(An)Archive
Childhood, Memory, and the Cold War

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1. Who Do I Remember For?

Memory as Genre and Dark Pleasures of Trauma Witnessing

Petar Odak

There is a lot written on trauma-witnessing and childhood memories, very often in tandem. I am entering this discussion by engaging with two questions that have not been addressed extensively within the field of memory/trauma studies: (1) In which ways and from what places are memories being structured even before they come to be 'our' memories? In other words, can we talk of memory as a genre?; and (2) What kinds of dark pleasures are derived from trauma-witnessing—both from the side of the witness-teller and from the side of the listener? Finally: How are these two questions connected, and what does their intersection tell us about the possibilities and limits of memory-writing? This chapter is very personal; for, in it, I try to grapple with my own uneasiness when faced with these questions in the context of a memory-writing workshop. It is also a chapter that tries to contextualise its conclusions within the wider frame of memory-writing processes of different kinds.

Although I did not really know what to expect from something called a 'memory-writing workshop', I was surely intrigued by the concept. The event happened in September 2019 in Riga and brought together participants from different cultural/geographical and professional backgrounds. Our shared context was the Cold War or, rather, our

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common denominator was the fact that the Cold War and/or the post-Cold-War world had impacted our childhoods, in all the ways a historical period of that kind of varied political intensity and of that temporal and spatial span can exercise over everyday lives of children and young adults. To this, we should also add that, as a historical marker, the Cold War is fundamentally heterogeneous and somewhat evasive; in other words, any attempt to delineate its political, geographical, and temporal contours (including its afterlives) and, following that, to detect its influence over one's life, is inevitably fundamentally relative. It is necessary to take these remarks into account to fully understand the memory-writing that happened in a hotel in Riga. To summarise the process: during this three-day workshop, we were each invited to write and share three memories. No limitations were specified as to the content or the style of the written memories. The only request was that we write them in the third person.

It was certainly an enriching experience. The memory-writing made me both look into myself to seek for significant memories and, immediately afterwards, or maybe even simultaneously with the processes of memory-seeking and memory-writing, to reflect on the memories chosen and on my reasons for choosing them. Is my first encounter with a huge, shiny, and colourful supermarket really one of my most intense experiences? Or is it just an experience I am expected to have, taking into account that I grew up in the late-socialist and post-socialist timespace? (And here I am assuming, just for a moment, that there is a way to distinguish between these two: my own 'authentic' process of remembering and those seemingly imposed social expectations that surround and shape my process of remembering; I will get to this in more detail later on.) Continuing with this line: Am I really so strongly affected by that one particular traumatic memory of the Yugoslav war, which I shared with other participants? Or was I just catering to what I assumed were other people's expectations as to what should constitute my most important memories? If yes, why did I assume that in the first place? More broadly, why do we tend to assume that traumatic memories are the ones that marked us the most—in this case in relation to the Yugoslav Wars, or the Cold War more generally—and why are we so eager to hear other people's traumatic memories? Let me put it this way: should my most intense memories necessarily

be tied to the Yugoslav war, post-socialist transition, the rise of right-wing nationalism, and other traumatic events and/or events widely considered to be 'historical'?

Because, maybe, my most intense memories are more or less the same as the most intense memories of people who grew up in seemingly peaceful Western democracies—of a toy, a Walkman, a desired piece of clothing, a birthday party. However, maybe identifying memories that are (at least to some extent) trans-cultural comes with a price, possibly causing me to lose some of my identity or even some of my subjectivity. Also, to what extent is this my choice at all? Finally: What is the relationship between personal history and social history here? By dealing with all of these mutually implicated questions, I will try to unpack the very process of memory-writing. It is always, simultaneously, a process of writing our own personal histories and of retrospectively projecting a teleology through which we explain/understand ourselves today. I also want to account for the gains and the pleasures derived on both sides of this process: by me, the witness-teller, and by the others, my fleeting audience, who listened to my memories, especially the dark and the traumatic ones. Another very important remark: although my audience was, indeed, of a fleeting kind, it stood there in the name of a wider, abstract, nameless, but unquestionably omnipresent audience—one towards which I feel a certain kind of obligation—surely more by necessity than choice.

Therefore, this chapter will be arranged around two questions that imposed themselves on me during the memory-writing process in the Riga workshop: (1) What constitutes a 'significant' memory? and (2) What attracts us to each other's traumatic memories? Although these two questions might seem somewhat far from each other, they are deeply connected, as they both try to ask something very fundamental about the nature of memory and the process of remembering.

I will structure this text through a series of my three memories—it is somewhere during this process that the idea for the essay-turned-chapter emerged, as is clearly visible from the third written memory (or, more accurately, the self-reflective take on the previous two written memories) I shared during the workshop. On a more subtle level, which I will recount and explicate below, it is possible to trace a trajectory from my first memory through the second one, and on to the last one—a

trajectory that registers my own affective shifts during the workshop process.

First Memory: Ice Cream in Trieste/Palmanova/Graz

The first memory I shared was entitled 'Ice-Cream in Trieste/Palmanova/Graz', n.d.:[1]

Shopping abroad was usually done in packs of extended family. This time it was Petar, his father, his cousin, and his aunt. They left Zagreb early in the morning, before 6 AM, as this is how trips were done in this family. He hated waking up early, but this time the excitement for the trip abroad kicked in the second he opened his eyes. He doesn't remember the trip itself that much. Probably he was asleep most of the time. He did not notice crossing the border at all. After coming to Trieste/Palmanova/Graz, he first felt some sort of disappointment. Rows of stalls and stands selling cheap clothes and cheap toys reminded him of the open market of his Dalmatian small town, Šibenik. Was this all there was? Shouldn't this foreign country be more beautiful, more modern, more exciting—simply completely different? He was really not interested in buying clothes in the dirty open market. His attitude changed and the excitement reemerged when they approached a huge yellow building with the capital letters saying: B I L L A. White, yellow, red—it just seemed so colourful. This has to be something special, as his father and aunt were talking about Billa for a while—this was, it seems, their ultimate goal. They never mentioned that there was anything special about this store, but he could easily sense the excitement, which emanated from them while preparing for the trip. And now he was there, and he was happy, and this place was a complete shock to him: there were no stores of this size in his hometown. And the lights! It was so bright inside. Also, it looked so clean, as if he entered a pharmacy, rather than a huge busy marketplace. Among the sea of colourful products, what stayed with him the longest was an ice-cream. His father took him to the ice-cream freezer and told him to choose one, suggesting

1 The title was, of course, supposed to communicate the fact that, in my memory, these different places (Trieste, Palmanova, and Graz) are interchangeable, or, even, that they merge into a singular, fuzzy, and abstract place. This is because this particular memory is centred around the practice of shopping rather than the place where this shopping occurs. However, because I am fully aware that the name of the supermarket was Billa—which is an Austrian chain—the destination was most likely Graz.

the biggest one they had. Apparently, it was famous, and his father's favorite. They left the store, he unpacked the ice-cream and started eating it. 'Do you like it?', his father asked. He wasn't sure though. Excitement for the huge-sized sized ice-cream in a foreign country was way stronger than enjoyment in the taste of the ice-cream. Taste-wise, it was just another ice-cream, nothing more or less. But the size! However, pretty soon, it was exactly the size that became problematic. The boy simply could not finish this huge ice-cream. He felt bad, as he wanted to finish it, because it was obviously a special ice-cream, probably some big brand he just never heard of because you could not buy it in Croatia. He also did not want to make his father mad, as throwing food in his family was usually avoided at all cost. So he was walking down the streets of Trieste/Palmanova/Graz, with this huge ice-cream melting in his hand. His father noticed it, laughed, and just said 'Throw it away, it's too big for a kid, I should have known.' So he threw the ice-cream in a bin and continued shopping with his family.[2]

This is quite a commonplace, indeed, a very widespread motive when it comes to the subgenre of oral or textual accounts (including memoirs and autobiographies) of socialist childhoods: the first contact between a naïve post/socialist subject and the flashy world of consumer capitalism. It is, therefore, a very predictable memory—this realisation generates a certain uneasiness in me, maybe even some kind of embarrassment: my personal narrative is reducible to a set of memory tropes; these tropes govern my process of memory, they shape my self-reflective accounts, rather than the other way around (or at least, rather than my own act of memory-making simply emerging in the moment of reminiscence, in a completely ungoverned, spontaneous fashion).

In any case, this is my memory, for sure; something like this most definitely happened, even though some of the details, undoubtedly, were added later, fabricated in order to fill the memory gaps and give it a certain flavour, as the story always must be complete. Did my aunt and my father really mention Billa several times in the days before the trip?

2 Since I will rely on psychoanalysis further on in this essay, a certain, indeed, very stereotypical Oedipal moment (of which I became aware only now, while analysing this memory with more scrutiny, rather than during the workshop itself), which screams from this memory, simply cannot and should not be left unacknowledged. However, because it goes outside of the scope of this chapter-essay, this aspect will remain limited to this footnote.

Maybe, but most likely not. Were they 'emanating' excitement while talking about Billa? Most certainly not—this is above all, I have to admit, a retrospective performance of a poor post/socialist Eastern European.

I have no doubts that this memory is strongly framed by implied expectations that the very setup of the workshop posited; the name of the workshop, Reconnect/Recollect, urges the making of connections based on recollection. Therefore, unsurprisingly, my memory story resonated with most of the other participants in the workshop: they all could relate to it, they all knew what I was talking about. Moreover, within the scope of this project, mine was surely not the only memory that included or was centered around this moment of post/socialist consumer-object cathexis. Let me share here just two examples of others' memories:[3]

During the 80s or early 90s teenagers in Poland dreamed of walkmans. It was an object of divisions also. Visible ones. If someone was lucky enough to have a relative 'in the West', then could owe his/her walkman and every friend would know it. I still remember one boy, who wanted to make an impression on others, and was wearing only headphones, his hands hidden in the pockets. He had no walkman inside the pockets but wanted others to think he had been listening to music on his own walkman. ('Material Culture' n.d.)

She had the boots on her feet that she longed for so long. It was made of plastic, smelling a bit like that, but it felt good, looked fashionable, an out of ordinary piece on her feet. She felt that everyone would know she is different when she appeared in school. They might think that it came from foreign relatives from the West. She dreamed about having those relatives and receiving presents from them. Light gray boots, laced up to cover her ankles and a zipper under the lace. So unique, she thought. The boots felt tight a bit on her feet when she tried them on, but there was no larger size and the pain felt bearable then. For a short while

3 I am quoting these from the Cold War Childhoods' Memory Archive (https://coldwarchildhoods.org/memories/). Anonymous memories collected there come from the workshop in Riga in which I participated, but also from other memory-writing workshops that were held in Berlin, Helsinki, and Mexico City. I want to emphasise that English was not the mother tongue of most participants, nor is it the language they use on an everyday basis. I decided to respect the authors of these memories and restrain from any editing in regard to grammar or syntax. After all, the fact that this memory-writing workshop took place in the context of the language that was foreign for most of us necessarily adds another layer in our assessment of the whole process.

then it was, but now as she was sitting in the back seat of their Lada car with a car boot full of food, an LP of Queens, shampoos of flowery smell, it felt hurting. But she felt she is exceptional since she has the boots, from her shopping trip to Yugoslavia, the West. ('Gray Zipper Boots' n.d.)

My memory resonated with the rest of the group because we do, indeed, have some similar memories. But it also resonated with others because our memories (moreover, our very significant memories!) are inevitably entering and being shaped by a frame that preceded them. As one of the participants wrote later, reflecting on the workshop: 'I was very, very inspired. I loved to see how the memories speak to other memories and things suddenly get a wider meaning and context' (quoted in Millei et al. 2019). Another workshop participant went even further, claiming that 'many of the features that we thought of as distinct to our respective contexts (cultures, countries, socioeconomic background, etc.) were in fact perhaps more universal to the human condition across a generation' (ibid.). For sure, to talk about universal categories and to invoke universalising notions such as the 'human condition' in this day and age (and in the context of contemporary feminist, decolonial, critical-race, posthumanist etc. theory) is in itself problematic. But we do not even have to get that political to recognise that, even within the context of white subjects of the global West, this kind of universalism that can be recognised in the way our memories relate to each other is at least partly conditioned by the very expectation that these memories should relate to each other. In other words, the notion of the 'universal human condition' is not a conclusion that spontaneously and logically emerges once we let our memories speak to each other and we notice their similarities. It is actually the other way round: the 'universal human condition' is a pre-existing notion, a frame that precedes our very process of remembering and that shapes the course of our memory-selection and our memory-writing, and which is, in its final effect, exactly that force which makes our memories 'speak to each other'.

The Genre of Memory

This all leads to the conclusion that, when it comes to memory, we are dealing with something akin to a genre. Indeed, it seems that there are certain (genre) motives and (genre) codes that are iterable across

different people's memories. How to approach this idea of memory as a genre? The most obvious scholarly path we can follow when trying to address this question is literary studies, more specifically the work on the genre of autobiography and memoir. I would like to briefly examine this path in order to offer some preliminary conclusions relevant to our object of inquiry here: memory as a genre.

In his book on the literary genre of memoir, Couser (2012) recognises that, on a very fundamental level, there is no clear set of criteria according to which certain texts are assigned to a certain genre category: sometimes this is done based on the form (e.g., sonnet), sometimes regarding both the content and the form (e.g., an elevated style and a serious tone of the epic), and sometimes primarily in relation to the subject matter of a given text. He places the genre of memoir in the last category, as we read certain texts as memoirs not because of their style or content per se but, rather, because of the very fact that we know, even before we start reading, that these texts are supposed to communicate someone's personal narrative of the event(s) that really happened. In other words, what determines if a piece of writing is a memoir, transcends the text itself. This is something in line with what Genette (1997) calls paratexts, or those elements that 'enable a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public' (p. 1). The elements he focuses on are book covers with all the information they include, such as authors' names, publisher's notes etc., but we can easily, via analogy, take paratext to stand for everything that surrounds a given text (especially if the 'text' is something as evasive as personal memory) and frames it in a certain way in front of the public.

Memories shared within the memory-writing workshop I took part in clearly come to us as part of a genre that is, above all, determined by a certain paratextual framing, which was, in this case, simply the context of me and the others claiming that what we shared were our own memories. It was, of course, very possible that, in writing and sharing my memory, I lied or, even more likely, that I misremembered the event I narrated to the group (as I have already admitted). Nonetheless, the implied agreement was that what I shared was true, or at least that my report was as truthful as it could be, considering that the event I described happened almost thirty years ago. This was the common framework all of us in the workshop accepted and counted on: what we

share really happened. Therefore, what makes memory a genre in itself and, effectively, what gives it its tone and colour, as well as its affective impact, is this context that frames it as a personal true story.

However, the question of what delineates the potential genre of memory is not the most crucial here, or at least it is not the question that brought forth the initial set of dilemmas that animate this essay. In addition, and more importantly, it does seem that, indeed, there are certain genre motives that repeat themselves across memories shared by different individuals; that is, the paratext is not all there is. Therefore, it might be useful, at this point, to look into different types of memoirs, both in regard to their content and their style.

Couser (2012) detects several subgenres of memoir writing; the two relevant for our discussion here are conversion and testimony. Conversion brings 'the story of a radical (and usually sudden) reversal in the narrator's perspective' (p. 38), this traditionally being applied to religious narratives of faith conversion, most often to Christianity; however, as Couser himself asserts, the term is applicable to ideological shifts as well. It is clear that we cannot easily equate the moment of a post/socialist subject's first encounter with the world of consumer capitalism with the ideological or political conversion, especially if the subject is a child, with limited cognitive capacities and, more importantly, with limited awareness of the socio-historical context. But there was certainly in my memory something like a 'reversal in the narrator's perspective', some kind of a marking moment, which both encapsulates wider ideological shifts and announces further ideological shifts, at the same time personal and collective. It is for this reason that both I and many other workshop participants, when choosing which significant memories to share, opted for those moments of encountering consumer capitalism for the first time—because we feel this encounter says something important about the historical moment or the historical period of post/socialist transition and, by extension and by necessity, something important about our lives as well.

The second subgenre of memory relevant for our discussion here is testimony, a narrative that is distinguished 'by the relation between the I and the world' (Couser, p. 41), and where the narrator, above all, serves as a witness. My memory clearly functions as a witnessing one, because it, again, not only represents one individual encounter with the alien

and mythical West but it also resonates with the wider socio-political context, or even operates on the level of allegory. Once again, this is why we so often go for the motive and the narrative I detected here: this event encapsulates something larger than us, something that transcends our own lives, something that we are maybe even obliged to remember and share.

In her book on global iconic events, Sonnevend (2016) describes a historical event as some kind of aberration from history, a history that is usually taken to be a fundamentally repetitive and slow process. Historical events are 'split off from the regular rhythms of daily life and stand out in memory as unique, marked as uplifting or traumatic (p. 1). Among several criteria that qualify a certain event as a historical one, Sonnevend lists condensation, which is 'the event's encapsulation in a "brand" of a simple phrase, a short narrative, and a recognisable visual scene' (p. 25). Although her focus is on one-off events of limited duration, rather than political contexts of longer period—the book's exemplary case study is the fall of the Berlin Wall—this condensation perfectly describes the memory story I offered above. My first encounter with shiny objects in an enormous superstore is both a short narrative and a very recognisable visual scene. This is what makes this memory so powerful: it comes as a shortcut that captures a historical moment and that cuts through both personal and political. In other words, it is a repeatable genre motive.[4]

Before moving on to the second memory and the question of pleasure in witnessing trauma, I would like to emphasise that my aim here is not to suggest that the memory stories I recounted above, because they can be coded as having an iterable genre motive, are nothing but derivative

4 I do not want to overburden this essay with too many examples (in addition to my memory and the two others I chose as exemplary). However, I would like to briefly mention two other cases to further support my claim of this being an iterable genre motive. When conducting fieldwork in Germany, I interviewed a Berliner who grew up in former East Berlin. One of the most intense memories he decided to share with me included an intricate plan his family came up with, in order to procure him a very-desired Kinder Surprise chocolate egg from an Intershop, without anyone noticing (as it was politically frowned upon to shop in this store, which was aimed at foreigners and only accepted foreign currency). Another example comes from a German TV show *Deutschland 83*—a very powerful scene of a young GDR spy entering, for the first time in his life, a huge, shiny and loud supermarket in West Berlin. He gets so overwhelmed that he experiences what seems to be a panic attack.

or, even worse, inauthentic; in other words, it is not my intention here to question the validity of other people's memory (or my own, for that matter). If anything, my claim is that validity, truthfulness, authenticity, etc. are not adequate criteria when approaching the question of memory, precisely because memories and memory-making processes exist outside parameters that could be verified through these categories.

Moreover, as Bakhtin (1984), in one of the pivotal studies on genre, puts it in regard to the context of fiction writers: 'What interests us is precisely the influence of the *generic tradition itself* which was transmitted through the particular authors,' because exactly 'throughout this process the tradition is reborn and renewed in each of them in its own way, that is, in a unique and unrepeatable way' (p. 159, emphasis in original). If this is true of the classical fiction writers Bakhtin analyses, it is certainly true of all of us recounting our own memories. And finally, the claim from my side is not that we opt for these stories only in a compliant and passive manner. Inasmuch as these codes come to us as unavoidable and impose themselves on us, we also go for them and seek them, as they offer us a language through which we can both articulate ourselves and understand others.

Second Memory: Her Shoes

All of the above is but my current analysis, developed as I am re-thinking my memory choices, and as I am writing this chapter-essay; that is to say, I did not assume the same kind of reasoning and the same level of self-reflection back then, during the memory workshop (at least until the very last memory I shared there). I did, however, feel certain things. For example, I felt that the emotional impact of my first shared memory was very limited, that there was no affective punch to it. I had to do better. That is why, the same night in my hotel room, I sat down to write the following memory, titled by the memory-archive editors as 'Her Shoes' (n.d.). The next day I shared it in the workshop:

It was a beautiful day—warm and sunny. His mom picked him up from the kindergarten. They first had to go to the market to buy some groceries and then go home, where his sister was waiting for them, as she had already come back from school. However, the second they left the grocery store they heard sirens—the ones that indicated they were under air attack. They ran to the closest shelter,

as that was the usual drill in situations like this one. The shelter was basically a fire station—huge, but dark and quite stuffy, because of all the people that were crammed inside. It was his first time in this shelter—usually, they used the one next to their house—and he did not like it at all. Yes, he appreciated some grownups' attempts to calm him down by offering cookies, but all he really wanted was to leave this terrible place. His mom wanted the same, as they had another reason: his sister was home alone. He was listening as she was consulting with other grownups about what to do now. Some people advised her to stay here with the boy, because here they were safe and the daughter probably already went to the shelter next to their house. This did not satisfy her. She turned to him and asked: 'Do you mind staying here while I go home to check on your sister? And one of these ladies from our neighborhood will bring you home after the attack is over?' This he refused immediately, with unhinged fear and panic that left no space for negotiation. At that moment his mom leaned over, put her arms on his shoulders, looked him in the eyes and said: 'In that case, we run.' And then she did something that, for him, marked the seriousness of the situation: she took off her heeled shoes. This strange act confused him deeply. 'This way I will run faster.' Yes, it made sense, but in his mind this whole thing was just wrong. His mom taking off her shoes in public? Running away barefoot? On a dirty road? He has never seen her doing something similar. 'Ready?' she asked. He nodded. They started running. All he could see were the beige heeled shoes in his mom's hand. All he could hear was the sound of her bare feet hitting the asphalt.

First of all, we should recognise that this memory also perfectly fits into the argument of memory as a genre which I outlined in the previous section. For one, it is, again, 'a short narrative, and a recognisable visual scene' (Sonnevend 2016, p. 25) that condenses a broader historical moment. It is also most certainly a witnessing memory, even more so than the previous one, especially if we follow the criteria of what is conventionally considered to be historical witnessing in the scholarly field of memory studies; that is to say, it is, fundamentally, a traumatic memory. This is the aspect I want to focus on in this section.

As I finished reading my memory, I put the paper down and looked up and around the room at other participants. There was complete silence. Several people made a sound of consternation, some kind of a long gasp that traversed the room. I heard one or two 'Oh my god!' and 'This is terrible'. On some level, I got what I wanted: I shared a

story that produced a solid affective punch. On another level (or maybe this is the same level after all), other participants got what they wanted as well: an intense story and the pleasure derived from it. To be clear, what was very palpable in the room was a feeling of discomfort; but this discomfort was most definitely accompanied by a certain feeling of pleasure, a pleasure that pushes us towards sharing and hearing personal traumatic narratives in the first place. How to account for this? What is the place of this pleasure?

It goes without saying that, inasmuch as traumatic memories are personal, they are also, on a very basic level, always collective and social—that is, political. In other words, they are very much invested in the production and maintenance of a certain collective identity. In this case, the memory of the Yugoslav Wars and the suffering on the Croatian side were and still are one of the pillars of the nationalistic discourse that generates a lot of its affective political power exactly from these self-victimising narratives. The fact that I am not ideologically aligned with this discourse does not mean that my processes of remembering were not shaped by it. In this context, an (unintended) political work of my memory can be understood through Landsberg's (2004) concept of 'prosthetic memory', which stands for any kind of media that allows us to experience events that are far gone, in the form of a 'privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience' (p. 19). The fact that Landsberg is above all focused on (visual) mass-media representations should not bother us here. As I showed in the previous section, the affective power of our shared memories lies exactly in the fact that they fluctuate as iterable genre motives that transcend different registers of articulation, including different media. In the case of this memory workshop, I shared a memory that activated a certain affective aspect already present in the personal emotional baggage carried in by the other participants.

Although not unaware of its pitfalls, Landsberg is predominantly interested in the politically progressive potential of prosthetic-memory practices. Sodaro (2017), in her take on the matter, twists the idea and offers us a concept of 'prosthetic trauma', which is, above all, invested in generating a 'simplistic, divisive dualism between right and wrong,

good and evil in a way that has important and dangerous political implications' (p. 2). No matter how uneasy it is to face this, I have to accept that my chosen memory, at least to some extent, did participate in the reproduction of the self-victimising Croatian nationalistic identity. None of this, of course, calls into question the legitimacy of me sticking with this traumatic memory, nor the decision to share it in the workshop; in other words, the fact that this memory fits the mainstream Croatian memory narrative, does not take away of its affective importance for me. This is also why we need to go further in the examination of the reasons for participating, in one way or another, in the processes of traumatic memories and go back to the question: What is the place of this pleasure, the pleasure of hearing other people's traumatic experiences?

A very straightforward take on this issue would focus on the fact that people in the room were faced with a terrible story and simply reacted with instinctual empathy. Although this would not be an incorrect summary of what went on, it is important to analyse this moment more carefully and in more detail, instead of taking both the act and the concept of empathy for granted. I believe there are at least three different types of possible pleasures extracted from these kinds of experiences—ones in which we are faced with political violence and the suffering of others—and they are all centered around processes of identification.

For sure, we should start by recognising the pleasure of identifying with the victim, which goes two ways. First, we identify with victims-narrators of a certain historical violence—that is, we temporarily assume the position of the victim ourselves—and we extract a certain pleasure out of it. This might as well be related to the complex of repetition compulsion, as it is conceptualised in psychoanalysis. In his famous essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1955), Freud assumes several different takes on the repetition compulsion, in one of them focusing on an individual's unconscious tendency to re-enact the traumatic event or traumatic experience in order to deal with it again, or to feel that he or she has mastered it, gained control over it. In the famous and oft-quoted analysis of the *fort-da* game enacted by his grandson, Freud describes the boy's act of throwing away a reel tied to a piece of string while saying 'gone', and then retrieving it back by pulling and happily

exclaiming 'there!'.[5] According to Freud, this was a re-enactment of the boy's mother leaving the room, that is, leaving the boy, and then coming back to him. According to Freud, although 'at the outset he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience', exactly through the process of repeating this experience, 'unpleasurable as it was, as a game, he took on an active part' (p. 16, emphasis in the original).[6] Finally, Freud concludes, we should explain the boy's efforts as an 'instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not' (Ibid).

Although Freud is dealing with an individual case here, meaning that his grandkid's repetition compulsion is invested in and arranged around the act of repeating the boy's own unpleasant experience, trauma studies very often invoke this concept of repetition compulsion in order to explain collective (political) trauma.[7] Following this, we can claim that the pleasure of identifying with the witnessing victim is derived, at least partly, from the illusion of mastery that accompanies our processes of identification, after the witness's account affectively activated our

5 A more extensive description of the *fort-da* game: 'This good little boy, however, had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out "o-o-o-o", accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of the present account agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word "fort" [gone]. I eventually realised that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play "gone" with them. One day I made an observation which confirmed my view. The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o". He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "da" [there]. This, then, was the complete game—disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act' (Freud, 1955, pp. 14–15).

6 Freud asserts something very similar in his paper 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety' (1959), wherein he writes that 'Anxiety is the original reaction to helplessness in the trauma and is reproduced later on in the danger-situation as a signal for help. The ego, which experienced the trauma passively, now repeats it actively in a weakened version, in the hope of being able itself to direct its course' (pp. 166–67).

7 See, for example, Caruth (1996), Felman and Laub (1992), Leys (2000).

own past traumas. Yes, we put ourselves in the shoes of victims while listening to their stories, but we are constantly in charge of the situation; we are in proximity of violence, while at the same time keeping our distance and our illusion of control.

Unlike the first course of identification with the victim, where the main process is one of temporarily assuming the victim's position (albeit from a distance), the second one can be understood as a more straightforward process of identification through empathy: we gain pleasure by empathising with the other. However, even this process of empathic identification is at least double-layered, as the identification with the other necessarily comes together with the dissociation from the other. In other words, if we empathise with the other as the other, we are not putting ourselves in the position of the other but, rather, in a position next to the other. Therefore, it would be more precise to talk of empathic identification/dissociation. We get pleasure exactly by knowing that the victim is someone else, not us.

There is a very popular German expression, *Schadenfreude*, which already found its way into the English language, exactly because it does not have a satisfying equivalent therein, but can be translated as 'malicious joy'.[8] More specifically, *Schadenfreude* stands for the pleasure or joy in witnessing others' pain, and it ranges from the very widespread comic trope of a person falling (over a banana peel, for example) to the more sinister pleasure in someone else's intense agony. In her famous essay on war photography, Susan Sontag (2004) recognises something akin to *Schadenfreude* in the moments of witnessing other people's suffering: a comfort we find in the fact that we are not the ones suffering. She looks into philosophical accounts of this phenomenon, going all the way back to Edmund Burke's 1757 claim that all of us 'have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others'. Further on, he asks rhetorically: 'Do we not read the authentic histories of scenes of this nature with as much pleasure as romances and poems, where the incidents are fictitious?' (Burke 2017, p. 45). This is another type of pleasure that I recognise as being derived while listening to personal accounts of suffering: we are happy we are not the ones in pain, while simultaneously feeling good about ourselves as we

8 Equivalents do exist in some other languages, for example in Serbo-Croatian: *zluradost*.

still do care about the other's pain. Not only do we care, but we show we care very clearly. As the reaction to my traumatic memory showed—we gasp and exclaim ('Oh my god!') in utter shock because we are faced with inexpressibly violent acts.

Finally, the third pleasure that we obtain when listening to others' traumatic memories is derived from us identifying with the perpetrator. This one is the most controversial, and without a doubt the one most people would not be ready to admit, or at least would not be comfortable with recognising in themselves. In addition to identifying (in different ways) with victims, we also identify with perpetrators of violence because this grants us a pleasurable feeling of power. Indeed, these two are inseparable: the feeling of pleasure in assuming the position of the perpetrator is only increased as it parallels the feeling we get while identifying with the victim. This is what Radstone calls the 'gray zone', 'a site of fantasised identifications with victims and perpetrators that symbolise the prospects of omnipotence and coherent control that are lacking on a psychosocial level and must be disavowed on a moral one' (quoted in Ball 2003, p. 33).

Although I describe the pleasure derived from listening to the witness's account of political violence as a tripartite structure for the sake of analysis and clarity, it is more sensible to think of it as a singular affect of pleasure. This affect constantly shifts between the three aspects of pleasure or, to be more precise, does not allow for any delineation between them: it is a constant co-presence of these three pleasures. Finally, it is from this affective mixture that these kinds of memories draw their strength and exercise a strong grip over us.

At this point, I want to make one thing clear: I do not exclude myself from the affective operation described above. This includes both sides of the process. Most certainly, the same mixture of discomfort, empathy, and pleasure is what I myself feel in situations in which I am made to, or I decide to, listen to someone else's traumatic witnessing. Also, and more importantly in the context of the workshop I am describing here, I cannot negate my own pleasure in narrating my own personal traumatic experience. This is the pleasure of assuming the role of the victim, with all the symbolic capital this position carries. After all, to negate this pleasure would also mean to eliminate my own agency from the equation, which would, as its final consequence, have a de-subjectifying effect of just another kind.

Third Memory: A Conclusion

Towards the end of the workshop, I began to feel strange. At first, I could not really put it into words. However, as I started to think intensely about the two memories I shared in the workshop, I realised that the last one could not be yet another memory but that it had to be a self-reflective account of my process of remembering; it had to articulate the certain discomfort I myself felt when I looked back at the memories I chose. I would like to offer this meta-memory here, as part of the conclusion to this chapter, in conjuncture with the similar feelings and thoughts that Jana Hensel (2004) shares in her piercing memoir on living in the German Democratic Republic and in what came after. First, the final piece of writing I shared in the workshop:

It is really hard for me to invoke one particular memory that would be significant as either specific (in a one-of-a-kind, aberrant way) or representative of my childhood in a broader sense. The reason is: when I try to think of something that might be interesting to other people who do not share my background, my mind instinctively goes towards memories that involve Yugoslav wars and might be termed 'traumatic' (both of my grandparents had to flee their houses that were burnt to ground, my uncle was imprisoned and tortured, I was separated from my parents for a couple of years, etc.). However, although these memories come in abundance, I do not feel they represent my childhood or the memory of my childhood (if the two can ever be distinguished) in a fair way. That is to say, I remember my childhood through more positive, colourful tones: friends, games, school, cartoons, books, candies… (my favorite popular example here is Anne Frank's diary which, in the midst of the terribly violent events that stand as its background, notes as the most important things such as first love, games with cousins, the collection of cards of famous actors, etc.). This leads to another problem that emerges here—the relationship between private and collective/political. For example, one of my most intense childhood memories (the one that regularly and frequently comes back to me) is my father buying me a fluffy toy. It was a blue bear. The reason I remember it is because that was one of the rare moments he expressed his affection towards me. (The toy was the only one I kept for years, it was falling apart, and my mom had to sew it back several times). However, this memory has to do primarily with my relationship with my father, which is both private (i.e. awkward or even unpleasant to share) and probably not that interesting to people who do not know me. In other words, my

most vivid childhood memory has nothing to do with the Cold War, socialism, postsocialism, transition, Yugoslav wars, the rise of nationalism, etc. At the same time, this memory is extremely political, as it touches upon the conditions of (the lack of) paternal male bonding in a patriarchal society, which is greatly represented by Croatia in the 1990s. So, in brief, these are the reasons why, instead of offering one concrete memory, I made this reflection on the process my remembering went through in the context of this project. ('My Process of Remembering' n.d.)

This account brings me back to the very beginning of this essay and the rhetorical question I posed: What if my most intense memories are more or less the same as the most intense memories of people who grew up in seemingly peaceful Western democracies—of a toy, a walkman, a desired piece of clothing, a birthday party?

Writing about Western visitors coming to the former GDR for touristic sightseeing, Hensel (2004) tells us that

> as long as you took them to the Secret Police Museum, and showed them St. Nicholas Church, where all the Monday night demonstrations had taken place in 1989, carefully pointing out where the surveillance cameras had been placed to monitor those demonstrations, they were happy (p. 24).

The others expect something, and we give it to them. However, was the fact that 'we lost touch with our true experiences, and one memory after another slipped away', as Hensel (ibid.) is lamenting, a result of the wish of the other or, on the contrary, a precondition of the wish of the other? She continues: 'We repressed our actual experiences and replaced them with a series of strange, larger-than-life anecdotes that didn't really have anything to do with what our lives had been like' (ibid., p. 25). To this, I relate completely, as I tried to show in this chapter-essay. It certainly feels that I myself reduced my past to a cluster of larger-than-life stories, including, or especially, the traumatic ones. Truth be told, Hensel loses me when she concludes that 'we had forgotten how to tell our own life stories in our own way, instead adopting an alien tone and perspective' (ibid.). As I explicated above, I do not think there is an authentic memory that should be salvaged from others who are seemingly trying to coerce us into remembering what was not even remotely relevant to us. Our memories might be modulated from places that are not our own, but we

are not innocent, as we still participate in this memory production, and we gain some pleasures from it. Nonetheless, Hensel's feeling that the pressure is there and that something is being lost needs to be accounted for. It is, finally, the feeling I myself undoubtedly share.

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