsch becomes art. By recycling ostensible junk, Ugrešić lends a “dynamic afterlife” not only to the objects in her text, but also to her exilic protagonist.

Patching Together the Self

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, object-oriented memory allows Ugrešić's protagonist to rehabilitate her fractured identity and preserve her fragmented past. Memory is the all-encompassing theme of Ugrešić's fiction, a fact reaffirmed by the critical body of writing on the novel. Contemporary scholars such as Michele Simeon and Eva C. Karpinski have examined the manner in which the novel's stylistic elements, such as fragmentation, play into Ugrešić's scripting of subjective memory. Others, including Dragana Obradović, Monica Popescu, and Stijn Vervaeet offer material readings of the novel, focusing their analyses on the relationship between objects, memory, and identity. Their readings deal primarily with the objects within the novel and not the materiality of the novel as a whole; however, Ugrešić's fiction is intrinsically tied to the structural physicality of her novel. In order to grasp the full breath of the author's literary project, it is necessary to examine both book and memory as material objects.

246 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 166.

Within the theoretical framework of Ugrešić's physical-textual conceit, memory itself becomes an object, one that is composed of innumerable patches of fabric. Only once the author has sewn these chaotic, dislodged swaps of fabric into the quilt of her novel is it possible to distinguish their patterns of meaning. In such a way, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is able to acknowledge the trauma of fragmentation and transcend it. Karpinski argues that in Ugrešić's novel "fragments acquire a sinister meaning when bodies become fragmented flesh and when writing turns into a practice of re-membering, of piecing together the ruins, broken pictures, and forgotten names."²⁴⁷ Yet, it is the very notion fragmentation that Ugrešić recuperates. In the process of remembering and writing, in process of recognizing and honoring the fissures, the protagonist engages in the act of aesthetic redemption. When sewing together her autobiography, she highlights the threads of its seams; when piecing together her verbal album, she points to its margins. In mnemonic terms, her narrative serves as a museum devoid of the tyrannical quality of "museumification." In such a manner, Ugrešić suggests a means for transforming the violence of fragmentation into an expression of freedom. In formalist terms, the novel exemplifies "the concept of unity between action and situation, not only in terms of linearity and continuity, but also in term of artistic construction—the unity of intention."²⁴⁸

It is the deliberateness of Ugrešić's prose that allows her to create the formal unity of her novel without resorting to the conventions of plot. This approach to structure may seem experimental, but it is also embedded in a literary tradition and discourse, at the center of which sits Viktor Shklovsky. While his theoretical work lays the structural

247 Eva C. Karpinski, "Postcards for Europe: Dubravka Ugrešić as a Transnational Public Intellectual, or Life Writing in Fragments," *The European Journal of Life Writing* 2 (2013): 46.

248 Shklovsky, *Bowstrings*, 69.

foundation of Ugrešić's novel, his autobiographical writing situates her fiction within an artistic lineage. During his own period of exile in Berlin, Shklovsky wrote, "I have no desire to be witty. I have no desire to construct a plot. I am going to write about things and thoughts. To compile quotations."²⁴⁹ This quote appears in the first chapter of Ugrešić's novel, and in a few brief sentences, summarizes the form and content of her text. Ugrešić recycles Shklovsky's formula for exilic prose, and in doing so, contextualizes her novel within a larger tradition of arts and letters, past and present. While Karpinski concludes that "Ugrešić inadvertently situates herself in the well-established tradition of the romantic and post-romantic literary and philosophical fragments," it is inconceivable to suppose that the author would unintentionally prescribe to any literary movement. Neither romantic nor postmodern, the author's artistic influences are made transparent in her novel. In addition to Kabakov, Wentworth, and Shklovsky, the narrator cites the work of authors including Sontag, Brodsky, Nabokov, and Krleža, most of whom were either exiles, wrote on Berlin, or both. These authors inform and validate the protagonist's experience of displacement, ground novel within a self-selected literary tradition, and form the internal critical rubric of the text.

Not only does this coterie of authors offer us guidance as we make our way through the protagonist's chaotic internal and external landscapes, but it also offsets the relentless solitude of the narrator's own exilic Berlin existence. Unlike Castel-Bloom's and Kashua's hopelessly alienated protagonists, Ugrešić's narrator finds solace in an alternative, unromanticized community of artists, writers, and intellectuals, both living and dead. Traversing space and time, this community is bound by "diasporic intimacy," which is "dystopic by definition; it is rooted in the suspicion of a single home, in shared

249 Ugrešić, *Museum*, 9.

belonging. It thrives on the hope of the possibilities of human understanding and survival, of unpredictable chance encounters, but this hope is not utopian.”²⁵⁰ It is among this group of intellectuals that the narrator and Ugrešić find their new home.

In her article “Miljenko Jergović’s Art of Memory,” Lešić-Thomas writes, “Jergović and Ugrešić [...] concentrate ‘on scenes, events, particular stories’ with the hope that ‘by reproducing them in detail it will be possible to subvert the self-censorship that creates harmony in a whole-life story.’ Narrative fragmentation appears here as a defense against the logic of emplotment[...].”²⁵¹ In the body of critical writing on Jergović’s and Ugrešić’s fiction, memory and fragmentation constitute the central subjects of discourse. These topics conveniently link the two authors’ literary projects, and neatly segue into an analysis of the authors’ treatment of war, exile, nationalism, and trauma. These discussion, however, do not facilitate a full examination of manner in which these authors circumscribe systems of oppression, and propose a movement to freedom. Such an analysis could only be undertaken through a material reading of their work.

By examining the commodity goods that permeate the pages of Jergović’s short stories and Ugrešić’s novel, a wide-reaching system of politically aestheticized governance can be traced. What separates Jergović’s and Ugrešić’s fiction from their Israeli contemporaries’, however, is the formers’ ability to suggest alternative “practices” that have the potential to liberate the consumer from the tyranny of kitsch. Thus, the landscapes of Ugrešić’s and Jergović’s respective cities privilege the phenomenology of material space, which de Certeau describes as:

250 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 252-3.

251 Andrea Lešić-Thomas, “Miljenko Jergović’s Art of Memory: Lying, and Forgetting in Mama Leone and Historijska Čitanka,” *The Modern Language Review* 99, no. 2 (2004): 433.

A gesture of trees in movement everywhere. Their forests walk through the streets. They transform the scene, but they cannot be fixed in a certain place by images. If in spite of that an illustration were required, we could mention the fleeting images, yellowish-green and metallic blue calligraphies that howl without raising their voices an emblazon themselves on the subterranean passages of the city, 'embroideries' composed of letters and numbers, perfect gestures of violence painted with a pistol, Shivas made of written characters, dancing graphics whose fleeting apparitions are accompanied by the rumble of subway trains: New York graffiti.²⁵²

The fragmented, elusive character of Ugrešić's novel and the twenty- nine stories that comprise Jergović's collection read as a polyphonic, multi-sensory, irreducibly complex portraits of their respective cities. As de Certeau intimates, such a subjective depiction of urban spaces is constituted from the objects contained within them: a compilation of sanctioned and unsanctioned goods that become symbiotic with the subject's experience of the self.

252 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 102.

Chapter Three: Tolstaya's Booklets and Pelevin's Ads

On February 10, 2014, the acclaimed Russian film director Alexander Sokurov published an online public letter to President Putin. The letter decries Putin's covert efforts to shut down the Russian television channel, Rain. The private station, known for its accurate and liberal reporting, had been dropped by three cable providers after they had received phone calls from the president's administration. In his letter, Sokurov laments the recent wave of government-sanctioned censorship and violence against liberal media and youth movements—those protesting, both physically and virtually, Putin's ever-more dictatorial rule.

Sokurov's letter takes on the familiar rhetoric of the particular, oblique form of patriotism that has been espoused by Russian intellectuals since the beginning of the eighteenth century. This is a patriotism that transcends political ideologies, and defines itself through the country's artistic accomplishments. It is committed to the preservation and continuation of Russian culture and loves its country but hates its politics. Thus, for three centuries, Russian writers, artists, and intellectuals have defined their homeland in artistic rather than geographical terms. Those that have fought to protect the country's literary heritage have withstood censorship, exile, and psychological and physical violence. As Sokurov states, "we have a love and knowledge of High culture, and Russia's High art. But we also know what great hardship this love has cost us. They tried to educate us, but we pulled ourselves out of the swamp." While Sokurov's narrative attests to the resilience of the Russian *dukh*, the tone of his letter is fraught with exhaustion. "Once again," the director writes, "my motherland is in ashes, once again—the curses, the battlefields, the malicious speech. And once again, effort is being put, not into creation, but into battle, and once again, with an internal enemy." Evaluating the

moral and spiritual condition of his country in crisis, Sokurov asks in disbelief, “How can this be so?”²⁵³

It comes as no surprise that Russia’s new social order maintains the country’s historical antagonism towards its artists, writers, and intellectuals. Like Israel and the countries of former Yugoslavia, post-Soviet Russia finds itself in the grips of patriotic fervor, which only continues to escalate as Western countries proceed to place economic sanctions against Putin’s regime. Today, Russia’s neo-nationalistic ideologies are as homogenizing, mythologizing, and oppressive as those that preceded them. Putin’s government is marked by institutionalized misogyny, homophobia, and racism; its transition to a free-market economy has supported the rise of a corrupt oligarchical class; the country’s ongoing military presence in Ukraine, Chechnya, and Syria underscores its war-mongering international policies. Media censorship is the norm, ties between church and state are as strong as ever, and acts of political dissidence are life threatening. Thus, contemporary Russian writers watch history repeat itself. Once again, they must struggle to protect and protract the rich literary tradition of a county where freedom of expression is deemed subversive, and anti-intellectual sentiment run rampant. Yet, as in the past, it is this all-too-familiar tyranny that reifies the Russian writers’ commitment to their literary heritage, and fuels the fire of their artistic production.

Everyday Dystopias, a Matreshka Culture

Among the generation of authors that are forced to grapple with Putin’s authoritarian rule are the renowned Russian writers Tatyana Tolstaya and Victor Pelevin.

253Alexander Sokurov and Vadim Zhernov, “Film Legend Sokurov Writes Open Letter in Defense of Free Speech and Tolerance,” *The Calvert Journal*, February 12, 2014, <http://calvertjournal.com/news/show/2057/film-legend-sokurov-writes-open-letter>

In her essay, “Is Their Hope For Pushkin’s Children?” Tolstaya recapitulates the historical tension between Russian writers and their national leaders, intimating that this tension has always been about authorial power: “But the word, whether spoken or printed, represents a power greater than that of the atom. This is an entirely Russian view of literature, without parallel in the West. Everyone in Russia, it seems, shares it: the tsars and their slaves, censors and dissidents, writers and critics, liberals and conservative.”²⁵⁴ Tolstaya suggests that whoever controls the word dictates the national narrative. At the turn of the twenty-first century, this power struggle is as pronounced as it has ever been. Following in the footsteps of their literary predecessors, Tolstaya and Pelevin embed their novels within their national zeitgeist. Their fiction reflects their country’s political, commercial, and cultural trends. While offering a bleak portrait of contemporary Russian society, their literary projects extend beyond socio-political commentary. In Tolstaya’s *The Slynx* (2000) and Pelevin’s *Homo Zapiens* (1999), both authors overtly situate their texts within the Russian literary tradition. While their novels meditate on the state of their country’s arts and letters, sometimes despondently, Tolstaya and Pelevin also use their fiction to pay homage to their literary forerunners, whose works have defined Russia’s only enduring identity.

Tolstaya’s and Pelevin’s respect for their country’s literary tradition has been expressed in their essays and interviews, as well as in their novels.²⁵⁵ The pages of *The Slynx* and *Homo Zapiens* are strewn with citations from the works of Russian poets and bards, from Pushkin to Tsvetaeva to Okudzhava. While these references serve as proof of the contemporary authors’ commitment to their poetic heritage, the writers’ choice of

254 Tatyana Tolstaya “Is Their Hope for Pushkin’s Children?” tran. Jamey Gambrell, *The Wilson Quarterly* 16, no.1 (1992):122.

255 Tolstaya “Pushkin’s Children.” Pelevin’s BOMB magazine interview. Victor Pelevin, interview by Leo Kropywiansky, *BOMB* 79 (2002).

genre serves a tribute to the history of Russian prose. The post-apocalyptic world of *The Slynx*, and the perverse commercial dystopia of *Homo Zapiens* exemplify the staple genres of Russian prose since the nineteenth century: science fiction and fantasy. Gogol, Bely, and Bulgakov are but a few of Russia's most renowned authors who have employed fantasy to expose and satirize their country's historically corrupt social, political, and commercial practices. Rather than shrouding Russia's societal ills in magic and superstition, these authors utilized fantasy to contest their country's mystifying national narratives, maddening bureaucratic authoritarianism, and vacuous claims to civic liberties. Like their predecessors, Tolstaya and Pelevin use fantasy as a form of realist critique, intimating that the actualities of their country have been and continue to be stranger than fiction.

The Slynx and *Homo Zapiens* plunge their readers into the heart of Moscow. In Tolstaya's novel, the capital is post-apocalyptic and destitute; in Pelevin's, it is post-Soviet and hyperreal. In both, Moscow is unequivocally ominous, dystopian, and uncanny. These fictive portrayals of the city script an alternative narrative to the restorative nostalgia circulating in the public spaces of the real capital: "Moscow restorative nostalgia is characterized by a megalomaniacal imagination that recreates the past as a time of mythical giants. It does not propel historical reflection or individual longing but rather shapes a totalizing nostalgia for eternal grandeur."²⁵⁶ Combating these mythologies, Tolstaya's and Pelevin's depictions of Moscow, however disparate, underscore the most alienating, dehumanizing aspects of Russian society. While both authors highlight the depravity of their fictionalized cultures, the authors' literary projects ultimately aim to produce a viable portrait of contemporary Russian society. Thus, the

256 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 100.

novels' are replete with quotidian details, which anchor their fantastical worlds to a recognizable Russian milieu. *The Slynx* and *Homo Zapiens* engage in a hyperbolic, critical examination of the everyday, predicated on the notion that "commonplaces are much more tenacious than facts."²⁵⁷ By melding fantasy with the commonplace, Tolstaya and Pelevin are able to address their country's fraught contemporary realities, which are intentionally excluded from the nation's official narrative.

The Slynx and *Homo Zapiens* trace the everyday lives of their protagonists as they move up the ranks of their debased societies, which are ruled by greed and violence. In both novels fantasy acts as a rhetorical device that defamiliarizes Russia's commonplaces, exposing "normalcy" to be the banality of evil. The domestic and public spheres that Tolstaya's and Pelevin's protagonists inhabit are littered with, and defined by, quotidian goods. Pelevin's anti-hero, Babylen Tatarsky, is a marketing agent whose internal and external landscapes are comprised of popular commodities such as Parliament cigarettes, Pepsi-Cola, and Absolut vodka; Benedikt, Tolstaya's protagonist, is an eager consumer of post-apocalyptic equivalents to these commodities—rusht, firelings, and horsetail. Whether the protagonists consume invented products or recognizable brand names, their modes of consumption are familiar. Commonplace commodities dictate the identities, psychologies, and fates of Tolstaya's and Pelevin's characters. As their social status rises, their subjugation to prescribed cultural and consumerist practices grows increasingly acute. Succumbing to their base material desires, Benedikt and Tatarsky transform into subjects and propagators of their despotic governments.

257 Roberto M. Dainotto, *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2000), 20.

Unbridled consumerism is responsible for the societal strife delineated in *The Slynx* and in *Homo Zapiens*. Tolstaya's and Pelevin's treatments of commodity culture are largely reminiscent of the Hebrew writers' discussed in the first chapter; however, the Russian authors also consider how literature itself is effected by the tyranny of kitsch. Tree bark booklets containing snippets of classic Russian poetry are hot commodities on Tolstaya's post-apocalyptic marketplace; similarly, Russian verse offers a wealth of advertising material for Pelevin's morally dubious marketing agent. Tolstaya and Pelevin woefully thematize the denigration of Russia's arts and letters, scripting societies where literature has been political aestheticized or neutralized and, thereby, reduced to kitsch. Both authors suggest that it is this phenomenon that signals the collapse of Russia's ethical rubric, and paves the way for complete authoritarian rule. The moral and aesthetic imperatives set by *The Slynx* and *Homo Zapiens* not only call for the preservation of the Russian artistic tradition, but also demand a reinvestment in its humanistic and hermeneutic value. Today, the kitschy literary matreshkas ubiquitously sold to tourist in Arbat kiosks seem to portend the fate of Russian literature. As the formative figures of Russia's arts and letters are being hollowed out and reduced to souvenir dolls, "reproducing a common cultural text," Tolstaya and Pelevin stare straight into the void, safeguarding the presence of an absence, the Russian *dukh*.²⁵⁸

Tolstaya's Linguistic Apocalypse

In the fourteen years that it took her to complete *The Slynx*, Tolstaya witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the establishment of the Russian Federation. Her novel, first published in 2000 in Russian under the title *Kys'*, fictionalizes the political

258 Boym, *Common Places*, 236.

overhaul, amalgamating Soviet and post-Soviet commonplace realities into a single dystopic narrative. As Olga Osmukhina notes, Tolstaya defamiliarizes contemporary Russian spaces using poetic metaphors

that can either be scaled down, or, by contrast, unfolded into a “Hoffmanesque sketch,” “a gothic landscape,” or a “Cubist still life.” The metaphor is the means she uses to portray the commonly unknown, the humdrum, from an unexpected angle. To portray the ephemeral and illusory world in which her characters, those feeble-minded, ridiculous, timid, eternal children, live.²⁵⁹

No matter how fantastical Tolstaya’s world may seem, her novel never fails to reflect quotidian Russian realities. Even her post-apocalyptic landscape is historically grounded. *The Slynx* was first conceived in 1986, the year of the Chernobyl disaster. The catastrophe unquestionably informs Tolstaya’s novel, which is set two hundred years in the future, after a nuclear accident, referred to as “the Blast,” has wiped out Russian civilization. Generations after the explosion, several primitive societies have begun to repopulated the region, establishing insular townships. One such town, Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, becomes the setting of Tolstaya’s novel.

Fyodor-Kuzmichsk sits on the seven hills that were once Moscow. Transforming the capital into an uncanny, primeval village, Tolstaya creates a fictional space in which she can script Russia’s common places on her own terms. In her novel, she provides “[a]n encyclopedia of Russian life...[she] has come up with a flora and a fauna, a history, and a geography, frontiers and neighbors, folkways and popular customs, songs, dances, and games for her Russia.”²⁶⁰ Indeed, *The Slynx* presents an alienating tableau of post-apocalyptic Moscow; however, like Orly Castel-Bloom’s *Dolly City*, Tolstaya’s

259 Olga Osmukhina, “Literature as Technique,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 48, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 9.

260 Boris Paramonov “Russkaia istoriia nakonets opravdala sebia v literature,” *VREMIA-MN*, October 14, 2000, quoted in Olga Osmukhina “Literature as Technique,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 48, no. 4 (2012): 8.

grotesque village retains unmistakable markers of its national character. One of these markers is the town's rampant commodity culture: "Rusht" is the local alcohol, "Firelings" are the regional delicacy, and tree bark booklets are the town's version of books. Whether invented or familiar, these objects shape the epistemological framework of the town's inhabitants, whose only ambition is life is to procure more material goods. Unbridled consumption supports the town's tyrannical government, which strives to keep its citizens ignorant and obedient. The only object with any aesthetic, pedagogical, or spiritual value—the only object in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk that threatens to destabilize the town's power dynamic—is the book. In her novel, Tolstaya presents two disparate irreconcilable treatments of the book: the first considers the book as a commodity object, while the second regards the book as the eternal sanctuary of the Russian civilization and spirit. It is these two opposing conceptualization of the book that Benedikt, the protagonist of *The Slynx*, is tasked to negotiate as he moves through the ranks of society and begins to show glimmers of self-awareness.

The Slynx traces Benedikt's intellectual, psychological, and spiritual evolution, which is catalyzed by his growing engagement with the Russian literary tradition. As Benedikt transforms into an avid reader, literature remolds his phenomenological experiences, and instigates his illicit existential inquiry. Books foster alternative, poetic modes of self-expression, and open the gateway to oneiric possibilities that transcend the prescribed desires dictated by the homogenizing, despotic commodity culture of the town. Initially, Benedikt pines for basic commodities: "Since there aren't any lids, everyone will have a secret longing: If only I had a lid for my pot! Life is better when you've got a dream and you sleep sweeter."²⁶¹ By end of the novel, however, the

261 Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: NYRB Classics, 2007), 53.

protagonist's dreams of procuring only one object: the book. While the protagonist's consumption of literature subverts the sanctioned practices of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, Benedikt ultimately teeters on revelation without reaching enlightenment. In order to understand the psychological shackles that thwart the protagonist's movement to freedom, it is necessary to analyze the role of the book in the context of the town's tyrannical spatial structure, which has dislodged the Russian literary tradition from the past. Appropriated into the despotic, a-historical ideology that controls Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, literature is reduced to a commodity that supports the government's "regionalist" narrative.

Underscoring her country's intellectual and spiritual plight, Tolstaya not only estranges her readers from Russia's commonplace practices, but also from its inhabitants. The residents of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk are plagued with "Consequences," physical deformities resulting from centuries of exposure to radiation poisoning. While these genetic mutations—cockscombs, claws, extra appendages, and tails—serve as permanent, physical reminders of the nuclear holocaust, historical memory of life before and after the Blast is largely absent from the town's collective consciousness. Reminiscent of the villagers in *Dancing Arabs*, the inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk are cut off from their cultural roots and aesthetic traditions; thus, though they are not in physical exile, they suffer from the oppression of stationary displacement. Like the cancer that Dolly sees growing on every surface of her hyperreal city, Consequences are more than physical defects; they are the monstrous manifestations of the moral and spiritual disease that plagues the town's demographic. The town's residents possess neither civic standards nor aspirations for progress. Examining the socio-spatial construction of Tolstaya's text, Griffiths writes, "the loss of knowledge caused by the apocalypse ensures that the city's

structure cannot be reinterpreted, reimagined, or reworked.”²⁶² Made subject to a politically reinforced epistemological vacuum, the townspeople’s imaginative purview and spectrum of desires are dictated by the meager resources that are made immediately available to them by their government. Unreflectively, the inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk accept their downtrodden state of existence as an “always-already” condition.²⁶³ In such an environment, marked by greed and corruption, it is easy for Fyodor Kuzmich, the town’s ruler and namesake, to maintain authoritarian control over his ignorant demographic through the propagation of mythologies and superstitions.

Such despotic practices are not unique to Fyodor Kuzmich’s fictive regime; in *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym notes that Moscow’s contemporary public spaces intentionally facilitate historical erasure: “The erection of each new symbol enforces a collective amnesia about past destructions that have occurred as if by some uncanny ritual every fifty years. What is being forgotten here is forgetting itself.”²⁶⁴ In *The Slynx*, Tolstaya hyperbolizes this phenomenon. Her fabular civilization represents a society in its final stages of cultural amnesia. In the novel, Tolstaya suggests that forgetting is not only a byproduct of historical erasure, but also result of a psychological shift that stems from the denigration of language. The inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk do not just forget the past; they do not possess the vocabulary with which to remember it. As Natalia

262 Mark Griffiths, “Moscow After the Apocalypse,” *Slavic Review* 72, no. 3 (2013): 491.

263 Foucault writes that “the common representation of power which, depending on the use made of it and the position it is accorded with respect to desire, leads to two contrary results: either to the promise of ‘liberation,’ if power is seen as having only an external hold on desire, or if it is constitutive of desire itself, to the affirmation: you are always-already trapped.” The governing apparatus in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk is predicated on the latter category. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 83.

264 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 108.

Ivanova notes, “The Blast has damaged the language itself; there is no literacy and all the words with abstract meaning or foreign provenance are distorted.”²⁶⁵ Tolstaya invents and scripts her novel in this bankrupt Russian vernacular, which is utilized even by the narrator of *The Slynx*, a resident of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, who refers to “renaissance” as “runnysauce,” “boutique” as “bootick,” and “Schopenhauer” as “shoppinghower.”²⁶⁶ Comical, absurd and ominous, Tolstaya’s estranging word play suggests the socio-cultural malaise that result from linguistic bastardization.

Perhaps the most defamiliarizing structural device in Tolstaya’s novel, the decrepit Russian vernacular used in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk not only highlights the town’s cultural depravity and ignorance, but also perpetuates it. This phenomenon is not endemic to Tolstaya’s post-apocalyptic world; rather, it is an acute representation of the intellectual and cultural demise that threatens Russian society today. In “Is There Hope for Pushkin’s Children?” Tolstaya bemoans the post-Soviet status of arts and letters, lamenting that “now in Russia some of the most intelligent, educated, and talented people [...] claim that literature should not exist at all [...].”²⁶⁷ The repercussions of this phenomenon are delineated in *The Slynx*. The abject linguistic landscape of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk evokes another catastrophe of mythological proportions: the fall of the Tower of Babel. The biblical myth, which is also central to Pelevin’s novel, is evoked in *The Slynx* through Tolstaya’s profaned Russian vernacular. As a result of this verbal impoverishment, Russia’s artistic tradition—the country’s moral and spiritual anchor— is on the cusp of annihilation. The Blast and the ceaseless political turmoil that ensued in its aftermath have manipulated and corrupted Russia’s cultural heritage to the point of crisis.

265 Natalia Ivanova, “Grind the Peacack into Burkers,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 39, no. 4 (2003): 73.

266 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 11, 24, 74.

267 Tolstaya “Pushkin’s Children,” 129.

With each governmental overhaul, the past is obliterated, and space itself is completely re-scripted. Thus, it is only the “Oldeners,” the minority population that has survived the Blast, who insist on referring to Fyodor-Kuzmichsk as Moscow. As a Consequence of radiation poisoning, Oldeners developed negative senescence; their bodies do not age, and their memories do not fade.

Oldenprint, Booklets, and Post-Apocalyptic Graphomania

Benedikt is the son of one such Oldener, Polina Mikhailovna. Benedikt’s mother was always in the company of other survivors of the Blast, many of who still consider themselves to be part of the Russian intelligentsia. The Oldeners aspire to “keep memory alive,” and “[contribute] to the restoration and rebirth of culture.”²⁶⁸ Some, including Polina Mikhailovna, had even managed to preserve a few “Oldenprint” tomes—books that have survived the nuclear holocaust. One of Benedikt’s earliest childhood memories is of the incineration of these books. In Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, all literary production is controlled and censored by the government, which regulates the production and distribution of booklets through a strict system of discipline and punishment: “The booklets could be taken to the market and traded for mice. You could trade a string of mice for a booklet. There’s only government trade, though, don’t dare copy anything yourself—if they find out, you’ll get a thrashing.”²⁶⁹ The circulation of Oldenprint, pre-Blast artifacts that contest the despot’s political mythology, is further stymied through self-propagating superstitions. Oldenprint books are deemed to be a public health hazard. Rumored to spread a deathly, contagious illness, they are immediately confiscated. Anyone found in possession of a volume is locked in a sanitarium for treatment. Thus,

268 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 24.

269 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 33.

when Benedikt's father learns that his wife has been secretly safekeeping Oldenprint, he burns her entire library. Such traumatic events counteract Polina Mikhailovna's influence on her son, which, in any case, is short-lived: Benedikt's mother dies from food poisoning when he is still a young boy.

After the death of his mother, Benedikt develops a distaste for the Oldeners' discourse, which is generally stigmatized by the town's ignorant population. As the protagonist matures, he seeks out a normative existence within the impoverished cultural milieu of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, and the survivors' concerns and language become evermore foreign to him. In the first pages of the novel, the narrator addresses the linguistic dissonance between the Oldeners and the rest of the town's inhabitants, claiming that "when it comes down to it, the Oldeners don't understand our words, and we don't understand theirs."²⁷⁰ Despite the communication barriers, Benedikt does not completely disassociate himself from the survivors. His mother's best friend, Nikita Ivanich, becomes his confidant and mentor. Furthermore, following the wishes of Polina Mikhailovna, Benedikt becomes a government scribe, a profession that his mother believed would bring him closer to Russia's literary tradition. As Osmukhina notes, Benedikt's "primitive understanding of the world, his uncouth ways, his lack of development are predicated upon the absence of luminous childhood impressions, by his having been wrested away from his roots. The only way for him to discover himself is to seek initiation into culture by way of *the book*."²⁷¹ It is only the Oldeners who attempt to promote a cultural renaissance through the revival of the Russian literary tradition. Thus, though Benedikt is a product of his environment, his affiliation with the survivors of the

270 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 23.

271 Osmukhina, "Literature as Technique," 12.

Blast sows the seeds of enlightenment whose growing imperative he can neither fully act upon nor ignore.

Textually and intertextually, Benedikt is embedded within the Russian literary tradition. As a scribe, the protagonist is reminiscent of “[a] typical hero of Russian prose [...]: Akakii Akakievich (from Gogol’s *Shinel*)’ *copied documents* and Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin (from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*) had beautiful *penmanship*.”²⁷² Like these two canonized fictive personas, Benedikt’s literary aspirations are mundane and void of imagination. Thus, despite his profession, the protagonist’s process of self-discovery is slow, partial, and continuously misguided. It is also hindered by his environment.

Growing up in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, Benedikt is subjected to a strict, hierarchical political system that melds the worst aspects of Russian feudalism and Soviet despotism. All economic activity is government-controlled, and the town’s citizens are split into five relatively immobile socio-political classes: Degenerators (beast-like sled drivers), Serfs, Golubchiks (the proletariat), Murzas (government officials), and Saniturations (the police). The classes division are spatially reinforced: Degenerators and Serfs live in sheds and cellars, Golubchiks, like Benedikt, inhabit primitive huts called izbas, while the upper-class inhabitants build fortified houses or terems. The town’s social and spatial stratification find further representation in language:

Tolstaya makes careful use of language, exaggerating the division in post-Soviet Russia by giving each societal level different forms of address [...]. Adopting medieval torture practices, while aping Soviet slogans, members of Tolstaya’s elite use a mixture of colloquialisms and official bureaucratese to dictate ordinary citizens.²⁷³

272 Ivanova, “Grind the Peacock into Burkers,” 75.

273 Griffiths, “Moscow after the Apocalypse,” 492. While Tolstaya creates neologisms for her fictive caste system, she chooses to retain the serf class. This linguistic move conjures the ghosts of Russia’s despotic governments through the ages. Their practices

This opaque master-slave jargon feeds Fyodor Kuzmich's obfuscated, inconsistent bureaucratic practices known as the "the governmental approach," which is "never straight forward. You think this is the way things should go, but no, it's not like this, not like that. No way you could guess yourself."²⁷⁴ By mystifying its modus operandi, the government maintains civic order through fear-mongering, forcing the town's disempowered demographic to quell its discontent through alcoholism, violence, and petty crimes.

At the outset of the novel, Benedikt, like the rest of the Golubchiks, fully buys into the culture of lies disseminated by the government. The protagonist believes that Fyodor Kuzmich "brought people fire [...] thought up sleighs, [...] got the idea to carve wheels out of wood, [...] taught us to make stone pots, catch mice and make soup, [...] gave us counting and writing, letters big and small [...]."²⁷⁵ The tyrant upholds the historical vacuum by filling the void in town's collective consciousness with a self-serving mythology. Fyodor Kuzmich presents himself a god-like protector of the townspeople. To prevent dissidence or "Freethinking," Fyodor Kuzmich controls all artistic and scientific output. As it turns out, the ruler's terem contains an expansive library, which includes the majority of the Oldenprint tomes that have survived the Blast. Holding the remains of Russian civilization captive, the despot deals it out piecemeal, making sure not to compromise the subservient thought structure of his subordinates. Only one other Saniturion, Kudyar Kudyarich, (the person who will ultimately usurp Fyodor Kuzmich) has an Oldenprint collection of comparable size. These two libraries, locked behind mansion walls, "imbue [their] guardians with authority over the common

continue to haunt the country's socio-political structure and vocabulary despite Russia's ongoing project of historical erasure.

²⁷⁴ Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 170.

²⁷⁵ Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 16.

citizen.”²⁷⁶ As the reader comes to understand, it is Kudyar Kudyarich’s library that will lend the Saniturion the knowledge and tools to overthrow Fyodor Kuzmich and institute an even more despotic government.

While still in power, Fyodor Kuzmich intermittently dictates a Blok or Pushkin poem to the scribes in the Work Izba where Benedikt is employed. The bark booklets are believed to be composed by the brilliant mind of the dictator himself and, therefore, are regarded as prized commodities. Benedikt transcribes these hackneyed chunks of Russian literature onto pieces of birch tree bark, though neither he nor the other Golubchiks nor Fyodor Kuzmich possesses the vocabulary to understand the contents of the poems. The townspeople’s consumption of literature is purely superficial:

People love to read: on weekends at the market they always go to trade mice for booklets. The Lesser Murza’s come out, set up the governmental stalls along the fence, set out birch-bark booklets, a tag stuck in each of them that says how much they’ll take for it. [...] The Golubchiks crowd around, checking prices, discussing whether to buy or not to buy, what the book is about, what’s the story, are there a lot of pictures?²⁷⁷

The cycle of literary production and consumption in the town is reminiscent of the Soviet-era culture of “graphomania.” Boym writes,

The invention of print originally promoted mutual understanding. In the era of graphomania the writing of books has the opposite effect; everyone surrounds himself with his own writing, as the wall of mirrors cuts off all the voices from without. The purpose of such writing is not to communicate with others but to prevent any kind of communication.²⁷⁸

Tolstaya places her protagonist in such a hyperbolically insular, unreflective environment. Though the majority of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk’s population is literate, the town’s inhabitants are primitive readers. Neither the stylistic variations nor the

276 Griffiths, “Moscow after the Apocalypse,” 490.

277 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 75.

278 Boym, *Common Places*, 172.

variegated content of the booklets rouses the Golubchiks' suspicions about the authorial sources of the texts. Lacking an aesthetic rubric, they buy booklets as entertainment at best and as status symbols at worst. In fragmented booklet form, literature is stripped of meaning; it is incapable of fostering creativity or discontent; it is transformed into kitsch.

Space Done Two Ways

The Golubchiks' unsophisticated modes of reading thwart curiosity and self-reflection. Thus, the majority of the town residents unwaveringly adhere to Fyodor Kuzmich's every word. Lacking the knowledge, skills, and desire to rebel against their government, Golubchiks lash out against one another fostering a debased, self-policing community structured on terror. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk are completely entrenched in their dictator's web of deception, and are not wont to leave. Without maps nor navigational tools, the Golubchiks' knowledge of the area beyond the town walls is predicated on hearsay and the superstitions disseminated by their government. Benedikt unquestioningly accepts the geographical mythos of the region, which fully circumscribes the area surrounding the town:

Around the town are boundless fields, unknown lands. To the north are deep forests [...]. Old people say that the Slynx lives in those forests. The Slynx [...] grabs your spine in its teeth—*crunch*— and picks out big vein with its claw and breaks it. All the reason runs out of you. [...] You can't go west either [...]. You walk and walk, then [...] all of the sudden, they say, you just stop. And you stand there. And you think: Where was I going anyway? What do I need there? What's there to see? [...] You turn back. Sometimes you run. [...] You can't go south. The Chechens live there. [...] No, we mostly walk east from the town.²⁷⁹

Though no official maps of the area exist, a imagined topography of the region is treated as commonplace knowledge by the inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk. Such a folkloric

279 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 4-5,11.

geography dictates the resident's psychological and epistemological boundaries, which by extension, limit the residents' movements outside the town walls. As Griffith notes,

The apocalypse has permanently imprinted the constricting center/periphery division upon Moscow's topography because its inhabitants no longer contain the tools to alter the paradigm. Spatial concentricity and temporal cyclicity are crystalized by the apocalypse to such an extent that they traps individuals at the most basic level, within their own heads.²⁸⁰

Isolationism and xenophobia are fortified by this mental prison, which suggests that the only safe direction to walk is east—away from civilization.

Demarcating the physical and imaginative trajectories of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk's demographic, spatial mythologies circulate and buttress the ideological rhetoric of what Dainotto calls "regionalism." In *Place in Literature*, Dainotto argues that "regionalism" is a rebranded form of nationalistic jargon: "'Regional' is a pastoral sensibility untouched by the evils of history and sheltered from the latter within the 'boundaries of some sort' of place. To put it bluntly, regionalism is the figure of otherness that is, essentially, otherness *from*, and against, history."²⁸¹ Indeed, the inhabitants of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk are trained to reject all memory of their town's history, even if the past helps them elucidate the present. For example, in the *Work Izba*, Benedikt must answer to the Murza Jackal Demianich. Although Benedikt begrudges his overseer, the protagonist does not care to know why the Murza is allotted the higher position.

Jackal Demianich is given power over us because he's a Veteran of the Ice Battle. What sort of Battle it was, and when, and just who Jackel Demianich fought, and whether he struck down lot of Golubchiks with a cudgel or a bludgeon, we don't know, and don't want to know—an even if someone told us we'd forget.²⁸²

As part of his cultural and social inculcation, Benedikt has learned to resist remembering.

280 Griffiths, "Moscow after the Apocalypse," 492.

281 Dainotto, *Place in Literature*, 9.

282 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 49.

The townspeople's fixation on the present, or "*seichas*," is reminiscent of Moscow's "Big Village" mentality. As Boym argues, this sensibility toward space and time makes Moscow an "unreadable city that deceives the visitor."²⁸³ In *The Slynx*, the reader becomes that foreign visitor. Tolstaya utilizes this treatment of space and time to defamiliarize her audience from the post-Blast landscape. The "Big Village" mentality that governs the practices of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk is neither authentic to the space nor organic to the community. Rather, it is Tolstaya's ironic scripting of a culture suspended in time: a futuristic society that has been thrown back to the Middle Ages. In *The Slynx*, *seichas* culture is neither idyllic nor ideal; it is an unnerving marker of tyrannical stagnation that further underscores Dainotto's description of the regional purview:

'Region' is [...] the commonplace of an organic community. It is a topos that is antithetical, from its very outset, to 'the cities of the machine age,' which, as Ransom had marked, 'are peculiarly debased...since the population is imported from any sources whatever; and therefore, they are without character.' In search of a shared communal identity, region is the rhetorical opposition to the modern city.²⁸⁴

Benedikt's agrarian treatment of time complements the regional sensibility. "Who counts time? Do we know?" the narrator inquires. "Winter, summer, winter, summer, but how many times? You'd lose count just thinking about it."²⁸⁵ The protagonist's understanding of his environs further underscores his ideological entrapment. Petrifying the township in an a-historical moment, Fyodor Kuzmich's regime aims to thwart modernity, and alongside it, the concepts of progress, individuality, and democracy. Only the Oldeners, namely Nikita Ivanich, are committed to re-inscribing the town back into the flow of history, and thereby, into a movement toward the re-establishment of civilization.

283 Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 96.

284 Dainotto, *Place in Literature*, 22.

285 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 21.

Since Nikita Ivanich had developed the ability to spit fire—a Consequence from the Blast—he has worked as the town’s Head Stoker. Since no one in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk knows how to kindle wood, for two centuries the Head Stoker has played an indispensable role in the survival of the post-apocalyptic civilization. As a result of his special skill set, the Oldener is subservient to no one. “He doesn’t have to ask, or bow, or scrape, or be afraid—nothing. Freedom!”²⁸⁶ Like any other Consequence, the fire that burns inside Nikita Ivanich is as much metaphorical as it is literal. The Head Stoker perpetually tends to hearth of the Russian spirit that is always at risk of being extinguished.

Capitalizing on his diplomatic immunity, Nikita Ivanich founds the Monument Preservation Society, whose mission is to palimpsestically overlay the spaces of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk with signposts that commemorate Moscow’s old topography—Arbat St., Strastnoi Blvd., Nikita’s Gates. Most of the town’s residents, who have no concept of city planning, are completely nonplussed by the street signs. At best, the Golubchiks ignore the signs and at worst they treat them as a nuisance. Occasionally, the townspeople vandalize the posts: they cut them down for firewood or “scrape off ‘Arbat’ and carve something new: ‘Pakhom lives here.’”²⁸⁷ For the survivors of the Blast, however, the street posts both act as historical plaques that memorialize their beloved culture and as navigational instruments that help orient their personal, mnemonic maps of Moscow. By erecting the street signs, Nikita Ivanich transforms the town’s landscape into “liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the

286 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 64.

287 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 25.

geography of the literal, forbidden or literal meaning.”²⁸⁸ Yet, no one but the Oldeners can detect the subversive function of signposts, which conjure the ghostly landscape of the capital city, and embed Fyodor-Kuzmichsk within a historical time.

In such a manner, Nikita Ivanich attempts to fill the void in the town’s historical memory. Like Jergović’s gravedigger, the Head Stoker intimately evokes Moscow’s obliterated topos. His street posts are ideologically neutral. They do not aim to disseminate a restorative narrative, or revive a distorted and glorified image of the capital. These are not the official signposts erected by city planners, which attempt to create spatial order; rather, they are elegiac objects of “countermemory” that combat the workings of cultural amnesia by conjuring the veracular places that once stored the Russian spirit. Hence, they evoke what Boym calls “*bytie* (spiritual existence)” in a place governed by “*byt* (everyday routine and stagnation).”²⁸⁹

***Bytie* Objects: Instructions for a Meat Grinder and the pushkin**

The survivors of the Blast locate their *bytie* in their memories of the material world and the goods that circulated within it. While Nikita Ivanich and the rest of the Oldeners bemoan the vacuous, unreflective commodity culture that runs rampant in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, they hold on to the few domestic items that they have managed to salvage in the aftermath of the nuclear accident. These worthless objects—identification cards, bills, receipts—bear precious mnemonic value that transcends their ostensible bureaucratic function. They speak to “[a] whole way of life” now lost.²⁹⁰

288 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 105.

289 Boym, *Common Places*, 29.

290 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 118.

Tolstaya explores this alternative treatment of everyday commodities, which is reminiscent to Ugrešić's, in a chapter portraying the funeral of the Oldener Anna Petrovna. At the request of Nikita Ivanich, Benedikt helps the survivors carry Anna Petrovna's coffin to her burial site. Viktor Ivanich, another Oldener, officiates the funeral ceremony, which he concludes by inquiring after any pre-Blast objects the deceased might have had in her possession: "Instructions for using household appliances? No? A television? A gas or electric range? A microwave? Kerosene stove? No? Vacuum cleaner? Floor polisher? Washing machine? Kitchen appliances."²⁹¹ These commonplace goods certainly have no practical or commercial value in a town with no electricity, yet they bear great emotional resonance for the community that once used them. Listening to Viktor Ivanich recite the list of household appliances, the mourners burst into tears. It becomes clear that the survivors inconvenience themselves to preserve these quotidian items solely for the purpose of commemoration. The only pre-Blast relic found in Anna Petrovna's possession is an instruction manual for a meat grinder.

The meat grinder manual may seem like a sad, meager memorial object, testifying more to the material poverty of the post-Blast society than to the richness and complexities of a human life. Nikita Ivanich, however, quickly disabuses Tolstaya's readers of this notion. During his speech at the funeral service, the Head Stoker asks, "What does this memorial object tell us? Answering his own inquiry, he continues:

This is a priceless relic of a bygone era! [...] In these difficult years—the Stone Age, the sunset of Europe, the death of the gods and everything else that you and I, friends, have lived through—at this time the instructions for a meat grinder are no less valuable than a papyrus from the library of Alexandria! A fragment of Noah's Ark! The tablets of Hammurabi. Moreover, friends, material culture is being restored hour by hour. [...] The most important thing to preserve is our spiritual heritage! The object may not exist, but there are instructions for its use,

291 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 118.

we have its spiritual—no, I do not fear using the word—will and testament, a missive from the past!²⁹²

For Nikita Ivanich, the value of the instruction manual is its cultural worth. The Head Stoker treats the quotidian good as a historical object, which has withstood many centuries of strife, and which still has a role to play in the spiritual and cultural awakening of the Russian people.

Benjamin's writing on historical materialism helps elucidate the ontology of the instruction manual. In his *Theses on the History of Philosophy*, Benjamin argues that the value of material objects could only be gauged by their historical impact. While the commercial worth of an object diminishes with the passage of time, the cultural value of a commodity may increase. Thus, in his eulogy, Nikita Ivanich exemplifies the sensibility of a historical materialist.²⁹³ In his speech, the Head Stoker treats the instruction manual as a historical subject, which holds the prospect of liberating the past and bearing cultural fruits for future generations. As a material and textual object, the meat grinder manual has even greater redemptive potential, since it is not just a relic of culture, but also of language.

Rather than reducing the memory of the deceased woman to a triviality, the instructional pamphlet humanizes Anna Petrovna. Like the objects found inside the stomach of Ugresic's Roland the Walrus, the meat grinder manual suggests an intimate biography of the deceased woman, testifying to her pre-Blast life, as well as to her

292 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 121.

293 The historical materialist is one who "approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes a cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the History of Philosophy," in *Illuminations*, 262-3.

deepest longings and reflective nostalgia. Although the Oldeners knew Anna Petrovna as a pesky, curmudgeonly woman, their memory of her is redeemed by the instruction manual— her personal contribution to preservation of Russian culture, language, and history for the benefit of future generations. Thus, the ceremony allows the survivors to commemorate their individual and collective histories, and reify their hope for the future. As such, the funeral becomes a space of “*sobronost’*,” or “ a place of communal spirituality, [which] is opposed to authority and formal attributes of spirituality and power. [...] *Sobronost’* is a radically anti-iconographic, antirhetorical, anticonventional.”²⁹⁴ The obsolete instruction manual perfectly captures the spirit of the gathering.

While the Oldeners use this occasion to reaffirm their commitment to the spiritual and intellectual growth of their society, Benedikt is completely baffled by the ceremony. His presence at the funeral underscores the gap between the Oldeners’ and the Golubchiks’ consumerist practices. During the ceremony, Benedikt struggles to understand the Oldener’s speeches and soon stops listening to the eulogies. His thoughts turn to Olenka, the beauty of Work Izba. Daydreaming, he wishes “for Olenka to bring him pancakes and hot kvas! [...] Her eyes are bright... Her little face is egg-shaped.”²⁹⁵ The protagonist’s oneiric longings are the product of unreflective, objectifying consumerism. Structured on the principles of commoditization and ownership, Benedikt’s affection for Olenka, even on the most subconscious level, is based on the fulfillment of banal material desires. Rather than aggrandizing his beloved, his stale imagination evokes her visage as an egg.²⁹⁶ Like Ćipo’s treatment of his Muslim doll in *Sarajevo Marlboro*,

294 Boym, *Common Places*, 87.

295 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 122.

296 Tolstaya’s delineation of Benedikt’s objectifying daydreams is based on Gogolian models. A perfect example of this anthropomorphizing/objectifying rhetorical device

Benedikt's lustful reveries dehumanize Olenka, reducing her to a banal material object that can be purchased at the market.

The funeral scene concludes with Benedikt's daydream. Tolstaya uses this event to present an alternative, elegiac model of kitsch consumption, which contrasts with the objectifying *seichas* commoditization practices exemplified by Benedikt. Such an examination and reappropriation of kitsch, Boym argues, is central to Tolstaya's literary project, which

presents wonderful exhibits of kitsch as well as of the Soviet ordinary marvelous. Most of the kitsch items in Tolstaya's stories are not contemporary; they belong to another time and are colored by the aura of memory and nostalgia for the vanished world, as tacky and unoriginal as it might have been. [...] Her stories invited us to rethink the one-sided mockery of sentimental kitsch.²⁹⁷

Like the fiction of her ex-Yugoslav contemporaries, Tolstaya's novel alerts her readers to the threat of tyrannical kitsch, while suggesting an individualistic, meaningful, and even poetic manner of relating to the commonplace material world. Such an empowered subject-object relationship heightens self-awareness, buttresses individuality, and shelters memory from the ravages of cultural amnesia. It is this form of curious, reflective consumption that Nikita Ivanich strives to cultivate in Benedikt.

Though Nikita Ivanich laments the state of Russian culture and letters, his Monument Preservation Society signals his hope for a "spiritual runnysauce." The

could be found in the first pages of *Dead Souls*. As Chickikov rides into the province of N., one of the first sights he beholds is a "seller of hot punch with a red copper samovar and a face as red as the samovar, so that from a distance one might have thought there were two samovars in the window, if one samovar had not had a pitch-black beard." Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1997), 4.

As noted in the introductory chapter, a central theme in Gogol's literary oeuvre is Russia's cultural commodification.

²⁹⁷ Boym, *Common Places*, 259-60.

emblem of this renaissance is Pushkin, whom both Tolstaya and the Head Stoker regard as a figure of “inner freedom.”²⁹⁸ As an homage to the moral and aesthetic ethos of the poet, the Oldener decides to erect a bust of Pushkin in the center of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, anticipating that the statue may spark the interest of the town’s population. Nikita Ivanich recruits Benedikt for the project. Detecting sparks of self-reflection in the protagonist, the Head Stoker comes to believe that the young man is capable of instigating a widespread cultural shift toward enlightenment. During their time spent together carving the statue, the Head Stoker tries to teach Benedikt about the Russian literary tradition and the deeper purpose of reading. As Benedikt chips away at the log that is to become the statue of the poet, the Oldener says to him:

So it is that moral law, all our imperfections notwithstanding, is preordained, etched with a diamond blade on the tablets of the consciences! Inscribed in fiery letters in the Book of Being.... Our life, young man consists of the search of this book. It is a sleepless path through the dense forest, groping our way, an unexpected acquisition! Our poet—the one to whom you and I are erecting a modest alter—our poet knew this, young man! Her knew everything! Pushkin is our be all and end all—the starry sky above and the law in our hearts!²⁹⁹

Sensing that Pushkin is very important to the Oldener, Benedikt labors over the statue. Yet, despite his efforts, the protagonist’s rendering of the poet is not entirely successful.

The statue ends up with six fingers and no legs. The inhabitants’ response to the bust is entirely true to character: “[The statue] is reduced to a “pushkin,” a lump of wood on which to hang laundry. The statue is no more than a simulacra, as elucidated by Jean Baudrillard in the sense that it substitutes a model of a cultural reality for reality itself because such a cultural reality no longer exists.”³⁰⁰ While the statue may appear to be a failure in the context of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, it is a success within the context of

298 Tolstaya, “Pushkin’s Children?” 122.

299 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 150.

300 Griffiths, “Moscow After the Apocalypse,” 494.

Tolstaya's literary project. As Boym writes, "[any] twentieth-century poet who wishes to talk or walk with Pushkin has first to wrestle with his overpowering monument." Using Nikita Ivanich as her mouthpiece, Tolstaya defines Pushkin as a representative of the ineffable Russian spirit, and in *The Slynx*, she attempts to liberate "Pushkin's cultural fate [as...] a classical example of national kitsch."³⁰¹ The only manner in which she can accomplish this task is by extracting Pushkin from his inscription in the Russian national narrative.

Tolstaya physically and metaphorically conquers the image of the "overpowering monument" with her iconoclastic bust, which defamiliarizes the kitschified, museumified figure of the poet. Nikita Ivanich is unfazed by Benedikt's hackneyed craftsmanship; the Head Stoke still eagerly erects the statue on one of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk's tallest hills. Rather than propagating a glorified national aesthetic, the mutant pushkin pays homage to the unmarred spirit of the poet. Thus, the deformed statue simultaneously testifies to the pathetic state of Russian literature in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, and demands that readers re-examine the figure of the poet on their own terms. Like Anna Petrovna's threadbare meat grinder manual, Nikita Ivanich's disfigured bust estranges readers from the statue, and in doing so, salvages and de-kitschifies Pushkin.

Books are Consumed; Manuscripts Don't Burn

Benedikt's commitment to the Pushkin project leads the Head Stoker to overestimate the protagonist's intellectual and moral development; however, the Oldener's influence on the young man is offset by a figure of even greater political power, the protagonist's father-in-law, Kudeyar Kudeyarich. Midway through the novel,

³⁰¹ Boym, *Common Places*, 172.

Benedikt musters the courage to propose to his dream girl, Olenka. Only after asking for her hand does Benedikt learn that his future father-in-law is the most-feared figure in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk, the Head Sanituriion. The initial dread that grips Benedikt quickly dissipates. The protagonist quits his job and moves into his in-laws' extravagant terem where he luxuriates in the splendor of his newfound lifestyle. Yet, after becoming accustomed to his lavish environment, Benedikt grows bored. Knowing that his son-in-law's discontent is a sign of Freethinking, Kudeyar Kudeyarich gives the protagonist a pass to the terem library, which contains hundreds of Oldenprint tomes. The Head Sanituriion disabuses Benedikt of the notion that books spread illness, claiming that "illness isn't in books, dear boy, it's in people's heads."³⁰² Without considering the implications of the Sanituriion's explanation, Benedikt breathes a sigh of relief and spends months doing little else but reading.

Devouring book after book, he learns that Fyodor Kuzmich did not write the literature transcribed in the Work Izba. Yet, even this revelation does not vex him. In fact, little disturbs Benedikt while he has plenty of new reading material at hand. Yet, soon after exhausting his father-in-law's library, the protagonist grows desperate for new books. Gripped by the existential despair of ennui, all the protagonist can do is listen to the haunting howl of the Slynx in the distance. Capitalizing on his son-in-law's psychological state, Kudeyar Kudeyarich invites Benedikt to join him in a terror-spree of the town. The protagonist eagerly dons the hooded raiment of a Sanituriion, and the father and son-in-law embark on a witch-hunt for illicit Oldenprint. During this raid, Benedikt kills a Golubchik while trying to confiscate a contraband book. At this moment, the Slynx is revealed to be the external projection of Benedikt's internal monster. The Slynx is the

302 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 171.

existential sludge that sullies Benedikt's thoughts, and flies over him during his murderous rampage. Thus, though this event initially sends the protagonist into shock, he recovers. With the Slynx deeply nestled inside his soul, Benedikt forthwith takes on the position of Saniturion full-time.

Benedikt's greed for Oldenprint completely dislodges his moral compass. His sinister methods for acquiring new books testify to his inability to understanding the real, spiritual essence of Russian literature that Nikita Ivanich hoped to reveal in him. With the voices of the Head Stoker and the Head Saniturion whispering in each of his ears like the figures of the angel and the devil, Benedikt defaults on the convenient, self-serving advice of the latter. In subsequent months, Kudeyar Kudeyarich monitors Benedikt's intake of literature, telling him not only what to read, but also how to read it. Rather than liberating the protagonist from the shackles of oppression, literature further enslaves him to his base desires. Griffith diagnoses the protagonist's consumerist habits to be the cause of his spiritual plight:

[Benedikt] can never escape from the cycle of destruction and degradation, not because the wider regime will never fall or the leader will never die [...] but because he personally lacks the necessary nous. Despite effectively traveling through time by accessing the Moscow's past knowledge, Benedikt is unable to make sense of this information. He can never become an intellectual because the books he craves so desperately, that he is willing to kill for, are no more than meaningless objects. He mistakes the material for the spiritual and fails "to learn the alphabet of life."³⁰³

Rather than using his new bank of knowledge to tackle increasingly pressing questions about his identity and life-purpose, Benedikt remains a superficial reader, burning through books so as to escape his bleak existential condition. His voracious consumption of literature is not ennobling; instead, it transforms him into the monstrous accomplice of

303 Griffiths, "Moscow after the Apocalypse," 491.

Kudeyar Kudeyarich, a partnership that culminates in a coup d'etat, which the power-hungry Saniturion had long been planning.

After taking on the title of Head Murza, Kudeyar Kudeyarich decides to execute Nikita Ivanich. Blackmailing Benedikt, Kudeyar Kudeyarich threatens to destroy all the books in the palatial terem if Benedikt does not force the Head Stoker to give himself up to the authorities. The protagonist reluctantly complies, and the Oldener, heartbroken, willing surrenders. Betrayed by Benedikt, Nikita Ivanich loses all hope in humanity. Tied to his pushkin and placed in the public square to await execution, the Head Stoker opens his mouth and sends an all-consuming ball of fire into the crowd, incinerating the entire village. In the final scene of the novel, Benedikt awakens to find the town completely obliterated. The only object that protrudes on the horizon of the scorched landscape is the pushkin, with Nikita Ivanich still bound to it, but still alive. Approching the stature, Benedikt frees the Head Stoker and watches as the Oldener rises into the air and floats away.

The ambiguity of Benedikt's future at the end of *The Slynx* is reminiscent of the equivocal destiny of Bulgakov's protagonists in *The Master and Margarita*. In the final chapters of Bulgakov's magnum opus, the Master's apartment is set on fire, along with his manuscript. As Moscow's copulas burn below them, the Master and Margarita are carried away to an idyllic sanctuary, having been granted "peace," but not "light." In this oneiric sequence, it remains unclear whether we encounter the protagonists in an earthly or heavenly paradise. Benedikt's final meeting with Nikita Ivanich is similarly enigmatic. The magical events that transpire at the end of the novel break from the conventions of Tolstaya's otherwise "realistic" dystopia. Thus, it is impossible to ascertain whether the angelic image of the Head Stoker is ushering the protagonist into an afterlife or leaving Benedikt to rebuild Russian civilization from the ashes. Regardless,

Tolstaya's evocation of Bulgakov's masterpiece is unmistakable. While Fyodor-Kuzmichsk goes up in flames, the wooden pushkin survives. Despite the material and spatial annihilation at the end of *The Slynx*, Tolstaya, echoing the sentiments of her forebearer, intimates that "manuscripts don't burn."

While Tolstaya concludes her novel with a second apocalypse, she intimates that the Russian spirit perseveres. It is preserved in the pushkin, as well as in otherworldly, literary figure of Nikita Ivanich, who physically dislodges himself from the spatial confines of the town. "There is no civilization, Golubchik," the Head Stoker say to Benedikt at the end of the novel. "We have to do it ourselves, with our wooden one."³⁰⁴ In the aftermath of this second apocalypse, it becomes clear that nothing can protect the Russian *dukh* but its artistic heritage. It is this very task that Tolstaya's novel sets out to accomplish. In form and content, *The Slynx* expresses the author's commitment to the Russian literary tradition and language: the chapters of her novel are headed by letters from the pre-reform Russian alphabet, and her invented Russian vernacular reveals the sophistication and flexibility of her mother tongue. The theoretical framework and aesthetic ethos of her novel are conveyed through her language, which is just as fabular as her fantastical world.

Indeed, Tolstaya's rhetorical gymnastics garnered much acclaim and certainly deserve critical study. Natalia Ivanova's and Olga Osmukhina's readings of *The Slynx* examine the manner in which Tolstaya enters into and innovates the genre of post-apocalyptic literature through her ingenious literary play. Alla Latynina argues that, were it not for Tolstaya's linguistic modalities, her novel would run the risk on being cliché: "So what exactly release [the novel] from the rather banal purlieus of the plot? First there

304 Tolstaya, *Slynx*, 296.

is the language the verbal fabric, the all-pervasive comedy [...].³⁰⁵ *The Slynx*, however, not only performatively demonstrates the adulteration of the Russian language, but also identifies the networks of control that promote this corruption.

Tolstaya's novel delineates the systems that objectify and commoditize literature. Like her predecessors, she warns about the appropriation and manipulation of the word at the hands of the government. In *The Slynx*, these concerns are tied to considerations and the contemporary economic situation in Russia. In today's socio-political climate, the threat of media and commercialism to Russia's literary heritage has never been more foreboding. Yet, the novel ends a note of faint hope. Tolstaya ultimately abides by the classical dystopic formula, which "presents genuine art as an aesthetic and ethical antidote to the snares of ideology as well as the products of ersatz culture." In contrast, Pelevin's *Homo Zapiens*, which addresses similar problems, breaks with dystopian conventions and "portrays art's total subversion by kitsch."³⁰⁶ His novel portrays a contemporary post-Soviet Moscow, populated by a demographic that has lost its agency and souls to the gods of the free market. In this abject milieu run by advertising moguls, the intelligentsia class is eradicated and no one is left to preserve the Russian *dukh*.

"Acapulypse Now" or Pelevin's Consumerist Dystopia

In a 2002 interview with BOMB magazine, Pelevin defines Russia's contemporary government as a subservient appendage of the country's marketplace:

Phenomenologically any politician is a TV program, and this doesn't change from one government to another. But if you want me to compare the government we

305 Alla Latynina, "'There's Your Spiritual Renaissance for You,'" *Russian Studies in Literature* 39, no. 4 (2003): 69.

306 Sofya Khagi, "From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens: Viktor Pelevin's Consumer Dystopia," *The Russian Review* 67, no. 4 (2009): 573.

had under Yeltsin with the one we have under Putin, I won't be able to do it. Not only because I don't watch television. For this kind of assessment you need a criterion. I guess the right one would be the way the government handles the economy, because its primary function is to take care of the economy. Politics is usually the function of the latter.³⁰⁷

Pelevin's summation of Russia's current political structure is expounded upon at length in his 1999 novel, *Homo Zapiens*. First published in Russian under the title *Generation 'П'*, the novel darkly satirizes post-Soviet commodity culture, while plainly addressing the psychological and societal effects of consumerism. Of the six texts discussed in this study, *Homo Zapiens* offers the most exhaustive and bleak portrayal of tyrannical kitsch. Sofya Khagi has already provided an eloquent and thorough analysis of Pelevin's "techno-consumerist dystopia," in her essay, "From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Zapiens."³⁰⁸ Using her study, the final sections of this chapter will provide an overview of Pelevin's dystopia and focus specifically on the manner in which the author uses the commodification of literature to mark the cultural demise of post-Soviet society.³⁰⁹

In Pelevin's Moscow, media and advertising corporations have replaced the government. As the reader comes to find out, all of the nation's current events and diplomatic proceeding are fabricated. The Institute of Apiculture, Russia's centralized marketing firm and secret government surrogate, generates the content of the country's political affairs for the sake of product placement. The advertising agency scripts and produces all of the national headlines, which it then feeds to major media outlets. Pelevin's grim portrayal of contemporary Russian society reduces the country's actualities to an incessant series of subliminal commercials. *Homo Zapiens* depicts "a

307 Pelevin, interview, 78.

308 Khagi, "From Homo Sovieticus," 560.

309 Pelevin's novel addresses and parodies a breath of contemporary Russian trends (mysticism/the occult) and socio-political issues (Chechnya War), many of which are outside the scope of this study.

surreptitiously totalitarian society in which total control is achieved not by crude force but through saturating the populace with products of mass culture that serve as a subtle tool of social conditioning.”³¹⁰ Pelevin’s oligarchical regime uses television programming not only to disseminate a simulated reality, but also to exercise mind-control. More than homogenizing the collective consciousness and consumerist habits of the nation’s residents, the ubiquitously aired programs obliterate the ontological essence of the country’s population. Enslaved to the television, the post-Soviet society is comprised of a new race of humans, the Homo Zapiens. The Homo Zapiens species spend hours mindlessly flipping TV channels. Their entire existence is defined by

coercive zapping, whereby the television is converted into a remote control for the viewer, is not simply one method among others of organizing an image sequence; it is the very foundation of television broadcasting, the major means by which the advertising-informational field exerts its influence on consciousness.³¹¹

Homo Zapiens are indistinguishable from the television programs they consume; thus, this new species of people can no longer experience subjectivity. As Homo Zapiens, “man hardly exists.”³¹²

Pelevin’s *Brave New World* arises suddenly from the void left by the dissolution of communism. Its modes of control, driven purely by monetary gain, are built on economic models so alien to the majority of the country’s residents that its tyranny remains largely undetectable. Unlike the regimented environment of Huxley’s futuristic London, Pelevin’s dystopia retains all the commonplace hazards of a metropolis. The capital’s landscape shows no conspicuous signs of authoritarian rule; ostensibly, the Muscovites’ greatest challenge is the historical moment itself. Babylen Tatarsky,

310 Khagi, “From Homo Sovieticus,” 561.

311 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 81.

312 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 82.

Pelevin's protagonist, is among the demographic of former Soviet citizens who struggle to cope with their new socio-political environment. As the USSR is collapsing, Tatarsky is completing his bachelor's degree in literature. With no marketable skills or remarkable character traits, Tatarsky is forced to take a job as a kiosk clerk until his friend recruits him as copywriter at Draft Firm, the first of three marketing agencies where the protagonist will be employed.

Homo Zapiens follows Tatarsky in his quasi-revelatory ascent through the ranks of Moscow's advertising world. Relieved to find lucrative employment, the protagonist develops "a mystical, rapturous admiration for his own profession," and forgets about his literary career.³¹³ As part of his professional development, Tatarsky strives to decipher the workings of Russia's post-Soviet marketplace. Hallucinogenic drugs and the spirit of Che Guevara help him tackle this project. Using these unconventional methods, the protagonist unveils the most sinister aspects of the country's economic machine. For Benedikt and Tatarsky alike, however, knowledge does not lead to enlightenment. Rather than stirring his moral doubts, Tatarsky's deconstruction of Moscow's socio-economic order only pushes him to excel at his job, transforming him into a central propagator of Russia's new despotic system of government.

Though fabular elements permeate Pelevin's fiction, his novel is not allegorical. Set in contemporary Moscow, *Homo Zapiens* realistically depicts the commercial practices that define the Russian post-socialist commodity culture of the nineteen-nineties. One of the novelties of this period is the creation of the Slavic copywriter. With the gates to the global marketplace recently reopened, there is an inexhaustible demand for marketing agents. In Pelevin's novel, the Moscow advertising industry stimulates the

313 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 45.

job market, employing every type of social outcast—crooks, racists, perverts—who would otherwise be left without a job. Joining this once marginalized task force, Tatarsky learns to “adapt Western advertising concepts to the mentality of the Russian consumer.”³¹⁴ Given only the vaguest guidelines for his undertaking, and lacking any background or practical experience in his trade, he clumsily compiles slogans from a broad spectrum of sources, such as current and historical events, world literature, pop culture, and Russian folklore.

Tatarsky’s unsophisticated advertisements, such as “Wow! Acapulypse now!” are nothing short of kitsch.³¹⁵ His trite slogan seem to read as a parody until contextualized in Boym’s account of Russia’s post-communist commercial trends:

The new Russian commercials are strange hybrids and reflect a peculiar *ménage à trois*— on the one hand, the postcommunist romance with the West, on the other, the perpetual love affair with old Russia, which often unfolds in that so-called pseudo-Russian style. [...] In post-Soviet Moscow a plastic, second-hand Mickey Mouse faces a full-sized cartoon Gorbachev and Yeltsin, with the Pushkin monument in the background. Near Mickey Mouse vendors sell Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, cheap Ukrainian beer, and hand-made Jesus Christ East Eggs. The post-Soviet marketplace is a display of Russian cultural myths, a jumble of old and new conceptions of prestige and cultural hierarchies.³¹⁶

Boym’s documentation of post-Soviet advertising tropes lends veracity to Pelevin’s satirical prose. Despite the fantastical events that Tatarsky witness as his entrenchment in the advertising industry deepens, much of his everyday experiences—his brush encounters with the mafia, his drug intake, and his predilection for the occult—reflect the commonplace actualities of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Moscow.

314 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 19.

315 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 92.

316 Boym, *Common Places*, 274.

Tatarsky's enters the advertising world while Russia is in "the era of primitive capital accumulation."³¹⁷ This period of initial economic growth is especially profitable for thug-like businessmen who capitalize on the societal chaos of their country. In the aftermath of Russia's political upheaval, local and Western companies exploit the nation's ideological vacuum, promising Russia's demographic stability through consumption. No one benefits from these tumultuous years more than marketing firms, who brand products by manipulating their audiences' psychological need for security. Boym writes that the ads of this period tried to instill a sense of "belonging to an imagined, exclusive community. Instead of sincerity, straightforwardness, and authenticity, post-Soviet commercials appeal to exclusivity and power, and promise protection."³¹⁸ Bridging the linguistic, cultural, and emotional gaps between consumers and the plethora of emerging businesses who seek to turn their brands into household names, the newly founded advertising industry flourishes. Climbing to the top of the economic food chain, the marketing agencies direct their most lucrative strategies at their eager clients, and not at the consumers. Thus, Tatarsky quickly realizes that his only duty as a copywriter is to "screw with the client's brain."³¹⁹ Even early in his career, knowing little about the advertising world, the protagonist clearly senses, but is unfazed by, the treacherous nature of his profession.

The Post-Soviet "Mad Man"

The higher up the corporate ladder Tatarsky climbs, the more deplorable he becomes, and the more indispensable to the authoritarian marketing regime. While the

317 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 18.

318 Boym, *Common Places*, 276.

319 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 18.

advertising industry quickly corrupts the protagonist, the beginnings of his moral demise can be traced back to the moment when he abandons his literary pursuits. Pelevin scripts his protagonist as a thoroughly unremarkable youth. When commencing his secondary education, the protagonist first enrolls in a technical institute in order to dodge army service. At the age of twenty one, however, he reads a collection of Boris Pasternak poems that changes his life; Tatarsky decides to switch out his course of study, and enters the Literary Institute in the hopes of being admitted into the poetry department—a fantasy that is never to become a reality. The first chapter of the novel underscores the mediocrity of the protagonist. He is neither a brilliant academic nor a gifted writer. In fact, Pelevin’s hero is a completely unexceptional product of the Soviet seventies, or Generation ‘P,’ “a carefree, youthful generation that smiled in joy at the summer, the sea, and chose Pepsi.”³²⁰ The youth of that generation experienced the euphoria of Russia’s brief romance with Western commodities, which at the time harmoniously fused with the communist ideology of “eternity.” In that “carefree” era, Tarasky happily imagines spending a lifetime working as a translator. Yet, with the collapse of the USSR, the protagonist finds that the very structure of his reality begins to change:

Something began happening to the very eternity to which he had decided to devote the labors of his days. Tatarsky couldn’t understand this at all. After all, eternity—at least as he’d always thought of it—was something unchangeable, indestructible, and entirely independent of the transient fortunes of his earthly realm. If, for instance, the small volume of Pasternak that had changed his life had already entered into eternity, then there was no power capable of ejecting it.³²¹

Like any good Soviet student, Tatarsky accepts the static “eternity” of the communist regime, a belief that underlies all facets of Soviet life, including his study of the literary

320 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 1.

321 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 3.

canon. During that period, ideology and education are synonymous, and when the former crumbles, the latter falters.

Tatarsky's college education does not cultivate his critical thinking. The mythology of eternity propagated in the Soviet classroom has the same psychological effect as the *seichas* time governing Fyodor-Kuzmichsk: it pacifies anxieties about the future, stymies self-reflection on the present, and valorizes the status quo. The Soviet pedagogical system approached literature with "generic simplicity which permitted the majority of orthodox texts to be classified as didactic fairy-tales [...]." ³²² Thus, the lessons the protagonist learns from his studies, which are predicated on the ideology of eternity, quell him into complacency, and leave him unprepared to deal with the socio-political turmoil of the proceeding decade. Nor does Tatarsky's dogmatic communist education instill him with the ethical imperative to fight for the preservation of the Russian spirit, or its language and literary tradition. Passively watching the communist "eternity" fade from view, Tatarsky does nothing to offset the denigration of Russian culture. As a result, the protagonist has difficulties adjusting to the post-Soviet zeitgeist, and the fast-paced, ever-changing demands of its free market. This transitional moment in the protagonist's biography can be defined as post-apocalyptic in the sense that it marks "the end of a way of life [...] perhaps a system of beliefs—but not the actual destruction of the planet or its population." ³²³ In the aftermath of the apocalypse, Tatarsky finds that he is no longer an ordinary Soviet citizen, but a social outlier. Consoling himself with

322 Sally Dalton-Brown, "Ludic Nonchalance or Ludicrous Despair? Viktor Pelevin and Russian Postmodernist Prose," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 75, no. 2 (1997): 216.

The first line of Pelevin's novel, "Once upon a time in Russia," evokes and parodies this sensibility.

323 Gary K Wolfe, "The Remaking of Zero: Beginning at the End," in *The End of the World*, ed. Eric S. Rabkin et al. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 1.

the works Marina Tsvetaeva, he initially romanticizes his marginalized position, even taking a “certain bittersweet satisfaction in it.”³²⁴

While the post-Soviet job market holds little prospects for a translator of the languages of the peoples of the USSR, Tatarsky ultimately abandons his literary pursuits because of his limited purview: he is unable to distinguish the difference between the ideological “eternity” of communism (*byt*), and the spiritual eternity of literature (*bytie*). Lyudmila Parts argues that Tatarsky’s transformation from an aspiring poet to a copywriter represents the post-Soviet fate of the entire “intelligentsia” class.³²⁵ Yet, even when taking into account his educational background, it is difficult to claim that the protagonist was ever a member of the intelligentsia. According to Parts, the *intelligent* is a person with “a propensity for intellectual pursuit and moral integrity.”³²⁶ Parts overlooks the fact that Tatarsky, like Benedikt, lacks the integrity to be an true representative of the Russian intelligentsia. It is not that the political upheaval destroyed the protagonist’s ethical compass: Tatarsky “had never been a great moral thinker [...]”³²⁷ Any remaining doubts about his status as an *intelligent* are clarified over the course of the novel. Looking back on his college years, he admits that his time at the Literary Institute exposed his lack of artistic talent: “I felt jealous, because I realized I would never learn to manipulate words like that.”³²⁸ The protagonist’s confession reveals his previous artistic pursuits to be exploitative rather than humanistic. The advertising industry slowly exposes the true anti-intellectualism of Pelevin’s hero. By the end of the novel, the protagonist heads a marketing campaign that aims to annihilate the remnants of

324 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 5.

325 Lyudmila Parts, “Degradation of the Word or the Adventures of an Intelligent in Victor Pelevin’s Generation II,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 46, no. 3/4 (2004): 441.

326 Parts, “Degradation of the Word,” 439.

327 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 7.

328 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 106.

the intelligentsia. The only distinction between his undertaking and the “official anti-intellectual campaigns led by the [Stalinist] government that in many cases ended in the extermination of intellectuals” is the methodology.³²⁹ Rather than performing physical executions, Tatarsky targets the intelligentsia with a weapon developed by the post-Soviet oligarchical regime, “teleschizomanipulation.”³³⁰

Thus, the commitment to Russian literature that Tatarsky displayed during his college days proves to be superficial and self-serving. Once he is given a job at Draft Podium he never reads another literary work again. Tsvetaeva is replaced with marketing guidebooks such as *Positioning: A Battle for your Mind*. These “magic books” written by “American shamans” captivate the protagonist the way Pasternak’s verse once did.³³¹ Gainfully employed, he forgets his poetic aspirations. Only once, after a particularly fruitful day in the office, does Tatarsky feel the fleeting urge to compose a sonnet, but “after a couple of minutes [he] discards it as non-functional. It was hard to believe that not so very long ago, he had been wont to spend so much time searching for meaningless rhymes that had long since been abandoned by the poetry of market democracy.”³³² In hindsight, Tatarsky comes to understand that composing sonnets is only worthwhile when time is plentiful. Now, the protagonist abides by a different clock; the pressures of his techno-dystopic environment, where “everything that is most sacred and exalted should be sold for the highest price possible,” make such unprofitable endeavors seem ludicrous.³³³

329 Boym, *Common Places*, 134.

330 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 208.

331 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 17.

332 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 102.

333 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 17.

Russia for Sale

Thus, while Tatarsky fails as a writer, he succeeds as a “creative.” Though the two professions may seem similar, in practice they are antithetical to one another: the former produces art, while the latter destroys it. In the first phase of his career, Tatarsky finds that his education bears a wealth of marketing material. After all, what could convey the essence of the Slavic identity better than Russian literature? Capitalizing on the trope, the protagonist inundates his advertisements with literary quotes and allusions: Griboedov is used in multiple cigarette ads, Tyutchev is cited in a slogan for Smirnoff, Chekhov features in a billboard for The Gap.³³⁴ Not once does the protagonist stop to consider the ethical bankruptcy of his profession. Thinking only about his monetary gain, he hollows out the words of his once-beloved writers, transforming them into kitsch. Tatarsky’s commercials make the booklets produced in Fyodor-Kuzmichsk seem benign. Unlike the booklets, literature in Pelevin’s post-Soviet Moscow only sells as part of a slogan. Chopped up into ads, the Russian canon and its authors are decontextualized, stripped of gravitas, and neutralized. Not only is art commoditized, but it is also used to perpetuate cycles of consumption. While overtly lending an air of cultural sophistication to the consumer product (and appealing to the consumer’s desire for sophistication), latently, such advertisements adulterate the Russian literary cannon.

The appropriation and abasement of literature through advertisements is one of the central brainwashing tools deployed by the techno-consumerist dictatorship. As Khagi notes, “the mounting tawdriness of the tasks to which art is put erodes its ability to function as a refuge from spiritual degradation.”³³⁵ Unlike *The Slynx*, which attests to the endurance of literature despite centuries of authoritarianism, *Homo Zapiens* intimates that

334 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 42-44, 56, 63.

335 Khagi, “From Homo Sovieticus,” 573.

the post-Soviet market economy has already profaned art and the Russian *dukh*. As a result, Russia's national identity is once again in crisis. As discussed in the Introduction, the question of national identity has plagued the country's writers and intellectuals since the founding of St. Petersburg. In *Homo Zapiens*, the problematics inherent to Russia's national identity are presented as insurmountable marketing obstacles.

Mid-way through the novel, Khanin, Tatarsky's second boss, asks the protagonist to produce a five-page report selling the Russian idea. Tatarsky is baffled by the task, and after hours of unsuccessful brainstorming, he decides to seek out metaphysical assistance. Pulling out his Ouija board, he attempts to conjure the ghost of Dostoevsky. Though no specter appears, the Ouija board rattles and jumps in the air, leaving indiscernible scribbles on the paper. The angry apparition of the great antimaterialist writer has no interest in helping the likes of Tatarsky, forcing the copywriter to return to Khanin empty-handed. The protagonist is not the only marketing agent who struggles with the concept. The Russian idea is so abstruse that the Institute of Apiculture has an entire department devoted to it, though it remains unclear whether the efforts of that advertising team are any more fruitful than Tatarsky's.

The Russian idea stumps the marketing agents because it simply does not exist. Pelevin's dystopic society has no national character, not even an ideology. The market economy, which surreptitiously took control of the country after the fall of communism, filled post-Soviet Russia's socio-political and culture fissures with commercial content, replacing the nation's spiritual essence with advertisements. Therefore, the new governmental structure "depends not so much on the power of ideological phantoms to dupe individual human beings as on the self-perpetuating power field of the entire structure in which the humans/cells are functioning as they ought to, whether duped or

not.”³³⁶ Many of Moscow’s advertisement firms have palimpsestically taken over old Soviet government offices, including the Pravda newspaper complex, and the Department of Ideologies.³³⁷ The spatial overlay underscores the similarity of the old and new governments’ authoritarian practices. The oligarchical regime, however, is exponentially more despotic. Its subtle systems of mind-control outmode conventional propaganda. Tatarsky, like many citizens of the former Soviet Union, is ultimately relieved to be free of “the ideological exhaustion of communism.”³³⁸ Yet, in Pelevin’s dystopia, the absence of ideology does not equate to freedom. Creating a virtual politics that is predicated on the demands of the marketplace and manipulating the masses through the media, the newly established pecuniary government has already developed the means by which to exercise tyranny without ideology.

The scope of the government’s control is seemingly limitless, Even subversive activity is generated to stimulate the economy. At The Institute of Apiculture, Tatarsky’s friend Morkovin instructs the protagonist in the most cutting-edge marketing strategies, which utilizes

“new advertising technology reflecting the reaction of market mechanisms to the increasing human revulsion of market mechanisms. To cut it short, the viewer is supposed to gradually develop the idea that somewhere in the world [...] there is a final oasis of freedom unconstrained by the thought of money [...]. It’s profoundly anti-market in form, so it promises to be highly market-effective in content.”³³⁹

Using dissidence as an advertising ploy, the Institute of Apiculture has nullified the threat of countercultural activity in art, literature, and politics, not by quashing it, but by commoditizing it. Transgression, which according to Cresswell contests hegemonic

336 Khagi, “From Homo Sovieticus,” 567.

337 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 61.

338 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 76.

339 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 193.

structures, is converted into a marketing strategy that buttresses the oligarchical regime.³⁴⁰ By obliterating free thinking while retaining the semblance of its affects, the central advertising firm has reduced all human behavior into self-perpetuating consumerist impulses.

The market economy has not only transformed the Russian population into a group of Homo Zapiens, it has also made the very spaces of the country unreal. Khanin tells Tatarsky that the advertising industry is a “business in which the basic goods that are traded are space and time.”³⁴¹ Transgression is made doubly impossible in such a virtual landscape. As Cresswell argues, the transgressive act is inherently spatial—“a crossing of boundaries.”³⁴² Both geography and time in Pelevin’s Russia, however, are completely simulated. With no free agents and no spaces that can be transgressed, there is no hope for a movement to freedom. Thus, the remedy for tyrannical kitsch offered by Jergović, Ugrešić, and even Tolstaya is useless in Pelevin’s totalizing authoritarian dystopia. In a world where nothing exists but the marketplace and subjectivity has been razed, the mnemonic, intimate reappropriation of kitsch is unthinkable, since nothing exists beyond kitsch.

Tatarsky’s unreflective character makes him the perfect propagator of the post-Soviet social order. Pelevin’s tyrannical government controls its demographic in such a surreptitious manner that Russia’s commonplace actualities hardly need to be altered. Though the protagonist discerns and profits from the structure of his country’s new government, he is not immune to its workings. By the end of the novel, Tatarsky’s entrenchment in the system is incontestable: the copywriter becomes the head of the

340 Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 21.

341 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 99.

342 Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place*, 21.

Institute of Apiculture and is imaged into a three-dimensional hologram that ubiquitously appears in commercials and news broadcasts. Yet, even in the early chapters of *Homo Zapiens*, Pelevin portends his protagonist's fate. Shortly after landing his first marketing job, Tatarsky transforms into a conspicuous consumer. He buys a computer "although he has no particular need for it [...]."³⁴³ The protagonist not only loses control over his shopping impulses, but also over his tastes. A few scenes later, he finds himself at a bar and inexplicably orders Smirnoff, "which he usually couldn't stand." In the same scene, Tatarsky is depicted as "a stuffed model of a copywriter nailed to the counter in order to brighten up the decor"—an objectifying image that foreshadows the protagonist's own commoditization.³⁴⁴ Later, when suffering from a bout of depression, he concludes that "there were two ways he could get rid of it—down a hundred grams of vodka, or spend about a hundred dollars on something immediately [...]."³⁴⁵ Like Benedikt, Tatarsky learns to offset his existential angst through consumption. The continuous acquisition of material goods provides him with emotional and psychological stability. Thus, the protagonist not only sells, but also buys into the commercial tyranny. Tatarsky's consumerist habits further testify to the fact that in Pelevin's dystopia "the system is self-perpetuating [...]. Even the highest echelons of power live in the grip of the consumerist simulacra and are unable to break through."³⁴⁶

343 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 44.

344 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 50-1.

345 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 69.

346 Khagi, "From Homo Sovieticus," 574.

“The Three Riddles of Ishtar Have Not Come Down to Us”

By the time Tartasky takes over the Institute of Apiculture, he is both the main perpetuator of the Homo Zapiens species and a Homo Zapien himself. As the head of the central marketing firm, Tatasky is responsible for the maintenance of Russia’s economy, and by extension, its virtual reality. Yet, the protagonist’s specific contribution to the demise of Russian culture and the proliferation of tyranny is suggested by his first name, Bablyen. Tatarsky had always been embarrassed by his given name, which his father claimed to be a composite of two words: the title of Yevtushenko’s famous poem “Baby Yar” and “Lenin.” Regardless of his father’s intentions, the name also serves as blatant allusion to the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel. Whether Soviet or scriptural in origin, “Babylen” evokes the tense, often volatile intersection of literature and politics. This cross-section also happens to define Tatarsky’s profession. Although the protagonist officially changes his name to “Vladimir” at the age of eighteen, all of his Mephistophelian advertising bosses inexplicably continue to call him Babylen. As time goes by, Tatasky resigns himself to both his name and the sinister fate that it seems to have predestined for him.

By the time Tatarsky joins the marketing team at the Institute of Apiculture, his advertisements no longer cite poets. In fact, the protagonist has developed a distaste for literature. Previously kitschifying the Russian canon, he now does away with it altogether. Reviewing a proposal for a Gucci commercial featuring the figures of Pavel Bisinsky, Pushkin, Krylov, and Chaadaev, the protagonist instructs his subordinates to “change the critic for a new Russian, and Pushkin, Krylov, and Chaadaev for another new Russian [...]. It’s time to have done with literary history and think about our real clientele.”³⁴⁷

347 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 160.

Tatarsky's call for the eradication of the Russian literary tradition, and his campaign to exterminate the intelligentsia class signal more than his moral corruption; it suggests that he is the harbinger of Babel-like destruction, the culminating manifestation of the degradation of literature that he had instigated with his first advertisements. Yet, as Tatarsky annihilates Russia's literary heritage, he also precludes the possibility of every fully understanding the market economy to which he is enslaved.

In the second chapter of *Homo Zapiens*, Pelevin warns of the societal ignorance that ensues when cultural texts are lost. Searching for material for one of his first marketing projects, a Parliament advertisement, Tatarsky comes across a pile of old books, relics from his days at the Literary Institute. At that stage in his advertising career, the protagonist still treats these volumes as precious objects, and recalls "with tender warmth" how he salvaged them "from amongst the waste paper they used to be sent to collect after class."³⁴⁸ Among these tomes, he finds a self-published text in a loose-leaf binder titled *Infinity and the Universe*, a history of the ancient world. In the section about Babylon, he reads about the Three Riddles of Ishtar. As the myth goes, when a man solves the Three Riddles of Ishtar, he is allowed to ascend the ziggurat of the goddess and become a Chaldean, her earthly husband. Pelevin later reveals that Ishtar is the goddess of consumerism, and it is she who oversees the post-Soviet oligarchical regime. Tatarsky only learns this information at the end of the novel, when he is himself unintentionally appointed the Chaldean. The protagonist remains ignorant of the fact because "the riddles have not come down to us."³⁴⁹ Not knowing what questions to look for, Tatarsky is not aware that his ascent in the advertising world is equivalent with his ascent of Ishtar's ziggurat.

348 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 24.

349 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, 27.

Thus, in *Homo Zapiens*, there is also a riddle; however, unlike the riddle of the Parliament in *Dancing Arabs* and the riddle of the Marlboro in *Sarajevo Marlboro*, the Three Riddles of Ishtar are implied, but never articulated. In all three texts, the riddle is encountered vis-à-vis a commercial item, namely, a pack of cigarettes; in all three texts, the riddle holds the prospect of revelation, the opportunity for the protagonist to recognize and escape the system of tyrannical kitsch. Yet, in contrast to Kashua and Jergović, Pelevin precludes the possibility of his protagonist ever solving the riddles because they no longer exist. Without knowing the riddles, Tatarsky cannot detect his own worship of the pecuniary goddess, or anticipate his dehumanizing transformation into the living idol of consumerism. Thus, the loss of the Three Riddles of Ishtar is the first sign of the Babelesque destruction that will unfold over the course of novel.

While the central concern of Pelevin's fiction is unquestionably the rise consumerism in post-Soviet Russia, this phenomenon runs parallel to and is synonymous with the collapse of culture and language. The degradation of Russian language and literature is as centrally thematized in *Homo Zapiens* as it is in *The Slynx*. Just like Tolstaya, Pelevin links the deterioration of language to the broader moral and spiritual demise of his country. Rather than creating a vocabulary to signal this corruption, Pelevin textually transcribes an already prevalent contemporary linguistic trend: the anglicization of Russian. The replacement of the творец (writer/creator) with the коридейтор (creative) and the копирайтер (copywriter) is not just a particularity of advertising jargon. Rather, it signals a nation-wide cultural shift in the ontological structure of post-Soviet Russian society. The disappearance of the writer/creator marks not only the dissolution the country's literary and aesthetic tradition, but also the loss of its spiritual heritage: this is a world where the Creator has abdicated or been usurped by a group of demiurge creatives that have no connection with the divine. What is most alarming about this shift is that it is

happening right now. Much like Castel-Bloom's novel, Pelevin's fiction does not forecast the inevitable downfall of society, but reveals that it is already in progress.

Homo Zapiens offers no solutions to reverse or thwart this phenomenon. Even Pelevin seems to have resigned himself to the demands of the marketplace when publishing his novel:

To appeal to the widest target group, both "high culture" and "pulp" editions of the novel were issued by the publishing house Vagrius, with the reproduction of Brueghel the Elder's renowned painting, *The Tower of Babel*. The cover of the mass-market edition shows Che Guevara in a beret with the Nike logo surrounded by Coca-Cola and Pepsi logos.³⁵⁰

The branding strategies used to market *Homo Zapiens* are the same as those scripted in the novel itself, and self-reflexively underscore the realism of Pelevin's seemingly fantastical fiction. By succumbing to the dominant advertising trends of his country does the author yield to the same nihilism that shrouds his novels? Or does Pelevin, like Kashua and Castel-Bloom, exploit the literary marketplace to reach the widest audience possible, and in doing so, offset the advancement of the techno-consumerist dystopia that he scripts?

Khagi, Parts, and Dalton-Brown all argue that Pelevin's bleak fiction neither textually nor metatextually offers a way to transcend the all-encompassing tyranny of consumerism. Yet, Pelevin's interview with BOMB magazine provides key evidence to the contrary. In his exchange with Leo Kropywiansky, Pelevin cites Bulgakov as one of his primary artistic influences, explaining that *The Master and Margarita* allowed him to penetrate the veil of Soviet ideology:

This book was totally out of the Soviet world. The evil magic of any totalitarian regime is based on its presumed capability to embrace and explain all the phenomena, their entire totality, because explanation is control. Hence the term

350 Khagi, "From Homo Sovieticus," 571.

totalitarian. So if there's a book that takes you out of this totality of things explained and understood, it liberates you because it breaks the continuity of explanation and thus dispels the charms. It allows you to look in a different direction for a moment, but this moment is enough to understand that everything you saw before was a hallucination (though what you see in this different direction might well be another hallucination).³⁵¹

Homo Zapiens strives to create a similar effect on its audience. After all, the non-negligible difference in between Pelevin's dystopia and the contemporary reality of post-Soviet Russia lies in mass readership, which still exists in the latter. And while it does, so does the possibility of freedom.

Much has changed in Russia's cultural and political landscape since *The Slynx* and *Homo Zapiens* were published at the turn of the twenty-first century. In light of the socio-political transformations that have occurred in the country just in the last two years, it is possible to argue that Tolstaya's and Pelevin's novels no longer reflect Russia's realities. Nothing, however, is farther from the truth. In response to US and EU embargoes, a new wave of nationalistic fervor is reaching a peak in Russia, and support for Putin's regime is at an all-time high. Most alarming is the manner in which the country's youth choose to endorse Putin's government. Capitalizing on the commercial vacuum created by Western trade restrictions with Russia, a generation of pro-Putin designers and marketing agents has begun to emerge. Many of their brands, selling anything from mass-produced souvenirs to high-end fashion, embed the face of the president on their designs, propagating what they call "Putinverstehar."

Type the term into an internet search engine, and the first hit that comes up is a link to a web page for "Putinverstehar: International Society of Normal People." The

351 Pelevin, Interview, 77.

copywriting for the site, which sells silver rings ornamented with Putin's visage, could have been written by Tatarsky himself:

Putinversteher is a German word of modern coinage, which can be translated as "Putin's Disciples." [...] When you are putting on the Putinversteher ring, you are not only supporting Putin – you are challenging the world of corporations, velvet revolutions, humanitarian bombings, double standards and bearded women. "Putinversteher" is an international society of normal people, refusing to become a minority.³⁵²

This disturbing trend, nothing short of neo-fascist propaganda, provides incontestable evidence of Putin's successful manipulation of Russia's deleterious position in the global economy to bolster support for his oppressive government. The Putinversteher movement lacks all ideological subtlety, and the political charge of its readily consumed commodities is transparent. It is the embodiment of tyrannical kitsch.

Tolstaya and Pelevin's fiction foreshadows Russia's current zeitgeist, which is characterized by its anti-intellectual hegemony, and its institutionalized rhetoric of normalcy. The best litmus test for detecting this despotism is the Russian language itself, which is exploited and corrupted to meet the ideological needs and consumerist demands of the nation. Following the bastardization of the Russian language comes the abuse, distillation, and kitschification of the Russian literary tradition. *The Slynx* and *Homo Zapiens* underscore these unmistakable signs of tyranny. Turned into a consumer item or reduced to advertising material, the Russian artistic heritage is hollowed out and the living flame of the Russian spirit is extinguished. Thus, Tolstaya's and Pelevin's dystopian landscapes are ultimately reflections of their nation's moral and spiritual condition. Whether this world is portended or already realized, and whether the Russian *dukh* is destined to survive or perish, the Word alone can tell.

352 "Putinversteher," Accessed June 7, 2016, http://putinversteher.ru/index_eng.html.

Conclusion

Kitschography is a discipline in the making. Its origins are rooted in larger socio-cultural inquiries about the condition of modernity. Beginning with Zimmel's sociological study "On Modern Life" and Benjamin's cautionary note about the political aestheticization of art in the age of mechanical reproduction; weaving through the works of French cultural theorists such as Bourdieu and de Certeau; extending into the texts of contemporary cultural geographers such as Relph and Cresswell, a line of anxiety can be traced whose source seems to stem from the irreconcilability between modern consumerist practices and authenticity. While countless cultural critics theorized and re-theorized this discrepancy, only a small fraction of them have directly addressed an element central to this dissonance, an element that embodies the gap itself: kitsch. Even when mentioned, kitsch is most commonly treated as an auxiliary consideration of seemingly weightier critical discourses examining commodity culture, spatial constructions, and aesthetic production and reproduction. Though kitsch has been a concern of theorists, philosophers, and historians for over a century, no comprehensive, single-authored volume on the subject exists today. Like Ugrešić's textual quilt, the body of critical writing that constitutes kitschography is comprised of a patchwork of essays and excerpts. Even when taking into account the works of authors such as Boym, Shammas, and Relph, as this project has attempted to do, the scope of scholarship on kitsch does not extend far beyond that which is featured in Dorfles' seminal anthology.

Amalgamating and reviewing these texts, however, it is easy to understand why the development of kitschography as a discipline has been slow coming. Culturally and theoretically, Kitsch precludes analysis. On the one hand, the tchotchkes, bric-a-bracs, and reductive hallmark sentiments that are synonymous with kitsch do not seem to

warrant their own field of academic study; on the other hand, the most pronounced character trait of these affects and objects—an aesthetic and rhetorical vacuum, a lack, a negative—make them impossible to conceptualize in ontological terms. Those who are not deterred by these superficial and intellectual obstacles know that it is these very impediments that make the examination of kitsch not only necessary, but also urgent. Because it is so slippery, so elusive, so difficult to define, because its role in the knowledge-power dynamic is so opaque, because it is ubiquitous and seemingly innocuous, because it stymies self-reflection, kitsch's latent danger to its consumers is that much greater.

Kitsch persists and propagates through its existential and linguistic evasions: it goes undetected and gains force because it cannot be described in the positive. (Perhaps this is why it is so readily discussed alongside death, as Friedlander does.) Thus, the heavy burden and anxiety of the kitschographer is finding the means to theorize the presence of an absence. The ethical imperative of such an undertaking does not lie in proving the existence of this void, but in identifying it and determining what fills it. After all, kitsch does not threaten with nihilism; rather, it disseminates messages that are completely incongruous to its innumerate forms. Mickey Mouse figurines preach the gospel of it's a wonderful life; Coca-Cola provides a taste of carefree American youth culture; Marlboro cigarettes exude the aura of rugged masculine resilience. These vessels for propagating value structures, ideologies, and socio-cultural norms gain agency over their consumers, silently reversing the subject-object relationship. The result is consumption without volition, feeling without cause, expression without intention. Tracing the switch in the subject-object dynamic is one of the only ways to define and detect kitsch. In lieu of an ontological rubric, kitschographers validated their discipline through a phenomenological study of the material world.

While some philosophers like Robert Solomon try to recuperate kitsch by arguing for the value of one of its supposed attributes, such as sentimentality, their writing misrepresents the very nature of kitsch, which has no inherent qualities.³⁵³ Such ontology-based reappropriation efforts limit the scope of kitschography, and keep the discipline on the margins of academic discourse. Kitschography is not the study of a particular type of object or mode of expression, since kitsch does not abide by the mandates of any single genre, aesthetic, or rhetorical form; premised on phenomenology, the discipline examines the effects of objects on the psychologies, experiences, and subjectivities of the people that consume them. Kitschography, therefore, provides the tools for an all-encompassing analysis of our material world, and contests the layman's notion of kitsch, which is reserved exclusively for a matrix of hackneyed sentiments and mass-produced, quotidian commodity goods. The subtle work of this discipline is positing how anything, including precious, auratic products of high culture, could be hollowed out and kitschified.

Today, it is no longer propaganda posters that disseminate the bulk of national ideologies and mythologies. The ever-changing nature of consumerist trends guarantees that commodity culture will continue to feed itself, making it a particularly useful political tool that does not require constant maintenance. As Harvey notes, "ideology and political hegemony in any society depends on the ability to control the material context of personal and social experience."³⁵⁴ Hiding under the veil of transient cultural and monetary worth, kitsch is that medium of control. In order to analyze global, national, and regional systems of governance and oppression; in order to examine how individuals

³⁵³ Robert C. Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49, no. 1 (1991).

³⁵⁴ David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 227.

and communities define their realities; in order to detect the subtle channels of socio-political control propagating hegemonic narratives, it is necessary to study the most basic, omnipresent pathways by which these forces are disseminated: kitsch.

The material readings offered in the preceding chapters suggest but a few applications of kitschography. The necessity of the discipline is made evident by the contemporary literature emerging out of Russia, Israel, and the countries of former Yugoslavia. The authors discussed in this project have chosen to portray the cataclysmic events of their respective regions by focusing on the everyday actualities of the people who suffered at the hands of their governments. The realities of their protagonists are only marginally defined by the political and military conflicts that ensue all around them: physical violence is only the final and most ostensible marker of victimhood. Whether or not these characters are doomed to become casualties, they are already objectified by the material goods that circulate through their domestic spheres. The commercial goods that permeate their spaces mediate their desires, script and re-script their memories, and shape their notions of nation and self. Unreflectively buying into their commodity cultures, they forfeit possession of their identities and fates.

The six authors featured in this project depict the very phenomena that kitschography is conceptualizing. Yet, only a fraction of the flexibility and utility of the discipline can be displayed in the narrow confines of this study. A kitschographic reading of the same constellation of texts could have taken the focus of this project in a number of other salient directions. For example, to a lesser or greater degree, all six works address the ominous effects of Western media and commodity culture on minority groups, and especially on the Muslim demographics, in their respective regions. The authors in this study show kitsch to be the predominant ideological tool for the

objectification and homogenization of the Chechen, Palestinian, and Bosnian Muslim populations in their respective countries. This field of research is not only timely, but also transposable to other literatures, languages, and geographic regions.

The trajectories of the research begun in this project, however, are contingent on the development of its methodology. Kitschography itself must be reassessed to reflect the scope of its subject of study. The old equation must be dispelled. Tchotchke may be kitsch, but kitsch cannot be reduced to tchotchke. Kitsch is not only embedded in the fabric of our daily lives, but it also weaves the material of our reality. Yet, the process of discerning the presence and function of kitsch is anxiety inducing. In his conclusion to *Mythologies*, Barthes best summarizes the experience of critically engaging with the apparatus of kitsch:

The fact that we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless give the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but restore it to a state which is still mystified. It would seem that we are condemned for some time yet always to speak *exclusively* about reality. This is probably because ideologism and its opposite are types of behavior which are still magical, terrorized, blinded and fascinated by the split in the social world. And yet, this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge.³⁵⁵

The difficult task of reconciliation is the work of the kitschographer.

Kitschographers dwell in the badlands of aesthetics, where beauty and truth are distorted into clichés, where the ethical imperative of aesthetics succumbs to propaganda machines, where ideology is neon pink and served in a martini glass. At their hands, the universe of the quotidian and the commonplace is indexed, not in a vacuum, but as a part of a larger and inescapable system of knowledge-power. In other words, it is not the

³⁵⁵ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 159.

objects in and of themselves that become the subjects of scrutiny, but rather their relationship to and effect on politics, culture, and first and foremost, the public and private self. Though often-veiled in theoretical jargon, the study of kitsch is above all else a personal account of the self consciously, mindfully, living with the objects of the world. It is a confession, a queer and humble inversion of the subject-object power dynamic. Our objects own us as much as we own them, this any kitschographer could tell you. The more invested we become in charting the expanses of kitsch's kingdom, the more we begin to recognize that our own internal orientation has been skewed by Hallmark and Hollywood; we become increasingly aware of the degree to which our values and tastes, the foundations of our self identity, have been prefabricated. We peer into kitsch's vertiginous rabbit hole of deferred meaning and empty signifiers, and we get ill. The more one recognizes the endless onslaught of kitsch, the less one believes in truth, in the sublime, in the capacity for aesthetics, both at the level of art and of language, to illuminate. Yet, only by fine-tuning this recognition is it possible to regain agency of the subjective 'I'. This is the ethical imperative of kitschography.

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