

Conceptions of “Repetition” in Post-Yugoslav Slovene Literature and Film

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*From mountain to mountain nine echoes of: no,
Heard by the neighbor as: yes.*

Edvard Kocbek, “On Freedom of Mind” (“O Svobodi Uma”)¹

*You will see the Ninth Country, the promised
One in reach. Three paths lead you there.
Thrice a leap, thrice a sound, you will be transplanted.*

Fabjan Hafner, “Do tri. Tja”²

*“P.H. in the Ninth Country?”
“For the ninth time he knows not the country”*

Peter Handke, *Ein Jahr aus der Nacht gesprochen*³

Abstract

It has been a generation since Slovene independence from the former Yugoslavia. How have writers and filmmakers, domestic and international, confronted this experience of independence, and Slovenia’s subsequent integration into the European Union? This article offers several potential paths back to the past, beginning with a reconstructed dialogue between Peter Handke and Drago Jančar on the topic of independence in the summer of 1991. This polemic exchange hinges on a question of repetition: in what ways was history repeating itself for Slovenia at the end of the Cold War? Possible though inconclusive answers are found in the films of Damjan Kozole and a novel by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho set in Slovenia and adapted into American and Japanese films: at work in Slovenia during the 1990s is a maddening tension between historical repetition and the iterative process of “spontaneous order” associated with free-market capitalism. The essay

¹ “iz gore v goro devet odmevov: ne, / pri sosedu se slišijo kot: da” (Kocbek 2004: 152). Scammell and Taufer (2004: 153) translate the lines as “from mountain to mountain I send nine echoes of ‘no.’ / My neighbor hears it as ‘yes.’” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

² “boš uzrl deveto deželo, obljubljeno / in dosegljivo. Do nje vodi troje poti. / Troskok, trizvok te bo presdil tja.” (Hafner 2020: 92).

³ “‘P.H. im Neunten Land?’ ‘Neunmal kennt er das Land nicht.’” (Handke 2010: 588).

concludes with a study of Handke's post-Nobel Prize translations of Fabjan Hafner's Slovene poetry in German. At the level of poetic form, Handke's translations listen closely to Hafner's pleas for an interlocuter and despair about repetition. Placed alongside one another, Handke's German and Hafner's Slovene together offer what neither alone could readily convey: a variation on repetition that transcends history, the market, and the psyche in a fleeting aesthetic experience of *dvojina*.

Key words: Paulo Coelho, Fabjan Hafner, Peter Handke, Damjan Kozole, Slovenia, identity, historical repetition

Introduction

It has been nearly thirty years, a generation, since Slovenia's independence from the former Yugoslavia. From 1992 until joining the European Union in 2004, Slovenia was on its own. Has enough time passed for us to revisit these decisions, separatist or self-determined? It is not without trepidation that I pose the question: was breaking off from Yugoslavia, and joining the European Union, the right thing to do?

Peter Handke's critique of Slovenian independence in his 1991 essay *Abschied des Träumers vom neunten Land* (The dreamer's farewell to the ninth country) has, for better or worse, been overshadowed by the polemics of his later essay, *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia* (1997; *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien* 1995), written in the middle of the Yugoslav Wars. A through-line between the two essays is Handke's caustic claim that politicians and journalists—particularly Western European but also domestic—were maliciously exploiting instability in the region. However, while Handke's argument in the latter case would side with Serbs as, in his presentation, the “victims” of a demonizing media narrative spun by German and Austrian journalists to expedite the collapse of Yugoslavia, in the former case the critique is levied more specifically at Slovene intellectuals whom he accused of disposing of the grand historical narrative of Yugoslavia and, in pursuing an independent state of Slovenia, capitulating to the exploitative interests of international capital.⁴

⁴ John K. Cox (2005) argued that Handke's case against Slovenian independence consisted of three aspects: 1) an idiosyncratic fear that independence would disrupt his enchanted image of Slovenia, his “private land of milk and honey”; 2) a general rejection of nationalism and supranational regional concepts—e.g. “Central Europe” and “Balkans”; and 3) an historical appreciation for Yugoslavia for “its independence between the superpower blocs; its stunningly attractive diversity of peoples, religious, cuisines, and landscapes; its leftist or progressive politics; and, perhaps most controversially, the safety and equality it afford the Slovene people who (Handke asserts) joined Yugoslavia both wisely

Swiftly translated into Slovene, *Abschied* was treated to an immediate backlash in August and September of 1991 by local intellectuals publishing mostly in the newspaper *Delo*.⁵ In particular, Drago Jančar’s *Poročilo iz devete dežele: privid ali resničnost* (Report from the ninth country: illusion or reality), published on the 10th of October, has been seen as the exemplary rebuttal to Handke’s misunderstanding—or perhaps frivolous misconstrual—of Slovene reality in Yugoslavia. Against Handke’s unfalsifiable claim that “the Slovenian folk had never dreamed of a state,”⁶ Jančar would fire back that “the dreamer [Handke] is painfully waking up.”⁷ Already in 1991, Michael Biggins keenly foresaw how this polemic between Handke and his Slovene critics would play out:

Handke is approaching politics from the perspective of literature and the imagination; and his Slovene counterparts are bound to travel in the opposite direction, assailing Handke’s literary vision of reality [...] by way of the practical experience that the last few years have brought them. (181)

Handke’s *Abschied* and Jančar’s *Poročilo* could be synchronized and re-read as a debate in which the interlocutors interrupt and talk past one another. Whereas Handke claims that he could not “see a reason” for Slovene independence,⁸ Jančar argues that for anyone who experienced Yugoslav communism, it is impossible to *not* see a reason for independence. In its rhetorical structure and style of personal narrative, Jančar’s “report” is perhaps better described as a “re-tort,” a twisting-back of Handke’s argument upon itself. It would not be the last time that Jančar would model an essay on Handke’s work: the title of his 1997 essay *Kratko poročilo iz dolgo obleganega mesta* (Short report from a long-besieged city) is a direct

and voluntarily in 1918” (89). After the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Handke in 2019, Slavoj Žižek (2019) suggested that Slovenia’s aspirations to become part of the European Union angered Handke, who “dismissed Slovenes as slaves of Austrian and German capital, saying they sold their legacy to the West.”

⁵ According to Neva Šlibar’s bibliographical research, *Abschied* was translated as “Sanjačevo slovo od devete dežele: resničnost, ki je minila: Spomin na Slovenijo” by Vitomir Smolej and Slavko Fras, and first fully appeared in *Naši razgledi* (Nr. 16) on 30 August 1991, with excerpts in *Delo* a week prior (21 August). Rebuttals came from: Peter Božič, Drago Medved, Dušan Jelinčič (in *Primorski dnevnik*), Srečko Zajc, František Benhart, Dušan Mevlja, Peter Kolšek, Vladimir Kavčič (*Naši razgledi*), Alojz Rebula (*Družina*), and Boris Pahor.

⁶ “Nie, niemals hatte das slowenische Volk so etwas wie einen Staatentraum” (Handke 1991: 19).

⁷ “Sanjač se mukoma prebuja” (Jančar 1991: 7).

⁸ “das Hauptwort ‘Grund’ kann, für mich jedenfalls, nur bestehen zusammen mit dem Zeitwort ‘sehen’. Unch ich sehe keinen Grund, keinen einzigen [...] für den Staat Slowenien” (Handke 1991:9)

intertextual play merging the titles of Handke's novel *Short Letter, Long Farewell* (1974; *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* 1972) and Zbigniew Herbert's collection of poetry *Report from a Besieged City and Other Poems* (1985; *Raport z oblężonego Miasta i inne wiersze* 1983). Herbert concludes the eponymous poem with the line "and only our dreams have not been humiliated" ("i tylko sny nasze nie zostały upokorzone"), which might as well have been the Slovene rebuttal to Handke, despite the fact that Jančar too refers to a mistranslation of this very line in Slovene as "only our dreams are [left] humiliated" ("in samo naše sanje so ponižane"). Dreams remain, contra Jančar's misreading or the grammatical erratum; or perhaps this is what he *really* meant to say?⁹ Counteracting Handke's subjective experience as a "guest of reality" in Slovenia¹⁰ is Jančar's experience of "absurd fate" (*absurdna usoda*) when he found himself in the mid 1970s sitting in the same prison in Maribor where his father had been held under the Nazis a generation prior Jančar (1991: 19). In this sense, the pair of essays is not unlike a thesis (against independence) and an antithesis (in favor) whereby Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004 might have later represented, for some at least, a kind of geopolitical synthesis: neither Yugoslav nor independent, but newly "European," the negotiated outcome of Slovenia-as-member-state might have brought Handke and Jančar together in dissatisfaction.

"A and B" ("A i B"), wrote Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš in a short text discovered after his death in 1989: two depictions of home, mysteriously bound together: the maternal, which Kiš located above enchanting and beautiful Kotor Bay in Montenegro, and the paternal, uncovered in "the worst rathole" imaginable, in Hungary.¹¹ Can something like this mysterious affinity exist between Handke's maternal myth of Slovenia and Jančar's harsh paternal "reality"? Can there be a reconciliation between the historical grandeur of Yugoslavia and the worst of an authoritarian regime, can there be another way?

This article examines two alternative "paths" back to reexamining this question: a comparison of the films of Slovene director Damjan Kozole and a novel about Slovenia by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, and a close examination of the Slovene poems of the late scholar and poet Fabjan Hafner and their recent translation into German by Handke. At stake in these case studies is the question of repetition: is independent Slovenia bound to find itself again within a yet another totalitarian supranational political structure? How will individual Slovenes manage an ongoing economic and cultural

⁹ See Herbert (1983: 83) for the original Polish, Jančar (1991: 19–20) for the Slovene citation, and Herbert (1985: 78) for an English translation.

¹⁰ "Gast der Wirklichkeit" (Handke 1991: 11).

¹¹ Kiš (1994: 129).

identitarian crisis? And how do writers and filmmakers express, challenge, and/or transcend the drive to repeat?

Kozole and Coelho

The experiential quality of “independent” Slovenia can be observed in a pair of films by Slovene director Damjan Kozole. Shot and set just before Slovenia joined the European Union, *Spare Parts* (*Rezervni deli* 2003) is a bleak allegory of the country as a trafficker of illegal migrants, many of whom cross the Italian border into Europe only to be drugged and their bodies harvested for organs. The film’s suspicions of an old *Neuordnung*—the resurrection of a repressed leader-figure, the compulsion to return to a state of subservience under the looming European Union—are manifest in the cyclical imagery of a local racetrack in Krško and the remission of the protagonist, Ludvik’s cancer.¹² Hitler, Ludvik reminds his younger associate in the human trafficking trade, *also* wanted to conquer all of Europe. The second, and most well-known of Kozole’s films, *A Call Girl* (*Slovenka*, 2009), is set just after Slovenia joined the EU and personifies the country through the character of Aleksandra, a young woman from Krško who is studying at the University of Ljubljana. Troubled by her parents’ divorce and bored with her English classes, Aleksandra leads a double life as a call-girl of prominent European politicians; and the more entangled she becomes in the underworld of prostitution, the more she suspects that everyone who looks at her knows her secret.

Despite the six-year interval between the two works, *Spare Parts* and *A Call Girl* treat the themes of repetition and disposability with a shared set of narrative structures and visual aesthetics. Character-doubling, recurring lines of dialogue, repeated road and train routes, visual reflections in mirrors and in the glass windows of the Ljubljana infrastructure; in short, Kozole’s aesthetic of repetition relentlessly drives home a criticism of—and perhaps, a voluntarily acquiescence to—what is portrayed as a doomed political trajectory.

Viewed alongside one another and as a single project, *Spare Parts* and *A Call Girl* together raise the question of why each of the films individually gently elides the origins of the desolation depicted. It is not simply that the two films resemble one another in the omission of an explicitly post-Yugoslav historical context; instead, *A Call Girl* is unmistakably an artistic improvement on the political allegory, a reassembly of *Spare Parts*, such that the films as a duo appear to participate in and benefit from the capitalist system that its allegorical narratives independently criticize. Underpinning the relationship between the films would be a notion of “spontaneous order” typically associated with political-economic thought

¹² See Karatani (2012) for more on the concept of “historical repetition.”

of Friedrich Hayek and defined as a process by which impersonal markets, rather than centralized governments, best direct the unforeseeable evolution of society.¹³ For instance, *A Call Girl* preserves and recycles elements of the writing, production, acting, and shot locations of *Spare Parts*; it tightens various narrative tropes (e.g., the overwhelming presence of mass media in everyday life) and upgrades its form from simple visual repetitions to a more sophisticated aesthetic of reflection and gazing; it also opens up, in a synthesis of the two films, a more complex national allegory. That is, by using a third fewer actors, *A Call Girl* ends up eliminating the many extras playing illegal immigrants in *Spare Parts*, and thus, at least metaphorically, relieves Slovenia of its “immigrant” problem upon joining the European Union. Moreover, an unexpected trope of resurrection emerges in the interstice of the films as the Macedonian immigrant (“Makedonka”) in *Spare Parts*, who sells herself to acquire American medicine for her boyfriend, aesthetically returns in the form of the “Slovenka” in *A Call Girl*.



The “Makedonka” in *Spare Parts*

¹³ Cantor and Cox (2010) offer several examples of how the economic concept of “spontaneous order” can illuminate works of literature.



The “Slovenka” in *A Call Girl*

As a single project, Kozole’s films depict contemporary Slovenes and immigrants struggling with capitalism on the periphery of Europe during a time of deepening global integration; along the borders, the protagonists take on jobs that call into question their ethical obligations to one another and to society at large. Slovenia, as allegorically portrayed by Kozole, has become both trafficker as well as illegal immigrant, prostitute and client; and while the modern infrastructure of Ljubljana induces neurotic self-reflection, the rest of the country remains in the shadows. Exhausted and alienated by the repetitive demands of the new economy but subconsciously wary of returning to previous systems of supranational governance, the Slovenia of Kozole’s films longs for a coherent sense of national identity; searching the countryside and on the periphery of the periphery, however, it does not know exactly where to find it.

This national allegorizing of Slovenia in Kozole’s films is, needless to say, not without its delusions. On the one hand, the films are, thematically speaking, unduly pessimistic about the country’s current state of affairs; no solutions are offered, not even a flight into the more innocuous forms of cultural Yugonostalgia. On the other hand, the films are overly optimistic in their presumptions that European audiences, to say nothing of the rest of the world, care enough about Slovenia to take notice of this pessimism to begin with. The question of national identity is answered with a narrative of stubborn dissatisfaction in *Spare Parts*, and with one of detached narcissism in *A Call Girl*.

An oblique look at the Slovene national identitarian and psychological predicament can be found in, of all places, the novel *Veronika Decides to Die* (1999; *Veronika Decide Morrer* 1998) by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho. In the story, the protagonist Veronika is a young and single librarian in Ljubljana who, traumatized by her parents’ divorce and unhappy with her independent life, tries to commit suicide by taking an overdose of

sleeping pills; when she wakes up in an asylum located in the countryside, she is fed the lie that, as a health consequence of her failed suicide attempt, she only has a few days to live. The novel is ostensibly life-affirming, for it is this falsely-construed but nevertheless ultimately accurate awareness of her impending mortality that spurs Veronika to a renewed lust for life.

One could certainly read a “national allegory” between the lines of Coelho’s tale. The work is explicitly set in the context of the Yugoslav Wars, with references made to the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia. More importantly, after downing the sleeping pills and in the moments before she collapses, Veronika writes a furious response to an article in a European magazine which had mockingly asked “Where is Slovenia?” (*Onde é a Eslovénia?*). Her otherwise final act is misinterpreted, the novel suggests, as the reason why Veronika decides to kill herself.

Ironically, the two “world” film adaptations of Coelho’s novel almost completely do away with Slovenia, recapitulating the socio-political problem captured by the haunting question: *Where is Slovenia?* The zany and special-effects enhanced Japanese adaptation (*Berónica ha shinu koto ni shita* 2005) directed by Horie Kei thoroughly wipes the work of any hint of Slovenia, resetting the story in Tokyo, whimsically renaming the characters (e.g., “Veronika” becomes “Towa”, meaning “eternity”), and swapping the novel’s references to crises in El Salvador and Bosnia for actual footage of the War in Afghanistan. Like Veronika, Towa is depressed, though not because of the divorce of her parents; instead, it is the suffocating traditionalism of her domineering mother (dressed in a *kimono*) whom she, like Veronika in the original novel, refuses to confront. The film’s pessimism takes the form of an absurdist performance in the asylum, which may have inspired a 2012 staging of the work by Nishiura Masaki and performed at the Haiyūza Theater in Tokyo’s Roppongi district.

The American film adaptation (*Verónica Decides to Die* 2009), directed by Emily Young, on the other hand, is a gloomier melodrama set in New York City. Veronica is not a Slovene librarian but a Slovene-American “assistant account executive” whose parents left their home country “before the war” and have not divorced. This Veronika, unlike in the original novel and in the Japanese adaptation, meets with her well-off Slovene-speaking parents upon their visit to the asylum. But this presence of the parents in the American version ultimately renders their role in the film all the more irrelevant, for it is Veronika’s refusal to confront her divorced parents in the original work which most strongly conveys the traumatic impact of their divorce on her. Instead, the American Veronika’s psychological distress is born out of boredom, out of a life divorced, as it were, from meaning.

Missed by these adaptations is the way in which the question of “madness” (*loucura*) is braided into the original novel’s postmodernist and auto-fictional aesthetic of doubling. In Coelho’s novel, there are two Slovene

characters named “Veronika”—one being the aforementioned protagonist of the main story, and the other being the original source of this story within the narrative. This doubling mirrors the ambiguous role played by the autobiographical narrator who also goes by the name “Paulo Coelho” and who claims to have spent time on multiple occasions in an asylum in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1960s. “Everything repeats,” the narrator says.¹⁴ Repetition and difference are thus folded into the novel’s interrogation of identity and madness: “What is a crazy person?” Veronika asks her Serbian asylum mate Zedka, who replies: “A crazy person is anyone who lives in his or her world. Like schizophrenics, psychopaths, maniacs. In other words, people who are different from others.”¹⁵

Madness, for Coelho, is relative to the constantly-reconfigured binaries of self and other, friend and foe. Zedka, for instance, reveals that she had fallen in love with a Slovene man who was recruited into the army (presumably circa 1991), whereupon she became “the Serb—i.e., ‘the enemy.’”¹⁶ Embedded in the broader narrative, the romantic relationship between Zedka and the Slovene soldier is compared to two other relationships: the romance between the Slovene national poet France Prešeren and his bourgeois muse Julija Primic, and the romantic nationalism felt between Zedka and “[her] people,” the Serbs:

In the small central plaza of Ljubljana, the statue of the poet keeps his eyes fixed in one direction: whoever follows his gaze will discover—from the other side of the plaza—a woman’s face sculpted on the wall of one of the houses. It was there that Julia lived; Prešeren, even after death, contemplates for eternity his impossible love. And what if he had fought more? [...] And Zedka wondered: did I insist enough? [...] Did I fight for my first love with the same determination as I fought for my people?¹⁷

Though Coelho is not considered an authority on Slovenia or the former Yugoslavia, *Veronika Decides to Die* can be contrasted with Kozole’s

¹⁴ “todo se repete” (Coelho 1998: 16). Translations of Coelho’s work are my own.

¹⁵ “O que é um louco?” [...] Louco é quem vive em seu mundo. Como os esquizofrênicos, os psicopatas, os maníacos. Ou seja, pessoas que são diferentes das outras” (Coelho 1998: 39–40).

¹⁶ “Servia - ou seja, ‘o inimigo’” (Coelho 1998: 64).

¹⁷ “Na pequena praça central de Lubljana, a estátua do poeta mantém os olhos fixos em uma direção: quem seguir seu olhar, descobrira - do outro lado da praça - um rosto de mulher esculpido na parede de uma das casas. Era ali que morava Julia; Prešeren, mesmo depois do morto, contempla para eternidade o seu amor impossível. E se ele tivesse lutado mais? [...] E Zedka se perguntava: eu insisti o suficiente? [...] Lutei por meu primeiro amor com a mesma garra com que lutei por meu povo?” (Coelho 1998: 65–66).

“national allegories” of Slovenia and read as a nuanced psychoanalytical exploration of the narcissistic delusions and self-destructive tendencies that affect individuals after the trauma of political upheaval. This is not to say that Coelho’s novel does not lack its own allegorical loose and “spare” parts, politically speaking; on the contrary, the divorce of Veronika’s parents could be understood as a shallow—though perhaps deliberately so—metaphor for Slovenia’s breaking-off from Yugoslavia. After all, the asylum itself is explicitly referred to as “symbolizing—for the young nation that had just exited from a tolerant communism—the worst of capitalism: one only had to pay in order to get a spot.”¹⁸ Given that the story culminates in the individual’s self-actualizing escape from this “asylum” of capitalism, Coelho seems to offer a pop-psychological criticism of post-Yugoslav Slovenia; such would be unsurprising coming from the nostalgic writer of the recent *Hippie* (2018). Into what world, after all, is Coelho’s Veronika escaping if not into one of nationalistic self-absorption, amplified by the novel’s cliché allusions to Lake Bled, Ljubljana Castle, and Tromostovje, bound to please both casual international visitor and domestic tourist agency? In this sense, just as in Kozole’s films, Coelho’s novel presents Slovene national identity with a critical ambivalence towards capitalism; but rather than simply foreshadowing Kozole’s *Slovenka*, perhaps Coelho’s Veronika would be better, and more cautiously, approached as a projection of her subconscious.

Hafner and Handke

Where is Slovenia? The late scholar and poet Fabjan Hafner (1966–2016) was, like Handke, a child of the cultural and linguistic interstice between Austria and Slovenia. As a scholar, Hafner is known within Germanistik for his groundbreaking 2008 work *Peter Handke: Unterwegs ins Neunte Land* (Peter Handke: En route into the Ninth Country), which established the centrality of Slovenia in Handke’s oeuvre; notably, Hafner describes the Slovenia of Handke’s work using the topographical metaphor of the desert-like Karst region on the Slovene-Italian border, with its vast network of underground rivers and caves:

The Slovenian element is shown to be a pervasive lateral phenomenon, which like the seepage rivers in the Karst are here visible on the surface, there running through the hidden depths of the work of this author, an author who does not tire of exploring the edges elsewhere and making them permeable.¹⁹

¹⁸ “[...]Villete passou a simbolizar - para a jovem nação que acabara de sair de um comunismo tolerante - o que havia de pior no capitalismo: bastava pagar para se conseguir uma vaga” (Coelho 1998: 19).

¹⁹ “Das Slowenische erweist sich somit als durchgängiges Lateralphänomen, das wie die Sickerflüsse im Karst bald an der Oberfläche sichtbar, bald in den

Born in Carinthia, Hafner wrote about Handke in German but composed poetry also in Slovene, often translating his own work. “Poetry writing is translating,” Hafner wrote in a poem that appears in the collection *Indigo* (1988), “from a language that is not [in existence].”²⁰ Tragically, Hafner would take his own life in 2016. Moved by the tender and quiet anxiety and pleading tones in his poems, Handke posthumously translated Hafner’s *Erste und letzte Gedichte* (First and last poems), published in 2020.

Read in isolation, Hafner’s poems show an overwhelming attention to the sound of the Slovene language. While offsetting themes of bicultural identitarian anxiety, sound also seems to lock the postulated poet into a medium of recurring words and phrases, alliteration, and internal rhyme. In “ponavljanje” (repeating), the poet initially speaks as if in denial of how the endless repetition of language could hollow out meaning from words:

repeating
takes not
the meaning from a word
the good
from the good
the bad from the bad
from you
nothing good
nothing bad
it takes not
it gives not²¹

But immediately after this otherwise neutrally-valenced concept of repetition, repetition is constructed as a cycle of self-deception:

it only deepens
certain all-too certain is line of the circle
the self-same falsification²²

Here, an alternative translation for the middle line is “It’s a safe, all too safe circular track,” where the word *proga* refers to a “track,” evoking the concrete and circulator, rather than geometric, image of a railroad track; the final line, moreover, can be considered a counterfeit of oneself. Hafner artfully misaligns the formal audio-visual repetition of words (*it, not, nothing, it gives*

verborgenen Tiefenschichten das Werk dieses Autors als Leitlinie durchzieht, dieses Autors, der nicht müde wird, die Ränder zum Anderen hin zu erforschen und durchlässig zu machen” (Hafner 2008: 28).

²⁰ “Pisanje poezije / je prevajanje / iz jezika, / ki ga / ni” (Hafner 2020: 114).

²¹ “ponavljanje / ne vzame / besedi pomena / dobremu dobrega / slabemu slabega / tebi / nič dobrega / nič slabega / ne vzame / ne da” (Hafner 2020: 26).

²² “le poglablja / je varna prevarna krožna proga / je ponarejanje samega sebe” (Hafner 2020: 26).

not) and the poem's oscillating theme of repetition, defamiliarizing the concept of "repetition" itself. In the original Slovene, the formal elements create an unrelenting compulsion toward repetition; but while some word-initial alliteration can be visually detected (e.g., *poglablja*, *ponarejanje*; *samega sebe*), other forms of acoustic repetition are based on harmonizing vowels (below, in **bold**) and word stress (underlined):

ne vzame
ne da
le poglablja
je varna prevarna krožna proga
je ponarejanje samega sebe

For the poet of "groza" (horror), the dread of repetition is related more to the symbolic language used to describe time than to the unit-organization of time:

horror
 that
 year and year,
 to the very hour, minute, and second,
 the same path repeats²³

In "Besede" (Words), a similar dread about the fundamental semantic units of language is expressed in a lexicon around spoken language (mouth, lips, tongue/language, speaking, listening, understanding). The poet's concern is with neither the passage of time nor with *repetition* per se; it is *language itself*—and, even more precisely, the poet's subjective experience of language through the body—that appears to be the origin of anxiety:

Words
 you hauled
 from my mouth
 ripped them
 from resisting lips²⁴

In the second half of the poem, the poet admires how his grammatically feminine interlocutor has mastered languages in contrast to his own struggles:

Your lips
 are laughter.
 My speaking
 is bitter.
 Off grapes

²³ "groza / da / že leta desetletja / ob isti uri minuti sekundi / ponavlja / isto pot" (Hafner 2020: 24).

²⁴ "Besede / si vlačila / iz mojnih ust, / trgala si jih / z odpirajočih se ustnic" (Hafner 2020: 30).

I've gotten drunk
only of dread.

I am listening to you all,
but the words don't understand.
I am admiring
how you command the tongues²⁵

This poem playfully mixes grammatical number in a way that reflects back on the poet's struggle to understand the language in question. At the beginning of the stanza, the poet refers to “your lips” (*tvoje ustnice*), using the second-person singular; in the subsequent and final stanza, this interlocutor has shifted into the second-person plural (“you all,” “you command”). Does this shift signal the poet's distancing from an impersonal collective? In “I'm far away, a foreigner” (“Daleč proč sem, tujec”), the same self-other divide is breached with the grammatical dual form—a particularity of Slovene grammar—which expresses an intimacy of shared language and the accompanying agony of emotional distance (underlines added below for emphasis).

I only feel
your warm,
our language.

My lips
are empty,
the burning-point
of muteness

Words were yours
only to you, to me, out of love
I had them for myself.

Think, say,
what it would be if
everything were made real
that the two of us ever desired²⁶

An erotic reading of the poem may be suggested by the ambiguous use of “tongue,” the intimacy of address (second person singular), and the shift in

²⁵ “Tvoje ustnice / so smeh. / Moja govoriča / je grenka. / Iz grozdja / sem se napil / le groze” (Hafner 2020: 30).

²⁶ “Čutim le / tvoj topli, / najin jezik. / Moja usta / so prazna, / žarišče / nemosti. / Besede so bile tvoje, / le tebi, le sebi na ljubo. / Sem jih imel za svoje. / Pomisli, reci, / kaj bi bilo, če / bi se uresničilo vse, / kar sva si kdaj želela” (Hafner 2020: 32).

the next line to the image of an empty mouth as a burned-out shell (*žarišče*).²⁷ For the poet of “I’m far away, a foreigner,” the words of the language shared exclusively between two individuals (i.e., the language that you and I exclusively share) is only “warm” when the grammatically masculine interlocutor speaks them lovingly; otherwise, his lips are at the point of burning from silence. This silence, moreover, is more precisely a muteness (*nemost*), which in Slavic languages shares an etymological root (*němъ*) with the word for both foreigner and German (*němьць*). Not unlike with the word *barbarian*, it is hypothesized that non-Slavic peoples (and then, eventually, German-speakers more specifically) were associated with a lack of language.

Closer to the modern Slovene poetic tradition, moreover, one might recognize in Hafner’s aesthetic the verses of Srečko Kosovel (1904–1926), whose poem “Pines” (“Bori”) begins:

Pines, pines in silent horror,
pines, pines in mute horror
pines, pines, pines, pines!²⁸

Noteworthy about these opening lines is the craft with which the young Kosovel carefully roots his thematic of silence and muteness in the Karst landscape on the Slovene-Italian border during WW I. The characteristic Austrian black pines (*bor* / *Pinus nigra*) of the Karst had been imported into the region in the late nineteenth century for the purposes of reforestation and used as a shelter against the strong Adriatic wind (*burja*). In Kosovel’s poem, the “pines” also serve as a metaphor for the Slovene soldiers standing guard for Austria-Hungary (“Kakor strazniki pod goro”; “like sentries at the foot of the mountain”); the word *bori*, depending on the accented syllable, would further signify both the plural noun “pines” (*bori*) and the command “fight!” (*bori* from the reflexive verb *boriti se*). In an analogous way, the “mute horror” in which those pines/soldiers stand in the Karst is one burdened with the geopolitical reality that the empire’s ethnic Slovene minority was on the frontlines of a veritable *caporetto*-catastrophe. Though early in 1915 authorities relocated many if not most Slovenes to the Slovene interior, residents of areas not in the war zone could watch the artillery bombardments in the distance almost every night. The poem’s antagonism is not explicitly directed toward Italy, despite the fact that Kosovel would have certainly been cognizant by then of the earliest forms of Italianization even before the 1920s.

²⁷ For a definition of the word *žarišče*, see SSKJ: “kraj, prostor, kjer je gorenje med požarom najmočnejše: ogenj se je iz žarišča razširil na sosednje prostore; usmeriti curek vode v žarišče požara.” (the place or space of strongest burning during the event of a fire: the fire has spread from the hearth [žarišče] into neighboring rooms; aim a jet of water into the focal point [žarišče] of the fire.)” Fran.si. Accessed 4 February 2022.

²⁸ “Bori, bori v tihi grozi, / bori, bori v nemi grozi / bori, bori, bori, bori!” Translation by Ana Jelnicar and Barbara Siegel Carlson (Kosovel 2010: 18–19).

The “horror,” in other words, is not of political partisanship per se, but rather of the ineffability of the conflict itself: “Without an answer they do their duty / as in laborious fatal dreams” (“Brez odgovora vršijo / kakor v trudnih, ubitih sanjah”).²⁹

Whereas Kosovel’s attention to the Karst region conflates poetic and political space, Hafner’s poetry appears stuck in a feedback loop of language, unable to liberate itself from its identitarian concerns, not only with the self but also with others. In “Sama je” (She is alone), for instance, the grammatically feminine subject of the poem lacks the linguistic mastery to modulate her tone of voice.³⁰ In “Pozabljati, pozabljati” (Forgetting, forgetting), the poet impulsively considers abandoning writing and speaking while simultaneously trying to forget words.³¹ In “Brez konca konec” (End without end), the poet takes silent flight from a linguistic identity.³²

I keep silent with myself
against myself.
I forget myself,
I become me

Memory, far away,
foreign and fleeing,
and sweet like a tongue³³

In the collection of Hafner’s poetry, acoustic repetitions are pleading for a listener: The line “Ears / which do not hear / force us to words” (“*Ušesa / ki ne poslušajo, / nas silijo k besedi*”) appears in the poem “Prijazni ljudje bodo hodili vstric z nami in nam naproti” (Friendly people will walk beside us and against us”).³⁴ Nowhere is this cry sharper than in the final work selected for the collection; presumably written shortly before Hafner’s death, the poem “Just tell me, daddy, if you hear me at all” (“*Ati, povej koncno, ali me sploh poslušas*”) ends with the poet standing by for an answer: “I’m still waiting for you say if he is, that he is” (“*Še vedno čakam, da pove, ali je. Da*

²⁹ Kosovel (2010: 18–19). Jelnikar and Carlson translate the lines as: “No answer, / only the swish / of dead dreams.”

³⁰ “Ne obvlada jezika tako, da bi lahko spremenila glas” (“[she] doesn’t have the command of the language / to be able to change her voice”) (Hafner 2020: 34).

³¹ “Ne več pisati, ne pisati, / si govorim, ne več govoriti” (“No longer writing, no writing / I talk to myself / no longer speaking”); “besede izgovarjam, / da jih pozabljam” (“I utter pronounce words / so as to forget them”) (Hafner 2020: 56–58).

³² “Brez konca / konec. / Od nikoder / nobene besede / Vse tiše hrup, / vanj bežim / iz sebe” (“Without end / end. / From nowhere / not a word. / Noise growing quiet, / I take flight in it / from my myself”) (Hafner 2020: 76).

³³ “S seboj molčim, / sebi nasproti. / Sebe pozabljam, / sebi postajam Spomin, daven in / tuj in bežen in / sladek kot jezik.” (Hafner 2020: 76).

³⁴ Hafner (2020: 52)

je.”)³⁵ In talking through this, the speaker proceeds from waiting to hear *if* his father exists, to waiting to hear *that* his father exists; he steps, in other words, away from despair and closer to faith that he does. Considering poems of adolescence such as “Četrta zapoved” (Fourth Commandmen—i.e., honor thy parents)³⁶ or “Duša me boli” (My soul is hurting),³⁷ one might presume that the poet’s identitarian anxiety has familial origins. On the other hand, poems like “Dies illa” (“That day”, dated on the 11th of November 1987) as well as later works such as “Do tri. Tja” (To three. Right there) could theoretically take the poet beyond the immediate questions of identity and the vicious cycle of sound that plagues the earlier works.³⁸ This is not meant to collapse the anxieties of the “poet” into the real-life concerns of Fabjan Hafner; nor, however, should we ignore how—for Hafner, for Kosovel, for Handke, for Maja Haderlap among many others—the *place* of “Slovenia” was sometimes ambiguously considered the “Ninth Country” (*Deveta dežela*): a reference to not only a fairy tale opening (“Beyond the nine mountains, behind the nine waters...”) ³⁹ as an invocation of a far-away, magical place, but also to its auxiliary geopolitical and ethnic minority status vis-a-vis Austria.

Peter Handke’s translation of Hafner’s poems confronts an aesthetic and ethical dilemma: should the translator preserve the overwhelming attention to sound and thereby perpetuate a vicious cycle of sonic repetition with its political resonance, or should he intervene and thereby risk misrepresenting the aesthetic quality of the late poet’s work? For Handke, the work of translating has long been understood as creative adaptation—or perhaps an “application” (*Anwenden*) of the translator’s lived experiences to the original material (1998: 450). This unconventional and literal(ized) conceptualization of translation as a crossing-over (*Übersetzung*) not only between languages but also between modes of writing is mirrored in Handke’s novel about the rediscovery of his Slovene heritage, *Repetition* (1988), in which the concept of *repetition* itself (*Wiederholung*) is construed not as “repetition compulsion” but, in the ambiguity of the compound noun’s stress pattern, as “renewal” (e.g., in Slovene translation of the word *ponovitev*). In short, translation for Handke is, not unlike storytelling itself, a literary mode of repetition-qua-re(dis)covery (*Wiederfindung*).⁴⁰ A key

³⁵ Hafner (2020: 104)

³⁶ Hafner (2020: 86-92)

³⁷ Hafner (2020: 84)

³⁸ Hafner (2020: 92). The title of this poem may evoke a set Slovene phrase, most typically as “govoriti tja v tri dni”—i.e., to speak endlessly yet say nothing of consequence.

³⁹ The fairy tale opening line in Slovene is: “Za devetimi gorami, za devetimi vodami...”

⁴⁰ For more on translation as spatial renewal in Handke’s work, see McDonald (2022)

example of this renewal in translation occurs when the protagonist of *Repetition* reads aloud from his missing brother’s Slovenian-German dictionary, asking himself if he was not being partisan (*Partei ergriffen*) toward the enchanting novelty of Slovene at the expense of his native German:

No, it was both languages together, the single words on the left and the circumlocutions on the right which—character after character—bent, turned, measured, outlined, and constructed space. How eye-opening it was that there were different languages, how meaningful the supposedly so destructive Babylonian confusion of languages. Wasn’t the Tower [of Babel], while in secret, nevertheless built, and didn’t it reach, lofty/airy [*luftig*], into a heaven?⁴¹

The poem “Dies illa” exemplifies how Handke’s translations appear to attempt a renewal of Hafner’s poetry without discarding the attention to the acoustic specificity of Slovene. The verses below can be roughly translated as follows: “And all the young boys go off to war, in the red dawn / but I am staying home, mama is waiting. A feeble fool speaking / stupidities.” In bold are visually observable clusters where Handke’s German translation preserves the rhyme or vowel patterns in the original Slovene:

In vsi ti mladi fantje pojdejo v vojsko, v rdečo, rdečo zoro.

A jaz **ostajam doma**, **mama**, **ki čaka**. Betežen norček, ki govori **neumnosti**.

Aber alle die jungen Fanten sind unterwegs in den Krieg

ins rote, rote Frühlicht.

Aber ich **bleibe daheim**. **Mama**, **die wartet**. Kränkliches Nännchen das **Unsinn** redet Hafner (2020: 78-81).

In addition to these sound clusters (*in vsi - aber alle; ostajam doma - bleibe daheim; mama, ki čaka - Mama, die wartet; neumnosti - das Unsinn*), the linguistic specificities of Slovenia’s border zones provide for etymological wordplay that is made more salient in translation. As Hafner himself has noted, Handke frequently attends to etymology in his translation work (2019: 11). For instance, the Slovene word for “red” (*rdeč*)—unusual among Slavic languages in that it does track back to the word for “worm” (i.e., the larvae

⁴¹ “Nein, es waren doch die beiden Sprachen zusammen, die Einwörter links und die Umschreibungen rechts, welche den Raum, Zeichen um Zeichen, krümmten, winkelten, massen, umrissen, errichteten. Wie augenöffnend demnach, dass es die verschiedenen Sprachen gab, wie sinnvoll die angeblich so zerstörerische babylonische Sprachenverwirrung. War der Turm, insgeheim, nicht doch erbaut, und reichte er nicht, luftig, doch an einen Himmel?” (Handke 1988: 318–19).

from which the red dye was extracted)—can be readily rendered into the German word for “red” (*rot*), with which it shares a common proto-Indo-European origin. Similarly, *nor* ‘insane’ is already a loanword from the German *Narr*, meaning a jester or a fool; and *fantje* ‘boy’, a diminutive derived from Italian *fante* (i.e., infant), is preserved in Handke’s translation as the etymologically-related *Fant*, which more precisely would refer to someone who shows off despite a lack of experience. Most cleverly, perhaps, is Handke’s translation of the Slovene word *betežen*, meaning ‘insane’ or ‘feeble’ and derived from the Hungarian word *beteg* ‘ill’, as the German *kränklich* ‘sickly’. In so doing, Handke’s word choices in translation use etymologies from several peripheral languages to expand upon the geopolitical potential in Hafner’s original Slovene.

While the translation of “Dies illa” puts a wedge between image and sound without foregoing the original drive toward acoustic repetition, Handke’s translation of “Ljubljana” balances sound and image and heeds a thematic call to “translate backwards.” That is, in the original, the poet’s self-identity within the spatial confines of Ljubljana is constructed in terms of the Old Testament prophet Jonah whose body was preserved inside a fish for three days and three nights of distress before being discharged and resurrected. For Hafner’s poet, Ljubljana is a place of ambiguity, at once concrete and metaphorical, an illusory and temporary home for the stranger who must translate his delusions there back into the world:

Ljubljana, in you I’m a foreign thing,
a splinter stuck in your willing tissue
a provisional opportunistic interloper.

And you are the whale of Jonah, white mirage, which
with greed and delight I keep
translating back into the safe and material world.

I’m at my best in the middle of you.⁴²

More than with Hafner’s other poems in the collection, the attention to ambiguous space in “Ljubljana” resembles Handke’s own writerly self-conceptualization as a “place-writer” (*Ortschriftsteller*).⁴³ The sense of confined space in “Ljubljana” is more precisely a feature of the acoustic repetition, the Slovene intonation patterns of which Handke’s German translation tracks with such precision that the translation appears to be an

⁴² “Ljubljana, v tebi sem tujek, / iver, zadrt v tvoje boljno tkivo, / Zasilen, priložnostni priležnik Jonov kit si, bel previd, ki ga / hlastno in slastno sproti prevajam, / Nazaj v varni, stvarni svet. Sredi tebe sem najbolj pri sebi” (Hafner 2020: 100).

⁴³ Handke (1987: 19). For more on Handke’s self-concept as a “place-writer,” see Schirmer (2000).

imitation of a spoken accent; it is as if Handke the translator had actually listened to Hafner the poet on his own terms.

Ljubljana, v tebi sem tujek
Ljubljana, ich **bin** ein Fremdkörper in dir

iver, zadrt v tvoje boljno tkivo,
Zasilen, priložnostni priležnik

Splitter, **ingerissen** in dein williges Gewebe,
Gelegenheitsbeilieger.

Jonov kit si, bel previd, ki ga

Jonas **Wal** bist du, **weißes Wahnbild**, das ich

hlavno in slavno sproti prevajam,

ein jedesmal wieder, **in Hast und Lust**
Zurückübersetzte

Nazaj v varni, stvarni svet.

in die **sichere**, die **sachliche** Welt.

Sredi tebe sem najbolj pri sebi.

Bin **inmitten** von **dir bestens** bei **mir**

Hafner’s poet pleads to be heard, and Handke’s translations, particularly of the “last” poems, seem to echo back the cry. In the “earlier” works, however, Handke’s translations challenge Hafner’s poems at precisely the moments when the sound of language generates its own anxiety. The reverse-translator of “Ljubljana” stretches out the small word *sproti* ‘regularly’, ‘keep/continually’ into *ein jedesmal wieder* ‘time and time again’ to further emphasize how the work of translating an ambiguous sense of place back into the world is not a continuous and seamless teleological project but rather a process of regeneration “over and over” as if every time again from the beginning. In “repeating,” Handke almost completely does away with the obsessively cyclical rhyming rhythms of the original line:

le poglablja
je varna prevarna krožna proga
je ponarejanje samega sebe

vertieft nur -
sicher gar zu sicher ist die Kreislinie
ist die Selbsttäuschung⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Hafner (2020: 26–27).

When it matters most—namely, when Hafner’s poetry, while acoustically sublime, construes repetition in such fatalistic and cynical terms without any payoff in the form of a heightened sensibility to the poet’s surroundings—Handke’s translation halts the descent with an inserted hyphen, refusing to let the sound of words distract from a potential confrontation. There is not a single rhyme or alliteration in this line of Handke’s rendition; it is a formal rejection, or at least a hobbling, of the poem’s stammering that repetition is self-deception.

Can the translator negotiate between an acknowledgement of an original poem’s unbearable burden of repeating sound and an intervention that shifts attention away from the agony? Handke’s translation of Hafner’s poem “Horror” offers a final example of such a middle way. The German translation generally matches the Slovene sound patterns (e.g., *groza-Grausen*) but it crosses a semantic barrier with the line “the same path repeats” (*Ponavljja isto pot*) as “*denselben Weg / wiederholt*.”⁴⁵ The phonological structure of the last three syllables in Slovene is matched almost identically with that in German (*isto pot - wiederholt*); and yet syntactosemantically, the translation is an inversion of the original: the place of the static unchanging “path” in Slovene is transformed into one of repetition in German. And in the interstice, reproduced visually in the bilingual publication, it is the lopsided form of the two languages together - asymmetrical mirror images of one another - that ultimately resynthesizes, redistributes, and renews the meaning of each on its own.

<i>Ponavljja isto pot</i>	<i>denselben Weg</i>
	<i>wiederholt</i>
(repeats the same path)	(the same path / repeats)

Conclusion

At the start of this essay I asked whether it was “right” for Slovenia to have sought independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991 and integration into the European Union in 2004. This question belies a sociopolitical and epistemological naiveté—not only about the all-too conspiratorial construal of the European Union as a reconstituted form of empire, but also, and perhaps more generally relevant, about the theoretical tension between historical necessity and contingency. Was it *necessary*—which is to say, was it as predictable as *one plus one equals two?*—that things turn out the way they did? Proponents of historical materialism might say “yes,” that the arc of civilization bends towards such a telos, even if it entails repetition. This deterministic worldview, often signaled by an oversimplification of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis, is rejected by champions of historical contingency and those monitoring authoritarian recidivism in Europe and

⁴⁵ Hafner (2020: 24–25).

elsewhere: “no,” they might argue, things could have turned out differently, maybe for the better, but perhaps even far worse. And what if it *had* been worse? Would we have already reassessed, and wouldn’t we still be debating, Slovene independence as *a priori* the so-called “right thing to do”? If historical necessity is fatalistic, then contingency is chaotic. Alternatively, the series of past events that constitute “Slovene independence” take on an awkward shape when examined through the equally ideological lens of “spontaneous order”: Slovenia’s stabilization as an independent nation-state appears more than merely akin to the dynamic workings of the free-market; rather, the place itself begins to look like a product more of iteration and cultural feedback mechanisms than of a repetition compulsion bubbling up from the collective subconscious; it is a work-in-progress, the specifications of which are being back-and-forth negotiated —“as we speak”—between local cultural variety and national political uniformity. And isn’t this ultimately for the better? Slovenia, it has been said, is not Ljubljana, nor Ljubljana Slovenia. All along it has been both together, the center on one side and the rest on the other which—year and year—have “bent, turned, measured, outlined, and constructed” that space of friction and difference, repetition and recovery, that we—you and I—in Slovene might provisionally call a duel.

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POVZETEK

Koncepti ponavljanja v postjugoslovanski slovenski literaturi

Kako so pisatelji in režiserji opisali izkušnjo slovenske osamosvojitve in integracije v Evropsko unijo od razpada nekdanje Jugoslavije? Ta članek ponudi več možnih poti nazaj v preteklost, začeni z enim dialogom med Petrom Handkejem in Dragom Jančarjem na temo osamosvojitve poleti 1991. Polemična izmenjava se vrti okoli vprašanja ponavljanja: na kakšen način se zgodovina ponavlja v Sloveniji na koncu Hladne vojne? Možne a nedokončne odgovore najdemo v filmih Damjana Kozoleta in v romanu brazilsekga pisatelja Paula Coelho, ki se dogaja v Sloveniji in je bil filmsko adaptiran v Ameriki in na Japonskem. Slovenija v devetdesetih letih je predstavljena kot prizorišče nore napetosti med zgodovinskim ponavljanjem in procesom "iteracije", ki spominja na "spontani red" in je povezan s kapitalizmom prostega trga. Esej se zaključi z branjem Handkejevih po-Nobelovih prevodov slovenske poezije Fabjana Hafnerja v nemščino. Handkejev prevod pozorno posluša Hafnerjevim prošnjam za sogovornika in obupa nad ponavljanjem. Postavljena drug ob drugem, Handejeva nemščina in Hafnerjeva slovenščina ponujata tisto, česar nobena sama ne bi z lahkoto mogla: variacijo ponavljanja, ki presega zgodovino, trg in psiho skozi bežno estetesko izkušnjo dvojine.