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Nosferatu in Sarajevo. Searching for Vampires during the Siege in Karim Zaimović's Short Story "Čudo neviđeno"

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Among contemporary Bosnian writers whose biography and literary work had been indelibly marked by the 1992-1995 war of independence, Sarajevo-born author Karim Zaimović (1971-1995) is without any doubt one of the most representative, considering his tragic fate and the peculiarities of his narrative production. The son of famed painter Muhamed (1938-2011) Karim was among Sarajevo's leading young intellectuals during the late 1980s, together with relevant figures such as writers Miljenko Jergović and Semezdin Mehmedinović; in particular, he rose to prominence thanks to his essays about comics as an art form, which he published since early adolescence in influential local journals. Zaimović's profound knowledge of Western comics – which were principally distributed since the 1970s in then-Yugoslavia by the Strip Art Features rights company, owned and managed by Sarajevan publisher Ervin Rustemagić – and his interest in the tropes of genre fiction greatly influenced the short stories he started to write as war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sarajevo was besieged. These stories, which the author mostly read aloud between 1993 and 1994 during the radio program *Jozif i njegova braća* ("Joseph and His Brothers") he hosted on Radio ZID Sarajevo—an independent station founded in 1992 by academic and lawyer Zdravko Grebo (1947-2019) as a way to resist war and nationalism—portrayed life in the besieged city in a darkly surreal way, mixing, as noted by critic Fatmir Alispahić, the factual style of investigative journalism and historical storytelling with elements of horror and science fiction. [1] Such features characterize the majority of Zaimović's narrative works, which were printed posthumously in the 1997 collection *Tajna džema od maline* (The Secret of the Raspberry Jam), since the author died in August 1995 after being hit during one of the last mortar attacks on the city. While Zaimović's figure is currently remembered as a symbol of the incommensurable human and cultural damages left by the conflict, it is interesting to analyze the characteristics and purposes of his production, which make it deeply innovative in the Bosnian literary canon.

First of all, we may link the author's combination of historical-documentary realism and escapist fiction to the definition "historiographic metafictions," coined by Linda Hutcheon for those literary works underlining the socially-politically constructed nature of official historiographic narratives by self-reflexive and parodical means, which she identifies as distinctive of postmodern literature. [2] As suggested by

Alispahić, we may see how Zaimović mainly employed such stylistic devices to deconstruct and ridicule the nationalist ideologies that had led to the 1990s wars, as proven by the eponymous short story *Tajna džema od malina*, which farcically describes the breakup of Yugoslavia as the outcome of a millennia-long feud between secret organizations over the recipe of a legendary raspberry jam (said to have been originally in possession of Josip Broz Tito). A further link between Zaimović's production and postmodernism has been proposed by critic Almir Bašović, who has linked the author's amalgamation of realism with invention to the fact that his stories were mostly broadcast on radio, thus interpreting them as sarcastic ponderations about the media's claims of veracity. [3] Bašović has also described the author's frequent use of uncanny elements linked to horror fiction as a bleak satirical way of depicting the monstrous reality generated by the conflict; more precisely, by apparently keeping combat in the background while focusing on supernatural events that allegedly took place in the besieged city, Zaimović implicitly expressed an ironic feeling of "nostalgia" for normal peaceful times, when fear and terror were triggered only by the imaginary situations depicted in books and movies and not by the concrete dangers of war, which eventually turn out to be the scariest thing of all. [4] Additionally, we could interpret the author's superimposition of genre fiction clichés onto Sarajevo's urban reality as a way to ideally save the city from war destruction by providing some of its most representative landmarks with new imaginary identities, albeit rooted in local cultural background.

We may choose as a convincing example Zaimović's short story *Čudo neviđeno* (i.e., "Unseen Miracle"), in which the author described a fictionalized version of himself in the act of hunting down a vampire who is said to have been haunting Sarajevo since the days immediately before the First World War. The story was probably conceived by the writer after reading the 1972 essay *In Search of Dracula* by Radu Florescu and Raymond T. McNally, a translated copy of which is currently conserved among Zaimović's personal belongings at the Museum of Literature and Theatre Arts in Sarajevo, with a handwritten epigraph reading "July 23, 1992." The plot starts from a tragic episode that actually happened in the early phase of Sarajevo's siege, i.e., the bombing of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina – housed until then in the building known as Vijećnica, Sarajevo's former City Hall – on 25 August 1992, which prompted librarians and citizens to save the library's historical collection from the ensuing fire while being constantly targeted by snipers; in such circumstances, the author's narrating alter ego enters in possession of a semi-burnt book dating back to 1915, penned by a Habsburg-era civil servant named Dobroslav Mihčić, who chronicled in it his long fight against a vampire entity known as "Kabal." According to the book, the vampire entered the body of Karl Josef Hirschfitz, an Austrian military officer who started to massively kill Sarajevans by night since 1913; however, just before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Mihčić succeeded in turning the vampire inoffensive and temporarily hid his body before being killed in the subsequent world conflict. As the author soon finds out, the vampire had been slumbering for almost a century before being awoken by a falling grenade in 1992 and now is again on the loose; therefore, he decides to find and definitely stop him.

The story contains all the features that have been identified as distinctive of

Zaimović's production. First of all, we may see how the narration, despite apparently centering on the vampire storyline, actually depicts the ongoing siege as the plot's main driving force and source of fear. As a matter of fact, the author reminds the reader that everything started with the 1992 library fire, thus stressing the cultural losses it caused, as we can see in the opening paragraphs:

> After the great fire of the Vijećnica, the classification of those books that had somehow escaped the flames showed that it was possible to find, in that former monument to the written word, a certain number of titles that, besides their author, only the one who had taken them into custody knew. […]. Fire has destroyed documentation […] and we can now just imagine […] all those unknown books […] which the former University Library had once preserved. [5]

The conflict is then subtly but constantly referenced during the whole story, as the narrator mentions reading Mihčić's chronicle to "kill time and diminish fear in the nights of that first summer of war, made restless by the detonations of grenades." [6] Similarly, he depicts the devastation caused by bombs falling on Hirschfitz's hiding place, thus prompting the vampire's return: "Full of dust and moisture, it appeared to have been left untouched for decades if not for the great hole left by a grenade that had fallen on the roof at the very beginning of the war." [7] Meanwhile, critic Nehrudin Rebihić has also pointed out that the vampire character in the story clearly appears to be an embodiment of the war evil that cyclically affected Sarajevo during the 20th century, given his appearances in the fatal years of 1914 and 1992; [8] this is also suggested by Mihčić describing his struggle against Hirschfitz as meant to "bring back peace to our beautiful city". [9] However, we can see that Zaimović's use of the main clichés linked to horror fiction actually informs the story even on a more complex level.

In particular, it is interesting to note that the author re-employed the "found manuscript" trope – which has characterized horror fiction since its inception, such as in Jan Potocki's 1805-1847 frame novel *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* – to allegorically depict not only the damages brought by the besiegers to Sarajevo's cultural heritage but also the creative principle mostly driving his stories, that is, the mutual intertwining of literary fantasy with facts. For example, by describing his literary alter ego as obsessed with Mihčić's book – thus eventually choosing to take his place as Hirschfitz's adversary – and by naming the vampire entity as "Kabal" (which may be understood as a reference to the Kabbalah, i.e., the Jewish mystical doctrine interpreting the universe as a direct emanation of the biblical texts), the author depicts reality as determined or transformed by the fictional world of books. Meanwhile, the interplay between actuality and fiction is further emphasized by the fact that the author inserted in the story his real-life friends and members of Sarajevo's cultural milieu as characters, such as writer and diplomat Ivan Lovrenović – who is said to have originally given him Mihčić's chronicle – or Radio ZID deejay Adi Sarajlić, depicted as helping him in obtaining Mihčić's personal diary with the

chronicle's missing conclusion. Furthermore, this proceeding also consists of the already mentioned transfiguration of besieged Sarajevo's topographic reality, as suggested by the fact that the vampire's hideout is said to be in the building of the Napredak cultural association; such a location appears to be particularly relevant, since the building also hosts the experimental theatre institution Kamerni Teatar 55, whose crew went on to perform even during the siege under the direction of playwright Gradimir Gojer.

However, the "found manuscript" trope and the recurring presence of excerpts from different fictional documents significantly put Zaimović's story in relation with what is traditionally perceived as the quintessential vampire novel, that is, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), whose plot is related through heterogeneous textual materials, such as letters, diary entries, and newspaper articles. As *Čudo neviđeno* openly references *Dracula* – since the narrator first naively assumes that Mihčić's chronicle is a work of pure fiction, "clearly written under the influence of Bram Stoker's classic novel" [10]– the partially similar textual structure may suggest some further connections between the two works, thus expanding our critical interpretation of Zaimović's story and its relation to Bosnian cultural history.

More precisely, we would suggest that *Čudo neviđeno* apparently reverts the exoticist prejudices linked to *Dracula* and in particular to its 1922 silent film adaptation *Nosferatu* to reflect upon the ties linking Bosnia to the historical heritage of the Habsburg empire and to the cultural notion of *Mitteleuropa*. This peculiar term has been mostly employed with two different meanings: the first one, expressed by Friedrich Naumann's 1915 eponymous political program, consists of the pan-Germanic imperialist view presenting Central and Eastern Europe as territories of colonial-like expansion, which greatly determined the course of the two world wars; [11] the second one, linked to the specific Austrian cultural discourse, designates a fantastic-nostalgic view – or even a "mythologic", to quote Italian Germanist Claudio Magris [12] – of the pre-WWI multi-national Habsburg empire as a cosmopolitan and civil society, [13] albeit conservative and decaying, which authors such as Joseph Roth (1894-1939), Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), Franz Werfel (1890-1945) and Robert Musil (1880-1942) variously depicted in their works. In our comment, we will refer to both of these meanings. In particular, we could connect Naumann's view to Western fears about a possible spread of Eastern Europe's supposed barbarism and violence at the turn of the 20th century which recent studies have connected to *Dracula*. As a matter of fact, in the novel Dracula's home region, Transylvania, symbolizes a generic and backward "East" still dominated by superstitions and magic, which threatens to contaminate British society through the arrival of its vampire ruler in the cities of London and Whitby; [14] such a perspective may be put in relation with Naumann's imperial condescending perception of non-German populations residing in the territories that Germany needed to annex, exploit and "civilize", implicitly protecting itself from their alleged primitivism. [15] This vision apparently also informs *Nosferatu*, the unauthorized loose film adaptation of Stoker's novel, which Expressionist director F. W. Murnau (1888-1931) set in a typical German urban environment clearly influenced by the aesthetics of the 1815-1848 Biedermeier period; interestingly, Claudio Magris has

pointed out that the conservative artistic taste usually linked to Biedermeier were also employed, often ironically, by the literary promoters of *Mitteleuropa*'s second meaning in their depiction of the apparently immutable mentality of Habsburg society. [16] The filmmakers' change of setting – which is mostly explained as an unsuccessful subterfuge to avoid paying rights to Stoker's widow [17] – could be interpreted as a way to depict German society as menaced by the destructive influence of its Eastern neighboring populations, symbolized by the unholy soil that the vampire has brought in his coffin from "the land of thieves and specters" [18] to spread a plague epidemic (which could be understood as an depiction of the Great War ensuing from the Eastern Question-related tensions). Such a perspective could also be corroborated by the fact that *Nosferatu*'s main producer and designer, occultist artist Albin Grau (1884-1971), allegedly took inspiration for the film while serving in the German Army on the Serbian front, where a peasant told him in 1916 that his father was a vampire; [19] therefore, the vampire figure apparently stands for the "Eastern Other" whose violence, epitomized by the killing of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, was deemed both by German and Austrian nationalists as the main cause of the world conflict and the subsequent end of the pre-war society nostalgically evoked in the literary works pertaining to the second interpretation of the *Mitteleuropa* concept. Such a vision could also be rooted in the fact that most of the Western notions about vampire folklore derived from reports gathered by the Austrian army between 1725 and 1732 in northern Serbia and Oltenija (which the 1718 Treaty of Passarowitz assigned to Austria) about the local custom of exhuming the bodies of supposed "vampires" to definitively kill them; [20] significantly, these accounts were compiled when the Habsburg empire started its infiltration in the Balkan peninsula, which was to culminate in its rule over Bosnia-Herzegovina between 1878 and 1918.

Therefore, it is interesting to note that Zaimović's story seems to overturn such viewpoints by portraying the vampire as an Austrian officer, thus apparently reconnecting to those historical perspectives that depict the Habsburg administration of Bosnia by focusing mostly on its exploitative and colonialist-type aspects; [21] this is overtly suggested by the fact that Mihčić's chronicle presents Hirschfitz as a "colonial officer". [22] However, it would be wrong to restrictively interpret *Čudo neviđeno* as a sort of anti-colonialist condemnation of the Austrian rule in Bosnia. Instead, the fact that the author chose as the vampire's main antagonist Mihčić, a bureaucrat – that is, according to Magris, the literary figure mostly employed to depict the enduring hierarchic values of late Habsburg society [23] – apparently puts the story in relation with the second meaning of the *Mitteleuropa* concept. By presenting his literary alter ego as a continuator of Mihčić's fight in present times, it seems that the author implicitly stated that even the historical heritage of the Habsburg period was a constituent part of the composite Bosnian cultural identity. Considering the fact that during the 1990s the cosmopolitan legacy of the Habsburg empire was popularized as an antecedent of the political program of the newborn European Union – thanks also to writers such as Milan Kundera (1929-2023) and György Konrád (1933-2019), who re-employed the second meaning of *Mitteleuropa* as a common political-cultural sensibility [24] – such a stance could also be interpreted as a claim of Bosnia's cultural

parity with other European countries.

Anyway, the story's open ending seems to implicitly reaffirm that its main message pertains to the tragic inescapability of war reality. The fact that the narrator states that he is still looking for Hirschfitz, i.e., the embodiment of war itself, overturns the usual narrative schemes of escapist genre fiction, which, according to critic John G. Cawelti, needed to reassure the reader by re-establishing an initial situation of normality after adventurous or horrific vicissitudes. [25] Therefore, the undetermined conclusion of Zaimović's story seems to imply that war excludes a full return to a normal life for those who have experienced it. Such an interpretation of this feature –which characterizes most of the stories published in *Tajna džema od malina* – also appears to be tragically stressed by the collection's untitled last story, which paradoxically described the author as being killed and remained without a conclusion because of Zaimović's actual premature death.

Despite the interruption which war caused in the writer's life and work – significantly suggested by the story's unfinished last sentence – Sarajevo is still cherishing Zaimović's memory and exploring his creative legacy, as proven by theatre director Selma Spahić's adaptation of his stories as a stage play in 2013 [26] and by the efforts of the Museum of Literature and Theatre Arts to preserve his works, mostly epitomized by the 2023 exhibition of his personal writings organized by Dr. Ifeta Lihić, who also digitalized them; [27] we must also remember that in 1996 the author's family has established a foundation which honors his memory by assigning every year a scholarship to young emerging Bosnian artists. [28]

Notes

1. Fatmir Alispahić, "Intermedijalnost u prozi Karima Zaimovića", August 12, 2005 (see: https://fatmiralispahic.ba/2005/08/12/intermedijalnost-u-prozi-karima-zaimovica. All of the Internet links have been accessed for the last time on April 14, 2025). ↩
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3. Almir Bašović, "Rat i jeza u prozi Zilhada Ključanina, Irfana Horozovića i Karima Zaimovića", *Bosanskohercegovački slavistički kongres* 2 (2022): 161. ↩
4. Ibid. ↩
5. Karim Zaimović, *Tajna džema od malina* (Sarajevo: Buybook, 2021), 59 [translation by. E. D.]. ↩
6. Ibid., 61. ↩
7. Ibid., 73. ↩
8. Nehrudin Rebihić, "Koraci strukturalno-naratološkog čitanja proznog teksta: na primjeru pripovijetke *Čudo neviđeno* Karima Zaimovića", *Godišnjak Bošnjačke zajednice kulture 'Preporod'* 1 (2015): 439. ↩
9. Zaimović, 68. ↩
10. Zaimović, 60. ↩
11. Ksenija Vildmar Horvat, Gerard Delanty, "Mitteleuropa and the European Heritage", *European Journal of Social Theory* 11 (2008): 204. ↩

12.]Claudio Magris, *Il mito absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore,1988), 14. ↩
13. Vidmar Horvat, Delanty, 211. ↩
14. Matthew Gibson, "Bram Stoker's Dracula and the Treaty of Berlin (1878)", in: M. Gibson (ed.), *Dracula and the Eastern Question* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 69-70. ↩
15. Vidmar Horvat, Delanty, 208. ↩
16. Magris, 47. ↩
17. Yuri Garcia, "Constructing the Vampire Myth in Cinema: A Short Analysis of *Nosferatu* (1922), *Dracula* (1931) and *Dracula* (1958)", *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov* 14 (2014): 118. ↩
18. F. W. Murnau, "Nosferatu," posted June 18, 2015, by Best Classics, You Tube, 1 hour, 28 min., 11 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCT1YUtNOA8, minute 00: 08:08. ↩
19. Lotte H. Eisner, *Murnau* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1973), 109. ↩
20. Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New York: Yale University Press, 1988), 5. ↩
21. Clemens Ruthner, "Habsburg's Only Colony? Bosnia-Herzegovina And Austria-Hungary, 1878-1918" *SEEU Review*. 13(1): 2-14. ↩
22. Zaimović, 68. ↩
23. Magris, 22. ↩
24. Vidmar Horvat, Delanty, 213. ↩
25. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance. Formula stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago-London : The University of Chicago press, 1976), 5-9. ↩
26. N. Kreševljaković, "Tajna džema od malina – nova formula", *Al Jazeera Balkans*, September 27, 2015 (see: https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/culture/2015/9/27/tajna-dzema-od-malina-nova-formula). ↩
27. "Autorska izložba Ifete Lihić "Karim Zaimović – pogled u svemir" i Festival stripa u Muzeju književnosti i pozorišne umjetnosti BiH", *Urban Magazin*, July 27, 2023 (see: https://www.urbanmagazin.ba/autorska-izlozba-ifete-lihic-o-karimu-zaimovicu-i-festival-stripa-u-muzeju-knjizevnosti-i-pozorisne-umjetnosti-bih/). ↩
28. "Dodijeljene stipendije Fondacije *Karim Zaimović*", *PreporodInfo*, January 11, 2023 (see: https://preporod.info/bs/article/37340/dodijeljene-stipendije-fondacije-karim-zaimovic) ↩

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