

The Cannibals among People

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Introduction¹

Until now, the play *Ljudožerci* (The cannibals) by Gregor Strniša (1939–87),² a Slovenian poet and playwright, had been staged five times in Slovenia—i.e., in 1977, 1987, 1995, 2002, and 2017. Mile Korun³ directed the play three times (in 1977, 1987, and 2002) and Aleš Novak (1995) and Ivica Buljan (2017) directed it once each. From the perspective of the present discussion, which aims to analyze the differences and similarities in the reception of the stagings, the three Korun stagings are of special relevance, since they provide a higher degree of dramaturgically interpretative uniformity, than the differences and similarities in the staging in all five cases.⁴

The second relevant methodological element of the present analysis is the selection of secondary sources. These sources are neither scholarly analyses of Strniša's poetics in general, nor of *Ljudožerci* in particular, but rather the reviews of stagings published in newspapers and magazines, along with their more recent online variants. Because I am interested in the relation between the receptions of the staging of the same play and sociopolitical changes in the 1990s, I shall focus on those analyses and publications that

¹ The author acknowledges the project “Slovene literature and social changes: national state, democracy and transitional discrepancies” (J6-8259) was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency.

² Gregor Strniša, the son of the poet Gustav Strniša, is one of the most prominent Slovenian modernist authors. His life and literary work were heavily influenced by his unjust, two-year imprisonment in a labor camp by the post WW II Yugoslav authorities. After his return from the labor camp, Strniša studied German and English at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. He wrote seven original books of poetry, four dramas, numerous works for children, and even lyrics of popular songs. He is best known by his poetic form, the use of assonance, his mythical and folk influences and sources, and for his interests in contemporary physics, especially the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics.

³ Mile Korun is one of the most accomplished contemporary Slovenian theatre directors, who is perhaps (in addition to his “black umbrella,” an artifact he uses in all his plays) best known for his directing of contemporary and also traditional (Ivan Cankar, etc.) Slovenian dramas. He was a long-time professor at the Academy of Theater, Radio, Film, and Television in Ljubljana and in his later years also became a playwright (Svetovalec 2016).

⁴ A particularly compelling example, already studied in the Slovenian literary field, is the theater group Pupilija Ferkeverk. For more information on the theater and their only, unusual performance (1969) and its reprise (2009), directed by Emil Hrvatin, see Svetina (2008: 78–98) and Troha (95–101).

were aimed at the general public in terms of genre and are therefore the most sensitive to the socio-political landscape, while in turn impacting it the most.⁵

In order to adequately place, give meaning to, and contextualize the potential differences among the reviews of *Ljudožerci* stagings, in the final section of this discussion I take into account the treatments of meaning in dramatic works in Slovenian society by Gašper Troha, Denis Poniž, Silvija Borovnik, Barbara Orel, and Taras Kermauner. The present analysis also takes into consideration Strniša's critical attitude towards contemporary society as summarized in his expression "shopping mentality."⁶ According to Strniša's belief, such mentality needs to be opposed, but to do so we need our own firmly rooted ethics.

In his work *Interpretacije* (Interpretations), Jože Snoj argues that the theme of a man buried alive among his comrades' dead bodies and faced with the temptation of cannibalism, to which he does not succumb and still miraculously survives—a theme found in *Ljudožerci*, is actually taken from the book titled *Tu ležimo pobiti* (Here we lie murdered). This means that in *Ljudožerci*, Strniša problematizes the killings that took place after WW II.⁷ Strniša was not the first Slovenian writer who articulated this horrific chapter of Slovenian history, and Edvard Kocbek's fate shows⁸ how dangerous it was, even for the most prominent artists and public figures, to raise the topic. Therefore, we may form the most general hypothesis by stating that the reception of *Ljudožerci* from the period before independence differs from post-independence reception, at least in attitudes towards reverence for the deceased, or in grasping the function of drama and theatrical art in general. Furthermore, the analysis will show that Slovenian independence was a threshold beyond which WW II was no longer seen as "present time."

⁵ On the relation between the theater and centers of power in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in Slovenia and Yugoslavia, see also Troha (2007 and 2008b) and Jovičević (2008). Interesting insights into the reflections of many Slovenian playwrights, directors, and other theater artists and theorists on their own creations before Slovenian independence are to be found in Pibernik (1992).

⁶ This is Strniša's term for consumerism. On Strniša's critique of consumerism, see his introduction to the anthology *Vesolje* (Space, 1983: 5–19).

⁷ After WW II, the victorious partisan forces killed thousands of their military and ideological opponents in extrajudicial killings, most prominently in Kočevski Rog and Teharje. The killings, which were a state secret and remained so until Slovenian independence in 1991, were never officially investigated.

⁸ Kocbek posed questions regarding the post-war killings in his collection *Strah in pogum* (Fear and courage). For detailed description of the attitude of Yugoslav and Slovenian authorities towards Kocbek, see Omerza (2010).

Responses to Korun's stagings of *Ljudožerci* in 1977, 1987, and 2002

The first staging, 1977

Gregor Strniša published *Ljudožerci*⁹ in 1972, but the play was not staged until 1977, when Mile Korun directed the première (19 January 1977). The archive of the Slovenian Theater Institute in Ljubljana preserves two listings¹⁰ and five reviews or reactions to it, as well as an interview with the director,¹¹ but some of the other political and politically relevant receptions also need to be considered for fuller analysis of the social response.¹² The listings were published on the day of or on the day before the première in the newspapers *Delo* and *Dnevnik*. *Delo*'s listing is short and scarce on information about the performance: "This evening, in the Ljubljana City Theatre, the première of Strniša's 'dance macabre' is being staged [...] directed by Mile Korun." It lists several premières in the City Theatre and also offers information on "the modernization of stage expression," which this and other dramas staged at the theater were supposedly bringing about, while the listing in *Dnevnik* is much more compelling. Although the author of the *Dnevnik* piece also mentions the theater's artistic policy, the focus is on the drama's content and the meaning of its staging—that is, it refers to artistic director Bojan Štih as regards not only the modern disposition of stage expression, but also the fact that *Ljudožerci* is "a play of utter human distress, the poetry of fear and terror, of hunger and thirst, all being a parable of the absurdity of war." On the other hand, it also summarizes the artistic director's comments on the staging's dramaturgical outline, which finds "a double fabula in the text: the human, taking place in front of our very eyes, and the worldly one, surrounding it."¹³

⁹ The story of *Ljudožerci* is set during WW II in an abandoned and by ruined church and its crypt. The church's prior, its only surviving inhabitant, welcomes a group of refugees, who turn out to be a group of killers and cannibals. They soon turn the crypt into a slaughterhouse in which they kill other people and sell/eat their meat. The crypt turns into hell and the sacral music coming from the choir under the ruined roof forms its heavenly counterpart. The grotesque story ends by the cannibals killing and eating their own children.

¹⁰ By the term "listing" I refer to all mentions of Mile Korun as a director of *Ljudožerci* in Slovenian newspapers that cannot be regarded as reviews or critical evaluations. All responses to Strniša's play and its stagings can be found in the Archive of the Slovenian Theatre Institute (SLOGI – Slovenski Gledališki inštitut).

¹¹ *Primorski dnevnik* 6 October 1977

¹² Ivan Potrč replied to Javoršek's review regarding the staging and drama, and the drama was labelled as negative at the Congress of Youth Organization in Primorska (see Janez Stanek, "Korun in Strniša prepovedana," *Delo* 10 October 1987).

¹³ Jernej Novak, "Igra o ljudožerstvu," *Dnevnik* 19 January 1977.

If both listings more or less intend to inform the public about the performance and do not contain any value judgments, the response to the performance was heated, ambivalent, and fairly negative. Out of five responses, one is distinctly ambivalent; it fiercely criticizes the drama and at the same time praises the staging,¹⁴ one sums up Javoršek's findings,¹⁵ two are partly adverse, but for differing reasons,¹⁶ while Franc Šrimpf's review is quite positive.¹⁷ The reviews did not provide a consolidated value judgement on the text, yet it may be discerned that almost all the reviewers observed the difference between Strniša's text and Korun's staging, and the majority praised the staging and especially the acting.

Javoršek, although extremely adverse towards Strniša's text, comments on the directing: "Mile Korun [...] should be proclaimed the hero of contemporary directing efforts [...] His main merit is that Strniša's text [...] was put into some sort of order." He also has a positive opinion about the actors and claims that "it's been a long time since we saw such peculiar and effective performances in the City Theatre."¹⁸ Novak is similarly fond of the performances: "The potential of a more complete acting creation is opened by only four characters [...] but this potential is exploited to the fullest,"¹⁹ while Šrimpf describes the staging as "a peculiar theatrical and artistic achievement," and the actors' performances as "brilliant."²⁰ Inkret was the only one who was not impressed with the staging, but he was equally unimpressed with Strniša's text, since he felt that "neither in Strniša's text nor in the staging [...] is there anything actually dreadful and frightening, even less shocking."²¹ Furthermore, Inkret labels the staging and the text as "infantile."

More compelling than the value judgments on either the text or the staging are interpretations of Strniša's text and the success of its theatrical actualization, which have several points in common. First, all the reviewers recognized similarities between Strniša's form of drama medieval dramatic genres, especially, of course, mystery and morality plays.²² However, it is

¹⁴ Jože Javoršek, "Strnišev mrtvaški ples," *Delo* 21 January 1977.

¹⁵ Andrej Inkret, "Kanibali," *Naši razgledi* 28 January 1977.

¹⁶ Andrej Inkret, "Kanibali," *Naši razgledi* 28 January 1977; Jernej Novak, "Igra o ljudožerstvu," *Dnevnik* 20 January 1977.

¹⁷ Franc Šrimpf, "Poetično gledališče," *Večer* 22 January 1977.

¹⁸ *Delo* 22 January 1977.

¹⁹ *Dnevnik* 20 January 1977.

²⁰ Šrimpf, *Večer* 22 January 1977.

²¹ Inkret, *Naši razgledi* 28 January 1977.

²² Jakob Jaša Kenda draws numerous similarities between Strniša's plays and medieval dramatic genres. He "shows that the most important links can be established between the medieval danse macabre and Strniša's *Ljudožerci*, the medieval morality play and *The Frogs* (Žabe) and, partly, *The Dryad* (Driada)" (Kenda 1999: 35). *Ljudožerci*, for example, follows the dramatic pattern of

interesting that the intertextual references and their (un)successful actualization (either in the text or in the staging) are reviewed and interpreted in completely different manners. Inkret establishes that *Ljudožerci*

makes an account of the final, the most pathetic and bloody boundary of man's deceptive self-conscience, freedom, and his dreadful self-will," but he exposes a relevant difference between morality plays and *The Cannibals*, since "salvation is no longer possible, a man is indelibly marked by sin and breakdown, there is no mercy."²³

Šrimpf labels *Ljudožerci* "a fusion of pure poetry, medieval mystery plays, and physical and mental cannibalism of the twentieth century,"²⁴ while Javoršek perceives that "in reality, this dance macabre is completely subject to medieval mysticism or medieval relations among people who are intermediaries between the seen and the unseen [...] Namely, Strniša's playwriting is not in any way associated with any dramaturgy of this world, in quite the same manner as the medieval dramaturgy knew no principles."²⁵

Further, in addressing Strniša's text specifically—separately from the staging—the reviewers find fairly similar attributes in various contexts: it has "a morally critical interest"²⁶ that needs to be "thoughtfully absorbed";²⁷ that the text originates from the author's "deeply internalized need" for confrontation with "the most delicate problems of the twentieth century,"²⁸ and that with this play one needs to "think about the things that make cannibals and cannibalism possible."²⁹ All the reviewers recognize the ethical dimension of the drama, although, of course, they interpret them in different ways, according to their own understanding and ideological and mental backgrounds. While Novak generalizes and abstracts the message of the play as a principled, universal questioning of the origin of evil (cannibalism), Šrimpf highlights that the audience leaves the performance torn and

innocence-fall-salvation, which is an important feature of medieval morality plays, because it resembles the form of a ritual. In addition, Strniša's dramatis personae and even specific places of the drama can be seen as allegories of some abstract or moralic entities, for example the crypt is an allegory of hell, the choir music of heaven etc. Furthermore, in *Ljudožerci* Kenda finds the divide between the earthly, immanent or physical life and the Transcendent, the Absolute, or the Good, which is also one of the defining features of medieval plays.

²³ Inkret, *Naši razgledi* 28 January 1977.

²⁴ Šrimpf, *Večer* 22 January 1977.

²⁵ *Delo* 22 January 1977.

²⁶ Inkret, *Naši razgledi* 28 January 1977.

²⁷ Šrimpf, *Večer* 22 January 1977.

²⁸ Javoršek *Delo* 22 January 1977.

²⁹ Novak, *Dnevnik* 20 January 1977.

unappeased, since “poetry [...] is not and cannot be just smiling and stroking one’s heart.”³⁰

In addition, the reviewers attempt to establish the real motivation of the drama’s author: Inkret finds it in “moralism,” while Šrampf feels that what was seen on stage was “unusual,” which may be understood in terms of seeking new theatrical expression. A similar theory may be derived from Novak’s insistence that the staging was not “radical” enough, while Javoršek is even sharper and more specific. He associates the source of the thematic and motivic setting of *Ljudožerci* with events that took place during the war “in the area of St. Urh,”³¹ although he is aware that this surely was not Strniša’s conscious decision, since he states that *Ljudožerci* “is up until now the only and, by all means, the most dreadful depiction of the inhuman slaughter at St. Urh, near Ljubljana, whether Gregor Strniša purposefully wanted it or not.”³²

Javoršek’s review of Strniša’s text and Korun’s staging is not only the most extensive of all the reviews, but also the most merciless, since Javoršek openly polemicizes with Strniša’s text and, as is evident from his evaluation of Strniša’s motivation for writing the text, with the poet himself. His analysis of the text and staging begins as follows: “Anyone who argued that the première of Strniša’s *Ljudožerci* did not raise hundreds and hundreds of questions demanding answers, is an excessively happy man.”³³

This statement, which merely introduces a negative opinion of Strniša, already contains traces of Javoršek’s conclusions. Obviously, the text and, more so, the staging provoked a certain amount of discomfort, stirred commotion, and raised unanswered questions with the audience, as Šrampf also argues. But while Šrampf is convinced that there is nothing wrong with that, Javoršek labels the questions as “burning,” which may also be construed as “provocative” or even “malicious.” Yet why would Javoršek reproach Strniša (and not necessarily Korun) in this way? The answer is found in Javoršek’s statements below:

Any return to the Middle Ages is ill judged, in the same way that any sudden change of time and place is an attack on human nature. However, it has to be admitted that a man may confront the dead—i.e., non-Slovenian and non-topical subject matter,

³⁰ Šrampf, *Večer* 22 January 1977.

³¹ During WW II, the church of St. Urh served as a military stronghold under the Italian and later the German authorities. It was used by the Slovenian Home Guard, also called “The White Guard.” In its basement, interrogations, torture, and killings took place. 126 victims of these deeds are buried in the tomb next to the church.

³² Javoršek *Delo* 22 January 1977.

³³ Javoršek *Delo* 22 January 1977.

or travel with it in various time periods and geography, but at the première in January 1977, he cannot and should not afford such luxury [...] But since we are part of a century of the unusually bright common sense [...], Strniša, with his mentality and a way of settling accounts had to end up badly [...] *Ljudožerci* involves a string of successive scenes or individual ideas, but that string does not stem from the inner history of man, but rather from the mystic claims that cannot be revealed [...] So Strniša's drama is thus not in any way associated with the dramaturgy of this world.³⁴

Javoršek, therefore, reproaches Strniša with incompetence, non-contemporaneity, medievalness, obsolescence, and anachronistic features in all aspects: the formal, the contextual, and the conceptual—the formal by following the example of medieval drama forms (he attributes vagueness, obscurity, disorder, unreasonableness, imperfection, and disarray to the form); the contextual, since through the characters of Prior and Komtur, the space analysis and background music introduce metaphysical impressions of transcendence; the conceptual, since the play expresses disbelief in the humanity of people who only rely on themselves and do not acknowledge any respect for transcendence.

Javoršek is sharpest when he ponders Strniša's possible motivation and allegorical character of the main drama motif—i.e., cannibalism. He claims that the atrocities that took place during WW II at St. Urh were “the only viable explanation for Strniša's *Ljudožerci*. In *Ljudožerci*, everything is just the way it was at St. Urh or even more real than the reality itself, for poetry multiplies reality with unsuspected presences.”³⁵ Here and in two other places of his review of Strniša's *Ljudožerci*, Javoršek alludes to and also openly claims that Strniša created an analogy of reality that he, in fact, “never meant” to create, and that this is “the greatest and the most shameful tragedy of Christianity [...], which could only be described by France Balantič.”³⁶ All these quotes show that Javoršek does not agree with Strniša's vision of the contemporary world (or the world as it is presented in the play), which Javoršek interprets as vague, obscure, malicious, probably utterly evil, and, of course, empty in light of the Transcendent. Javoršek is clearly of the opposite opinion, as he claims that such a description cannot correspond to the “contemporary world,” whose principle is humanity and reason.

³⁴ Javoršek, *Delo* 22 January 1977.

³⁵ Javoršek, *Delo* 22 January 1977.

³⁶ Javoršek, *Delo* 22 January 1977.

The second staging, 1987

Korun's second time directing *Ljudožerci* provoked an incomparably large response and much more public interest than the first. This was not so much due to its content, but rather because of the injunction³⁷ sought by Strniša's widow—namely, the archive of the Slovenian Theatre Institute preserved as many as twenty-five reactions, listings, and controversies, which is four times more than Korun's first (seven) and third (six) stagings of the same text. Among them, there are eight listings, and the majority of them also mention the theater's conflict with “the heiress or representative,”³⁸ which provided good advertising fodder for the performance: The (temporary) injunction—although it was not the “usual” sort of injunction—made its contribution and raised unprecedented interest among the spectators.”³⁹ This surely adds up to the fact that out of twenty-five reactions to the staging, there are fourteen that predominantly or altogether raise the issue of the injunction and the reasons for it, and almost all the others at least mention it. Numerous Slovenian literary, theatre, and cultural workers—e.g., Andrej Inkret, Peter Božič, Janez Stanek, Tine Velikonja, and Aleš Berger—“voiced their opinions” on this issue. The core of the discussion of “Korun's other Cannibals” is therefore the question of why Strniša's widow condemned Korun's staging, which dazzled the reviews, but did not drown them out. On the other hand, both issues—problematization of the injunction and understanding of the drama—are associated with one another, as they both prove the importance of the theatre and its role in the then Slovenian and Yugoslav society.

Despite the reviewers' and public's focus on the “drama” related to the injunction on the staging, Strniša's drama and Korun's staging were elaborated on and reviewed in detail by four reviewers: Vojko Cuder,⁴⁰ Andrej Inkret,⁴¹ Jernej Novak,⁴² and Dušan Željeznov.⁴³ Novak and Inkret also reviewed the first staging in 1977. Inkret almost completely sums up his first analysis of Strniša's text, but complements it with more elaborate conclusions—e.g., “those [...] ‘ghastly clowns’ do not do anything that other people would not do, entangled in the general bloody slaughter of war.”⁴⁴ On the one hand, Inkret's 1977 analysis of *Ljudožerci* was traced in the same manner as in 1987, but in 1987, it more accurately names the consequences of Strniša's cannibalism: “For this reason, it is inevitable that they seduce,

³⁷ The term injunction refers here to a purely juristic formulation for a judicially enforced delay of the premiere staging of *Ljudožerci* in 1987.

³⁸ Jože Krajnc, “Ljudožerci na prostosti,” *Večer* 17 December 1987.

³⁹ Vojko Cuder, “Ljudožerci – njihov sedaj in tukaj,” *Primorske novice* 22 December 1987.

⁴⁰ Cuder, *Primorske novice* 22 December 1987.

⁴¹ Andrej Inkret, “Strniševi in Korunovi Ljudožerci,” *Delo* 23 December 1987.

⁴² Jernej Novak, “Ljudožerci kot čisti teater,” *Dnevnik* 24 December 1987.

⁴³ Dušan Željeznov, “Končno Ljudožerci,” *Večer* 29 December 1987.

⁴⁴ Inkret, *Delo* 23 December 1987.

kill and also eat each other”—this is something that was already stated in his first review, but in the second one, he continues: “and when the war is over, he remains alive and makes himself available to the new time only as a slaughterer; as the deaf, forgetful butcher Peter Pajot.”⁴⁵ This time, however, he partly leaves out the review of Strniša’s text (and Korun’s directing, since the latter was completely different from the first time). For instance, he omits the judgment that Strniša’s interest was primarily moral or that Strniša considers his views beyond reproach. The judgment on the text’s “infantilism” is also left out.⁴⁶ Certainly, for Inkret, the second staging of *Ljudožerci*, in comparison to the first, is better, and he is more lenient towards Strniša’s text.

Novak’s assessment of Korun’s second directing of *Ljudožerci* scarcely relies on his first, 1977 review. He assessed that in the first staging the directing was less “radical,” which corresponds to Inkret’s review of the same performance, and that there was “nothing really dreadful,” while the 1987 performance was, according to him, “loaded with stage energy.” Also, Novak’s analysis of Strniša’s text is no longer completely abstract; he finds the meaning of Strniša’s play in “the logic of survival,” where:

the flesh that first had to be lured through tricks [...] starts to offer itself. It starts to impose itself when Pajot no longer feels like doing the butchering. That is when he kills out of mercy – he is just “the dreadful clown”, the master of his trade, who gets rid of human distress as best he can [...] This dance macabre is substantiated by the feeling that people increasingly call death upon us and death is revealed as something that is an integral component of the human world.⁴⁷

What seems to be the logic of survival for one is therefore the logic of death for another, and humankind cannot possibly escape this vicious cycle.

Dušan Željczov’s review in the newspaper *Večer* strongly resembles Javoršek’s review of the first staging of *Ljudožerci*. It is not necessarily similar on the level of attributing value to the text, but rather on the level of understanding its political connotation, since, similarly to Javoršek, Željczov’s review states that Strniša’s text “incorporates very scarce elements of drama formulation.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, he claims that *Ljudožerci* is “quite an interesting text, written with a highly poetic, almost transcendental and

⁴⁵ Inkret, *Delo* 23 December 1987.

⁴⁶ Inkret, *Naši razgledi* 28 January 1977.

⁴⁷ Novak, *Dnevnik* 24 December 1987.

⁴⁸ Željczov, *Večer* 29 December 1987.

philosophical as well as metaphysical or even cosmic meaning,”⁴⁹ and then that the text “due to its complexity, will not spark so much interest in the general public as it conveys in its dreadful message.”⁵⁰ Therefore, it seems that he attributes certain peculiarity, intangibility, and incomprehensibility or even non-contemporaneity to *Ljudožerci* that might put off the typical Slovenian theater audience. On the other hand, he sees “our time” as the time of “transition from war to peace,” which, at the end of the 1980s may only evoke the post-war mentality of putting the social and personal life of a traumatized society into order, and not the topical, virtual need of putting things into order in the 1980s.

However, the burning debate over whether the injunction on the staging by Strniša’s widow was justified or not is not entirely unrelated to the conceptual reaction to the drama—quite the contrary, it is essentially linked with reactions to Korun’s 1977 staging. The facts regarding the ban are most clearly revealed by Strniša’s widow, Thea Skinder Strniša, in her response, published in the newspaper *Delo*, in which she argues that she was in contact with the theater at least three months prior to the listed première and not just a few days prior, as stated by Inkret and Kante. She also reveals the reasons for the ban: it was Strniša’s express wish that Korun should not direct his plays anymore, since Strniša was extremely disappointed with his direction in 1977.⁵¹ The conceptual reason for this, according to Janez Stanek, was supposedly Korun’s interpretation of the character of Prior: “Prior is namely the main character in the drama, the bearer of anti-play—against the group of “the cannibals”—and is therefore the herald of the clearly explicit and essentially ethical message of the drama, which is that now, as always, it is only possible to resist cannibalism on the basis of ethics, which is grounded in transcendental reality.”⁵² Obviously, Strniša felt that Korun’s direction diminished the meaning of Prior and thus removed the ethical message with a strong transcendental note from the drama. In order to explain the changes that hurt Strniša so much, we may turn to Javoršek’s above-mentioned review and Stanek’s explanation. The latter labels Javoršek’s review as an unusual text, since on the one hand, he enthusiastically praises the director, and on the other, he strongly criticizes Strniša’s drama. Javoršek, according to Stanek’s belief, describes the drama as:

medieval, ‘black, reactionary, unenlightened’ text, the content of which [...] was presented by Javoršek in a way that leads the ill-informed reader of the review to easily think that the drama

⁴⁹ The term “cosmic meaning” refers to Strniša’s use of the term “cosmic consciousness” (*vesoljska zavest*), which means a transcendental and universal viewpoint of poetry beyond time, space, and every current event or human desire.

⁵⁰ Željczov, *Večer* 29 December 1987.

⁵¹ Thea Skinder Strniša, “Korun in Strniša prepovedana,” *Delo* 10 November 1987.

⁵² Skinder Strniša, *Delo* 10 November 1987.

[...] praises the all-known criminal acts of the White guard at St. Urh during World War II [...]. All, even the simplest, readers of the drama, shall easily convince themselves that such interpretation is not true.⁵³

Stanek's description of the events surrounding the first staging of *Ljudožerci* that corresponds to the above analysis of Javoršek's review from 1977 helps us to understand Strniša's conceptual reticence regarding Korun's direction, but above all, it displays the essential differences between Strniša's view of the world and "the then cultural and political situation" that, according to Stanek and Korun, "did not particularly favor the text."⁵⁴ If by minimizing the character of Prior, as is alluded to by Korun and theorized by Stanek, the creators of the first staging of *Ljudožerci* in fact strove to "help" Strniša, then this means that the representation of transcendence as the highest ethical instance embodied by Prior's character was unacceptable in the then cultural and political milieu. Nevertheless, the performance on "cannibalism" contradicted the official story of the heroic resistance of a nation against the occupier,⁵⁵ and after all, against the ideology that perceived man as Man, or Reason personified, and therefore the only standard of ethically acceptable behaviour.⁵⁶

The third staging, 2002

Compared to the political controversy of Korun's first and much-noticed second staging of *Ljudožerci*, the third went almost unnoticed. Out of six articles related to the performance preserved by the archive of the Slovenian Theatre Institute, there are four listings and two theatre reviews. The reviews were written by Petra Pogorevc,⁵⁷ and Blaž Lukan,⁵⁸ but an extensive article by Gregor Butala⁵⁹ and an interview with the director by Slavko Pezdir⁶⁰ need to be examined.

None of the reviewers were very fond of Korun's last staging of *Ljudožerci*, and Lukan even mentions "spectators leaving the performance."

⁵³ Skinder Strniša, *Delo* 10 November 1987.

⁵⁴ Skinder Strniša, *Delo* 10 November 1987.

⁵⁵ A simplified version of this story states that the German and Italian armies occupied the Slovenian national territory and the Partisan army heroically resisted this occupation. Strniša shows that the resistance wasn't solely heroic and that it also involved atrocities against humanity.

⁵⁶ For a detailed analysis of Strniša's poetics and his perception of transcendence from the perspective of existentialist philosophy, see Kermauner (1968: 71–137).

⁵⁷ Petra Pogorevc, "Kanibalska burka," *Dnevnik* 15 March 2002.

⁵⁸ Blaž Lukan, "Ljudožerci po bistvu," *Delo* 15 March 2002.

⁵⁹ Gregor Butala, "Igra, ki gre skozi želodec," *Dnevnik* 13 March 2002.

⁶⁰ Slavko Pezdir, "Dogaja se od pekla do nebes in z vsem, kar je vmes," *Delo* 12 March 2002.

But the reasons for this are not the same as the reasons for “leaving Korun’s première in the City Theater in the distant year of 1977.”⁶¹ The first are linked to “the lengthy character” of the performance, and the second to its social and political criticism. Both reviews highlight “the clownish” and “inhuman” nature of the characters while “the (essential) component of humanity in their performance is absent.”⁶² The reviewers only barely, if at all express themselves on the text of the play. Lukan’s assessment, especially, is entirely dedicated to the staging and not to Strniša’s text.

Interestingly enough, both reviews, as well as Butala’s listing in some way mention the controversy surrounding both previous stagings of *Ljudožerci* (1977, 1987). The first two “due to some of the then unusual directing ideas, social and political taunting, and allusions to post-war killings, but also due to prominent individuals that supposedly recognized themselves in Strniša’s text.”⁶³ The reviewers therefore draw attention to the socially critical note of the text and refer to the actions that took place immediately after WW II and that were still veiled in silence in the 1970s and 1980s. This reference and social and political taunting seem obvious to them; they are not at all secret or hermetic. For this reason, it is even more relevant that such direct mention of post-war killings and the hidden events that took place during the war do not emerge in reaction to Korun’s staging in the 1970s and 1980s (on the contrary, in the 1970s, Javoršek associates “the cannibals” with the events at St. Urh, near Ljubljana), nor in relation to the then topical staging (2002), but are mentioned in 2002 only in relation to the previous two stagings.

On the other hand, all three lengthier newspaper pieces on three of Korun’s stagings of *Ljudožerci* are integrated in a completely different social context than the first two stagings, which is nevertheless shown in the conceptual core that is seen as the meaning of Strniša’s text. Petra Pogorevc expresses this most clearly:

Numerous political dimensions of wonderfully multi-layered Cannibals [...] have lost their previous edge as time goes by, but the pro-European capitalist everyday, without a doubt, shows such abundance of features of cannibalism that it would be possible to find the topical surrogate images on stage.⁶⁴

Pogorevc, like Lukan, establishes that Korun did not engage in such interpretation and dramaturgy, but rather attempted to get closer to “the secret that, despite the author’s clearly declared religious affiliation, is still set in a way as to contain a wide range of various relations stretching from pure

⁶¹ Lukan, *Delo* 15 March 2002.

⁶² Lukan, *Delo* 15 March 2002.

⁶³ Butala, *Dnevnik* 13 March 2002.

⁶⁴ Pogorevc, *Dnevnik* 15 March 2002.

atheism to pure religion, to put it simply.”⁶⁵ The secret Korun presents is the fundamentally ethical question of the origin of evil linked with a pleiad of the relevant existential issues that concern people today, but above all turn back to the twentieth century: what we, people, are capable of doing in the worst distress or in the name of a particular idea; what grounds our conviction on the difference between good and evil; why do we act in the most extremely abominable ways, etc.

Buljan’s *Ljudožerci* and present times

Other than Aleš Novak, who directed *Ljudožerci* in 1995 at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television, the only director besides Korun to put Strniša’s play on a professional stage is Ivica Buljan,⁶⁶ which he did in 2017 at the Slovene National Theatre, Maribor. This staging was accompanied by a lengthy review and two longer interviews with the director and Diana Koloini, the director’s assistant.⁶⁷ Both interviews—especially the one published in *Delo* by Ženja Leiler—contain extensive introductory writings interpreting Strniša’s drama. They present the past stagings and partly also the history of their reception. From the perspective of the present subject matter, the most prominent feature of the directing or staging, mentioned in both the interviews and the theater review by Melita Fostnerič Hajnšek, is the creators’ awareness regarding the actualization of Strniša’s drama. The creators obviously strove to find the dimension of “cannibalism” in the contemporary world. Buljan, for instance, states:

By naming the themes elaborated in the drama—mass killings, financial malversations, the Church involved in politics, the ordinary family’s submission to all authorities, perversity, prostitution, the inclination of unimportant people towards

⁶⁵ Pogorevc, *Dnevnik* 15 March 2002.

⁶⁶ Ivica Buljan is “deeply interested in modernist dramatists and poets, such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Heiner Mueller, Robert Walser, Elfriede Jelinek, Miroslav Krleža, Boto Strauss, and Bernard-Marie Koltès (who represents the focus of his authorial interest). He has worked as a guest lecturer at Académie expérimentelle des théâtres in Paris, Brussels, and Moscow. He has also taught at the La Mamma School lead by the famous director Ellen Stewart in New York. He is a professor at National Theatre schools in Saint Etienne and Rennes in France. In the period between 1998 and 2002 he was the director of the Croatian National Drama Theatre in Split. He is the co-founder of the theatre Mini teater in Ljubljana and the founder and artistic director of the World Theatre Festival in Zagreb” (<http://www.mini-teater.si/en/articles/1260/ivica-buljan>).

⁶⁷ The reception of the staging at the time of writing the present text is not yet finished, as the play is still in production. Therefore, the selection of response presented here is only the reflection of the current situation and not the reception as a whole. For easier access to the quoted texts, the online versions of reviews and interviews are cited in References, along with the links to these writings.

Nazism, homosexual scenes, incest [...], it may seem to us that this is a contemporary text in search of Sarah Kane.⁶⁸

On the other hand, Buljan sees “cannibalism” metaphorically: “Strniša recounts the story of Pajot who begins his business as a small craftsman, but gradually, with the accumulation of human flesh, surpasses his own production and thus transforms into a contemporary capitalist tycoon.”⁶⁹

Koloini, who was involved in Korun’s second directing of *Ljudožerci*, sees the topicality of the drama in relation to “the brutal discourse with terrifying arguments and motifs that have prevailed recently in the Slovenian space, most extremely during the refugee crisis, the Family Code and many other similar happenings.”⁷⁰

The authors of this staging therefore do not base their understanding of *Ljudožerci* in the context of WW II or even on any concrete events taking place during or after the war, as was the case of some of the reviewers of various stagings in the past; however, the existentialist issues are, at least conceptually, according to the authors, put in the background; whereas the social and ethical issues are in the foreground.

The creators of this staging therefore strove to place *Ljudožerci* in the contemporary context and not reactivate something from the past. But Strniša’s drama is contemporary in and of itself, because it indirectly thematizes the shallowness of a consumer society, which has, after all, often been the topic of the most prominent Slovenian dramas of the twenty-first century.⁷¹ In her introduction to the interview with the director and the director’s assistant of the performance, Ženja Leiler mentions the controversy of the drama due to its allusions to post-war killings, but it seems that the thematization of war and post-war events, as well as the existentialist concept of Korun’s last staging from 2002 have given way to a socially critical understanding of Strniša’s “cannibals” in terms of the criticism of consumerism and capitalism.

***Ljudožerci* and Slovenian reality**

The analysis of newspaper articles and reviews of Strniša’s *Ljudožerci* between the years 1977 and 2017 confirms the hypothesis of Silviya Borovnik, who argues that the year 1991 was the threshold that signified a shift in relations between dramatic and theater creation on one hand and

⁶⁸ Ženja Leiler, “Dramska žival Gregor Strniša,” *Delo* 12 May 2017.

⁶⁹ Damjana Kolar, “Ljudožerci na odru mariborske Drame,” *Mladina* 10 May 2017.

⁷⁰ Kolar, *Mladina* 10 May 2017.

⁷¹ Such social criticism is found in dramas by Matjaž Zupančič, Vinko Möderndorfer, Simona Semenič, and other male and female twenty-first century Slovenian playwrights.

society or authority on the other, which partly explains the different receptions of Strniša's *Ljudožerci* before and after Slovenia's independence. Her hypothetical point of departure is the conviction, expressed by Pirjevec and Rupel, respectively, that Slovenian literature (before independence) was particularly tightly interwoven with Slovenian social reality, since it was used as a substitute, as a means of "national self-foundation" (Pirjevec 1978: 58). Before and after independence, stagings of Strniša's *Ljudožerci* were received from an ideological standpoint (especially with Javoršek), as was the debate on the justification of the injunction of the performance in 1987.⁷²

Simultaneously, the analysis of the reception of *Ljudožerci* confirms Silvija Borovnik's findings—i.e., that socially critical texts thematizing "the political changes in a socialist state [...] emerged for many years after World War II" (Borovnik 2005: 8). The latter is obvious not only due to Strniša's temporal and place settings of *Ljudožerci*, which could also be seen as timeless (as is the case of the authors of the last staging of this drama), but on the basis of the reactions to the stagings, because some reviewers see the time of war and the post-war period explicitly as that "of the present time," even at the end of the 1980s. For this reason, Slovenian independence is a threshold beyond which WW II (from the perspective of the reception of *Ljudožerci*) is no longer seen "as present time." On the other hand, it is an event that, according to the analysis of Silvia Borovnik, sets art and especially literature and drama free, so that aesthetics rather than social issues are foregrounded.

However, Troha finds that relations between the authorities and artistic, dramatic, and theatrical production in the second half of the twentieth century were ambivalent, since "in the eyes of the public, drama had a status of dissidence and a strong support of the regime that enabled it to flourish" (Troha 2007: 5). Actually, Slovenian drama in the 1970s and 1980s flourished in a way that is difficult to imagine now, especially if we take into account the level of misunderstanding Simona Semenič was faced with after having received the Prešeren Award in 2018.⁷³ If artistic, dramatic, and theatrical production at the highest level now seems alien to the general public and is not understood and not seen as their own, the opposite is characteristic of Slovenian drama of the 1960s to the 1990s. This is shown in Troha's analysis of the reception of theater production after WW II.

The present analysis is based on a comparison of theater attendance, so it is possible to argue that "in the 1960s, the fluctuation of attendance conveys two distinct swings [...]. The two swings surprisingly coincide with the break-through performances in the Drama National Theatre and Oder 57" (Troha 2007: 142). Troha observes that the increase in attendance of

⁷² We have to add that Strniša constantly rejected the ideological interpretations of *Ljudožerci* and his other plays. His socially critical taunting was always directed against 'anthropocentric humanism', which sees man as Man.

⁷³ On the controversy related to the Prešeren Award in 2018, see Rak (2018).

theatrical performances in the 1960s and 1970s is in direct proportion to more or less obvious social critiques of performances, while in the 1970s, more distinctly auto-reflexive, modernist approaches of the theatre of the absurd, which turned away from social critique, caused a decline in the attendance at theatre performances (Troha 2007: 147–48). It seems, therefore, that the social critique of drama (or theatre performances) is related to its shock value, and *Ljudožerci* shows that this is not enough for a play to succeed.

Despite the absence of official censorship, Troha perceives that after WW II there was unofficial, “telephone censorship,”⁷⁴ which became somewhat institutionalised in 1974. Troha analyzes the structure of the management of public cultural institutions after 1974: “The management board replaced the council of a cultural organization that ‘consisted of two sections: the representatives of the employees [...] and the representatives of the broader social community’” (Troha 2007: 105). Such a regime, of course, enabled the local and governmental cultural and political milieu to have an impact on the (non-)staging of particular plays. The cultural and political milieu had a relevant or even decisive say, while at the same time, the bans and the blocking of some performances (e.g., *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dušan Jovanović) often just meant “an introduction to later [...] success” (Troha 2007: 149).

In fact, the same may be claimed with regards to Strniša’s *Ljudožerci*. Although the first staging was not successful, since it received half the responses of other performances in the same theater in 1977 and was highly criticized, including by Strniša himself, quite the opposite may be claimed about its 1987 staging. The scandal provoked by the ban on the performance undoubtedly caused more reactions, although it has to be considered that many reviewers (e.g., Stanek, Božič, etc.) found Korun’s second attempt at directing this play better or more adequate. This actually confirms the assumption on “the link between the fluctuation of theater attendance and publicity” (Troha 2007: 151), which, nevertheless, in light of the consumerist world that Strniša, after all, criticizes, is not that “surprising,” as Troha claims.

At the same time, it is possible to confirm, on the conceptual level, that the year 1991 denotes a turning point in the social role of drama or theatre in Slovenia (Borovnik 2005: 17–18). The responses to Korun’s second directing of *Ljudožerci* (1987) already display a potentially more concrete grasping of “cannibalism” and understanding of the time-and-space circumstances of the dramatic action in *Ljudožerci*, although the post-war

⁷⁴ The term “telephone censorship” denotes the informal power of culturally and politically influential people seen in the fact that they can prevent the publishing or staging of a text by making a telephone call. In the 1980s and especially in the 1990s such censorship increasingly turned into a mechanism of economic power (Dović 2008, Troha 2008).

killings have not yet been explicitly mentioned. Nevertheless, the responses to Korun's first two stagings of *Ljudožerci* are more similar than the responses to both post-independence stagings. Buljan's directing, for instance, explicitly (according to the director) actualizes the action and does not deal with renewed thoughts on the (presumably) original meaning of Strniša's drama, especially not in the concrete socially critical sense of drawing attention to the reality of post-war killings. The reception, therefore, transforms from an ideologically and even politically critical orientation based on reconsideration of the relation among humanism, metaphysics, and ethics, towards a particular economic system that dehumanizes human beings.

The post-war killings only appear in press in relation to the stagings of *Ljudožerci* after Korun's third direction of the play, in 2002 (prior to that, Jože Snoj discusses this issue in his *Interpretacije*).⁷⁵ However, this is thematization turned to the past that mentions the controversial side of *Ljudožerci* as a historical fact and not as something that is topical in the most recent stagings of this drama. Besides, it seems that the subject of post-war killings addressed the spectators and the authors of the performances in the 1970s and 1980s when this issue was not out in the open. Later, it was no longer seen as the essential element of *Ljudožerci*, but rather its historically limited effect, which in contemporary time (2002, 2017) no longer has addressees. The recent directing and critical reception of *Ljudožerci* bring forward Strniša's critical tackling of consumerism and, in Buljan's interpretation, especially the brutality of capitalism. Korun's third staging, which, according to the director's intent, as stated by Petra Pogorevc, does not follow the socially critical frame of drama in 2002, no longer turns to contemporary reflection on the metaphysical nature of ethical questioning. This means that it has been assessed to have been unsuccessful by reviewers, which is probably the best proof of the shifts in the social position of drama after 1991.

On this basis, it is therefore finally possible to conclude that the changed social role of drama and theater after 1991 can be seen in the analysis of the reception of the stagings of Strniša's *Ljudožerci*. At the same time, the analysis shows which questions Strniša opens up beyond concrete socially political criticism and the historical position of the text. This is chiefly the criticism of consumerism, not in the sense of criticizing the social system, but rather in the sense of existential(istic) criticism of buying happiness. The development of contemporary Slovenian drama (and literature in general) after 1991 shows that, even here, Strniša was prophetic. But his predictions should not be understood in terms of "clairvoyance," but rather as a poetic detection of perverted social and mental relationships that reveal themselves to refined observers before they actually become the most burning issues of

⁷⁵ See Snoj (1993: 166–78).

social reality. However, this too, is probably only one, most recent side to the reception of *Ljudožerci* that will surely see different stagings in the future. This will all be possible, because the very core of Strniša's drama is the thematization of the human attitude towards death and mortality, which will always remain a key issue of the human existence.

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POVZETEK

LJUDOŽERCI MED LJUDMI

Ljudožerci slovenskega pesnika in dramatika Gregorja Strniše (1939–1987) so bili na slovenskih odrih doslej uprizorjeni petkrat, in sicer leta 1977, 1987, 1995, 2002 in leta 2017. Od tega je dramo trikrat (1977, 1987 in 2002) režiral Mile Korun, po enkrat pa Aleš Novak (1995) in Ivica Buljan (2017). Črpajoč iz predhodnjih analiz družbene vloge slovenske dramatike v drugi polovici 20. stoletja (Borovnik, Troha, Poniž, Kermauner, Orel) preverjamo hipotezo, da leto 1991 pomeni bistveno spremembo v družbeni vlogi dramtike na slovenskem. Obenem skozi analizo odzivov preverjamo predpostavko, da so za razumevanje slovenske poosamosvojitvene literature ključna osemdeseta leta (Kos). Analiza recepcije Ljudožercev obe hipotezi deloma potrdi, obenem pa tudi specifična posamezne posebne vidike družbene vloge dramskega žanra in Strniševe poetike, ki vplivajo na družbeni odmev Strniševih Ljudožercev.