



TO MEMORY AND BACK

'In the past decade memory and the manipulation of memory have been posited as one of the central aspects of Balkan conflicts.'

Maria Todorova, 2004

The project *Balkanising Taxonomy* has developed from working with memory that I started in spring 2008. The discourse of memory then dispersed around all the possible fields of research on the Balkans that I had started conducting years ago. I always expected to explore Belgrade's protest of '96/'97 through the joint lens of culture and politics, but the sites of memory I begun to tackle called upon more interests around the subject of investigation and reached far beyond my expectations, mapping a vast framework which I now see as crucial to operate under if to offer an adequate representation of this event.

Memory offers a route into many of the possible themes of my research – archive, nationalism, identity – and I decided to approach them from the material source and then work my way up towards conceptualising the research as a whole. The key development to the research methodology was a product of collaboration with the Constance Howard Centre in Textiles who offered me an opportunity to curate an exhibition of their recently donated collection of Balkan garments and photographs.

I dived into the archive of garments and images, dating from the beginning of the 20th century and generously given to the centre by Jane Page in 2007, getting lost in the wealth of history held by the objects in front of me and the surge of memories I carry as both an individual and a part of Balkan peoples' collective. Both these positions are of significant importance as Maurice Halbwachs (1950) notes – every individual memory is a social phenomenon – hence my own memory input is situated within, and has resonance for, a collective memory.

As the journey through objects' likely locations, dates and authors progressed, I realised that it would take another researcher to deal with this process and I found comfort in her advice that provided a totally different solution to this problem – keep the archive as mysterious as it 'is', because no amount of information would truly disclose its nature.

The archive simply has too many layers and thus it is difficult to grasp it because it is different each time you immerse yourself in it. You start looking for one thing and quickly get distracted with a new found item forming a novel path of the investigation over and over again. Memory is the same: every time you go on a journey to the past some other information pops up, leading you on unknown routes and to seemingly real remembrances. This is because, as Boltanski's theatrical installations point out, *'memories are continuously recreated events, based on the past, but understood through the present (Rebecca Caines, 2004).'*

As the images of people from the past started coming through the scratched negatives, I recalled the memories of my grandmother, adopting her stories as I experienced them first hand, identifying with people on yellowish strips of film, with them as who I used to be. I begun collapsing the boundaries of past and present which revealed what critics of heritage believe, *'that at the heart of the heritage industry and nostalgia culture lies the desire for immediacy in the 'experience' of the past (Susannah Radstone's, 2000).'* I have indulged into this project the quest to re-connect with my ancestors, inspired by the collection given to me.

'...Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.'

Walter Benjamin, 1931

I wanted to go back, but by staying firmly on the ground of now, have a direct link to my heritage. I came to inhabit the persona of the



witness and was able to confidently claim the exact time, place and the circumstance of the women captured on the photographs from the market. I knew if they were buying or selling their frocks, if they had made the garments that they held, or whether they were eyeing them up and down in the hope to fit in to them. It is like I want to freeze them, or freeze myself in the present instead of allowing continuation of time. Huyssen (1995) describes my desire: *'(Memory) represents the attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast – speed information and cable networks...'*

Medi(a)tion

Continuing to think of memory alongside the development of media, Huyssen concludes that memory expresses our society's need for anchoring and the time for reflection in the world of fast travel and technology. The whole conceptualisation of memory has changed over time due to electric media storage techniques which allow us to easily capture the information, but at the same time deprives us from forming a continuum of memory as we are busy shielding ourselves from stimuli we made ourselves.

Our present, saturated by the stories, images, sounds - stimuli, influences us to deal with memory more now than we used to. This boom in, and obsession with, memory studies is, Rebecca Caines claims, drawing on Huyssen: *'a contestation of the informational hyperspace and an expression of the basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality however they may be organised. It is also a reaction formation of mortal bodies that want to hold on to their temporality against a media world spinning a cocoon of timeless claustrophobia and nightmarish phantasms and simulations.'*



I am also convinced that the technology we are surrounded by contributes to the desire to capture memories as the access and use

of cameras and other, now mostly digital means of operation is so ready – made, but I am sure that my professional background in art, in particular filmmaking plays a key role in this view of memory. Not only my references here derive from the education in arts, but my understanding of the sociological world I am constructing also gets built on these pillars. However, there seems to be even more to it:

'This triangulation of looking, figured by the superimposition of images from disparate moments of personal and public history, is in itself an act of memory – not individual but cultural memory. It reveals memory to be an act in the present on the part of a subject who constitutes herself by means of a series of identifications across temporal, spatial, and cultural divides. It reveals memories to be cultural, fantasy to be social and political, in the sense that the representation of one girl's childhood includes, as a part of her own experience, the history into which she was born, the figures that inhabited her public life and perhaps also life of her imagination.'

Marianne Hirsch, 1999

Is it then, as Gordy (2008) argues influenced by Todorova (2004) that the *'excess of culture in the Balkans'* adds to my interest in memory and makes it a classic quest for a female from the region?

I work through the Balkan archive like a filmmaker, imposing a sociological framework with which I am discovering the whole spectrum of importance I haven't considered. Oral history, ideology and representation, creep into the foreground from time to time and withdraw as the new themes fill up my room of collections. Projected snippets show 'the past (that) can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.' (Walter Benjamin, 1940). I am yet to deal with newly arrived discourses lurking in the shadow of my research. Susannah Radstone (2000) notes: *'Though the scales may swing between, say, invention–tradition and reflection / representation, the 'fragile value'*

of memory resides in its continued capacity to hold, rather than to collapse these equivocations.'

This complex nature of memory gave rise to my feeling of presence in the spaces of people portrayed in photographs from many years ago through a combination of the narrative I inherited from my ancestors, the knowledge of history presented to me through my education, the experience of elements of an environment that I could recognize, and the postures and clothing of all on the images. My account is a *'phantom memory'*, a mediated projection of historical clichés and personal assumptions and desires, explains Oksana Sarkisova (2007) where in the absence of narratives structuring the perception of photographed events, I imaginatively interpret visual sources allowing the photographs to become fused with the auxiliary background to produce interpretation, and infuse the visual material with meaning.

So, the more I look the more familiar the faces become – memories of my people pressing so hard that I begin to think that I know the faces, that perhaps they are neighbours, or relatives even. Memory constructed in this way, with cultural narratives, unconscious processes and historical happenings – *'events'*, is how Luisa Passerini (1987) would explain it. Maybe I am just conscious of my own *'expiry*



date' and I am embodying the fear of erasure perpetrated by universal history whose erroneous records are strongly felt throughout the Balkans.

'There is a memory that fades: that is, one fed by personal experience, direct memory. It dies with individual men and women and is replaced by a memory and commemoration that is mediated. The time is coming when there will be no more unmediated memory.'

Zdenka Badovinac, 2007

Indeed, all representation is based on memory, as Rebecca Caines (2000) writes. The photographs I looked at have been taken as a *'moment in time'* and thus have immediacy around their creation, but even and especially with their belatedness, we cannot read them without our memory impacting on the image. *'Re – presentation always comes after'*, Caines states and my feelings throughout the research of Balkan photos confirm this. They are not *'leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real'*. I am not going to have the Balkans revealed correctly to my audience – it is just not possible. *'The past is not simply there in memory, it must be articulated in memory'*, continues Caines as Huyssen (1995) also asserts and I have to commit myself to working with that notion



of responsibility for creation, taking memory work as I am producing art.

Susannah Radstone's (2000) view of memory which developed from the 19th century '*crisis of memory*' is along the same lines: '*...memory came to be understood as actively produced, as representation, and as open to struggle and dispute.*' If I am already conscious of the delusion of my pure presence in the photographs as they were taken, I am aware that I am making up the history I am trying to capture.

'The relationship between living and dead is asymmetrical: we, the living, decide who is heard and who condemned to silence. Historical work is the work of making-present, based on recognition.'

Karl Schlögel, 2008

My sense of self, now discovered as an artist of memory merged with the collective, blurs the understanding of my task as a curator. I suppose to expose the very people who I wanted to preserve and hide from the audience. I am expected to exhibit them caught in their everyday, in a way they might not want to be known as, in case they have better clothes to show off with, more beautiful places they visit and different people in their immediate surroundings. Did they want to be photographed on the market? Who photographed them? Was it their first time and if so, how was this experience for them? The need to talk to them is urgent for furthering my investigation, but it is not going to happen...

Instead, photography as '*an emotionally charged and a topographically precise medium*' (Olga Shevchenko, 2007) allowed for hybrid narratives to emerge and oscillate between the stereotypes and recollections of detail that contradicted accepted conventions.

There are not many photographs of man in this archive; it looks like the interest of the photographer was with people's clothing and

females indeed display a rich canvas of textiles. They carry the cotton or wool, materials not yet cut into the wonderful patterns layered on their bodies. The coats, shirts, skirts, undershirts, waistcoats, scarves, socks, aprons all display a plethora of artwork from stitching and knitting to weaving and embroidery.

A few tall men wear well-crafted hats and elegant overcoats. Layers of clothes, like layers of memory, layers of meaning like layers of history woven into fabric. I place the photos in jars, to preserve them from dust and to add to the understanding of the Balkans as a domestic, peasant environment, opposing properties of the '*wild*' as descriptions of the area. It is a difficult approach – Balkan has to be known as wild, but also domestic and I want to expose these conflicted attributes, so I opt for the inviting and welcoming look associated with a warm home. To compensate and highlight the juxtaposition of hospitable and hostile place, I presented the garments at the exhibition in a very different manner.



'The vocabulary of nostalgia fails to capture the logic of narratives elicited by photographs, although it remains useful for understanding the individuals' ability to suture together discordant mnemonic modalities evoked by domestic photography.'

Olga Shevchenko, 2007

Textures of memories

I move from photographs to caress the garments sneakily taking the protecting gloves off. A desire for direct contact, evoking the 'real', calling on the ancestors through the senses like in Stanislavski's biscuit exercise pays off and the sleeves of dresses in the archive wrap around me as I am dancing with the spirits of the past.



Through this touch I get acquainted with all the garments carefully placed in numbered boxes. As I look at them together, they appear to be the property of one family and at the same time I am not even sure they are from the Balkans as the influence of other cultures in them are distinctive. One shirt looks Indian and the trousers are of Turkish origin – is Turkey in the Balkans or its legacy in fashion, among other things the Balkans was left with after the Ottoman Empire disbanded, kept these trousers alive in the period of time I am witnessing them now and through the site of the clothing encircling me at this moment? I look once again as I remember that the memory of the trousers is actually recent – I own a pair of them myself, so my present memory is complimented by this past. I am encountering past through the present – my trousers are embodiment of this and an illustration of Maurice Halbwachs's (1950) view of memory.

My memories are overlapping, confused and fading as the new emerge and I cannot guarantee the authenticity of any of them – the ones that are leaving nor the ones that are arriving. I am not sure they are mine at all, but I am becoming increasingly conscious of their fragility. I have no control of what is coming or going, but I know how to provoke them. I wonder if doing so intentionally makes a difference to the kind of memories or even transmission of them happening. I also wonder would I react in the same way if I saw these garments elsewhere, or separately, or if I was not insisting on going through this process. So I am seeing this collection through the prism of memory because it is already an existent framework in my mind. The eye sees what the heart wants? But for those of us who were not there when past events occurred, they are accessible only through other people's recollections, their narratives and experiences. The more similar ones we encounter have more truth assigned to them, and the more they are written about, repeated and transferred through generations, becoming a history as this process continues.



The history that has been passed on to me is now in question – I am no longer sure about what I know, but I do have doubts towards what has been presented to me in the west about the Balkans. If I carry some truth about the past, I believe I can safely

say it is in conflict with much I have read and was told about the region in the UK. The Balkans seems to be taken as an ancient, remote, provincial and rural, as a territory fixed in time by historical narratives that blocks any progress. The recent violent events contribute enormously to this established view and I now have to battle with the wrongly described past that even before the Yugoslav wars we, from the Balkans, are yet to even understand and reckon with.

I am trying to identify and specify the area of investigation, so my research gets a geographical boundary, but I have a difficulty with cutting off the old influences or adding on the new countries that have made themselves part of the European Union – a western aspiration that is somehow still separate/ distanced from the East of Europe. If my project includes the exhibition of Balkan objects, I need to make sure that a Turkish blouse is made in Turkish fashion, worn in the Balkans or made with the material from there. The more I question and discover, the more questions arise and the less I know. Nationalism creeps into mind and my research is getting another layer...



How to be certain about the garments then? Do I attribute a republic as where the garment is from or instead on the card next to the object, attribute it to the minority who would wear it? Do I call the object by the name it had at the time or by how we would now? In whose language? Is the year of its make or the year it was worn of

most importance for this collection? Would any of this information help the audience to understand the Balkans better anyway? I have heard, witnessed, participated in, watched, downloaded, read and transcribed numerous papers produced by many academics that specialise in the Balkans and it did not look to me like they understood it, so why contribute to the confusion with laboratory data on the examined material? Instead, I decided to try and erase it, the same way I often feel Balkan is rubbed out and excluded from the global history. I ignored the accepted paradigm under which Balkan is examined and moved on from the desire to classify and taxonomise in hope that I'll know it better. I am closing it up, sheltering from the foreign influence, applying the western strategy to 'the other' and by doing so, revealing exactly that – the methodology behind which the Balkans is understood.

Exposing the strategy, questioning the understanding is what I wish to start with in my research and I used the project Balkanising Taxonomy to begin the practice of this. I placed the garments in black boxes and hung the boxes along the gallery walls. Black is inclined to represent total erasure or total form and the sumptuous colour of retrospection and nostalgia, claims Mark Prince (2008) in relation to the statement of maximum contrast against the white cube. The Balkans is often the exact opposite of what is expected and I need to stress this, even though whenever it shows, the western de-codifier would not let go of her/his embedded image of Balkan 'wildness' and s/he will support it with a classic addition of chaos where Balkans sits in the western mind. S/he would not think of this understanding as illogical, but ascribe irrationality to the object of investigation itself – to the Balkans.

'Black is cast as an all-purpose emotive backdrop, a memory of its previous content', writes Prince 'Blank, empty and dry... black depths are a metaphor for hidden sound.' My hollow boxes evoked all that, said the public shyly peeping through the peepholes which '...function as escape valves from the static, information-free world' and

are the only source of access to the garments. No magnifying glass, no reflectors, no explanations on the walls, but thoughts of writers and theorists I stumbled across throughout my research. A mystery of the Balkans enhanced to the mystery of how it is perceived. The light barely illuminating the clothing inside the boxes sparks ideas of what could be there, but does not allow for statements to be made. You feel you should look, but do not know what for and as long as we start from there, we might be on an equal footing – the Balkans and the West.

'There is a sense of necessary release. It is as though we have groped our way out of the glacial time of the paintings, through the black tunnel of the peepholes, into sudden bursts of bright uncontained life, our eyes having to forcibly readjust to the light.'

Mark Prince, 2008

And just before I let the public into the space, the ladies who work at the centre walked in. 'Ah, the coffins', said Jan and my face bore a long grin... As I am seeing in the archives whatever I bring with myself from the past, she is seeing in the gallery whatever modality she has with her...

Cultural and collective memory

Memory work is directed towards practices of collective and self-transformation. I am trying to understand myself and figure out how we got here, to take the Balkans the way we do in the West. I am regularly switching the we to me – me at the West and me in the Balkans, accepting that my memory of the Balkans is as cultural and collective as my memory of the perception of 'Balkanness' here, in the UK, which is cultural and collective too.

Collective memory is shaped by national and historical memory and mine is split in two – both pushing their thresholds and slipping into the other, but even though each individual memory is influenced by

the collective, it is different, it is unique. Furthermore, as cultural historian Stuart Hall (1999) considers, collective memory is as selective as history is, so I am choosing what to remember from one or the other side... I also perform cultural recall and 'in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully contrived', records Mieke Bal (1999): 'Because memory is made up of socially constituted forms, narratives, and relations, but also amenable to individual acts of intervention in it, memory is always open to social revision and manipulation. This makes it an instance of fiction rather than imprint, often of social forgetting rather than remembering.'

Being away from one culture that I was part of and coming to another, I haven't been in, my interest in memory feels like 'a response to and a symptom of a rupture, a lack, an absence' as it is for Carol Berdenstein (1999). However, I am not missing anything as 'there is no master narrative to forever fix the meaning of a historical event. Neither is there a subject of history to make experience of it', states Boris Buden (2007) and insists that what we have instead is cultural memory which never recalls the event in its alleged original meaning, but rather through different forms of its cultural articulation. It is this articulation that I must find in the attempt to represent the protest in Belgrade in '96/'97 through, and as my research.



My memories of masses and myself walking through the streets during this 'winter of discontent' are combined with body memories which are culturally inflected narratives – my body and a body of a mass have separate narratives that intersect at times. Even though these memories are cultural, they are not lies as Sturken (1999) notes, but *'reflections tied to other images produced and circulated within the culture.'*

Quoting Alon Cofino, Maria Todorova (2004) links collective memory to the nation: *'...an exploration of a shared identity that unites a social group...whose members nonetheless have different interests and motivations'...How did people internalize the nation and make it in a remarkably short time an everyday mental property – a memory as intimate and authentic as the local, ethnic, and family past'...* 'the crucial issue in the history of memory is not how a past is represented but why it was received or rejected'.

In the case of Serbia, there is desperation to move on, but aggressively – not only continuing the manner of recent past, but by eradicating 50 years of peace within communism before that too. Societies develop not so much through remembering the past as they do through forgetting it and in Serbia this practice is prominent and fuelled by national myths and legends. *'When memory is erased in one local situation, this helps to create at the same time a false picture of a fixed global identity'*, notes Zdenka Badovinac (2007) and I wonder if the history at the Balkans itself is getting modified, why Balkan people insist on being taken correctly in the journals of the west?

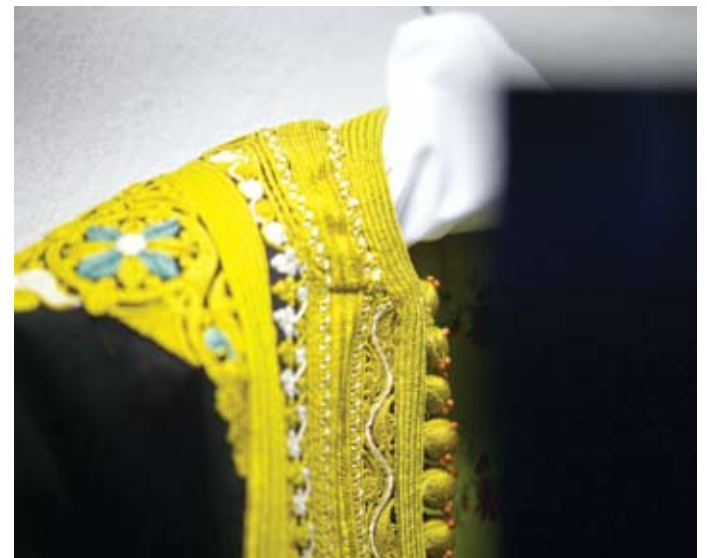
'Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate...There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism...barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.'

Walter Benjamin, 1940

The system of canonical history seems false on both sides and we can continue it by blaming each other, even though the glimpses of disappointing trajectories revealed in the works of intellectuals we appreciate: Benjamin, Freud, Baudelaire and Proust. As we look at the images, the people in them look back at us, but through multiple layers of eyes, our vision is blurred. So, memory should be deciphered, not understood as a lost reality to be rediscovered.

'Researchers interpreting the memorial traces of individual or collective sufferings and abuse do so not only to honour history's victims, dead and alive, but in the hope that memory can vanquish repetition. Moreover, whereas books and bodies can, and continue to be burned, any attempt to distort memory arguably leaves its traces in the form of interpretable 'silences and forms of forgetting' (Passerini, 1983) which, once seized, constitute the memory of and the grounds for resistance.'

Susannah Radstone, 2000



Is the theft of electoral cards or the silencing of the voices that chose the new government what made the people of Belgrade march in protest in '96/'97 or had the dictatorship by then neglected so many memories and revived the ones we did not want to identify with? It was probably a mix of these and more, but the sheer attempt to restructure the history was what put the revolution in action. We seem to be happy to amend it in the everyday, but a progressive call for adjusting the past according to the present could not go ahead...



'If it is true that every generation writes history anew, then that means there is no automatic transfer from generation to generation and that changed conditions find expression in forms of historical interest and conceptions of history. Naturally the conception of history of a generation which has not gone through war, nor through disputes with the wartime generation, but which is shaped by the new circumstances – a peace which has lasted a lifetime or immigration stretching across several generations – looks different.'

Karl Schlögel, 2008

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