

Globalising Southeast Europe Research Blog

Alternative facts? Reflections on violence, gender, and suppressed memory in historical documentaries from Croatia and Turkey

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Happy coincidence and personal enthusiasm were the main promoters for an unusual doctoral workshop which I recently co-organized at the University of Basel, together with my colleague Prof. Bilgin Ayata. We invited two acclaimed film directors, Lordan Zafranović from Prague/Zagreb and Nezahat Gündoğan from Istanbul, to watch and discuss their documentaries on genocidal violence in their home countries Croatia and Turkey, with the aim to explore, in a gendered approach, their visual methods as a means to negotiate violence and memory both from the victim's and the perpetrator's perspective. In her documentary 'Hay Way Zaman. Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları' [Unburied in the Past: The Missing Girls of Dersim] (2013), Nezahat Gündoğan explores the cleansing of the Kurdish, Alevi and Christian population of Dersim/Tunceli in Anatolia during the late 1930s through the eyes and memory of Emoş Gülver, one of the girls who went missing in the period. Lordan Zafranović's 'Zalazak stoljeća. Testament L.Z.' [The Decline of the Century. The Testament of L.Z.] (1993) is a personal account of Croatia's liability for the genocide on Serbs, Jews and Roma in the Ustaša state NDH (Independent State of Croatia) during World War II, and denounces the state-building of Croatia in the early 1990s on the base of the old Ustaša symbols.

The interdisciplinary workshop, which was generously financed by the rectorate of the University of Basel and the Basel Graduate School of Social Sciences G3S, attracted much interest from doctoral and master students, and colleagues from Basel and beyond. The atmosphere in the seminar room was concentrated: intense films, intense discussions, intense exchange. The specialists in either Turkish or Yugoslav studies, but also those with a family background in one of the countries discovered curiously familiar occurrences on the previously unfamiliar other side, beyond the language border.

The introductory session on Thursday morning 13 October 2016 was dedicated to the theoretical concepts of memory culture (Aleida Assmann, Hannah Arendt) and spaces of

violence (Jörg Baberowski). Distinguished literary scholar Aleida Assmann, in her analyze of the German case and the Holocaust, has contributed essentially to the theoretical development of memory studies since their establishment in the 1990s. She finds that assymmetric relationships between remembering victims' collectives and denying perpetrators' collectives have always prevailed (Assmann 2016, 39). In the preface to her seminal work 'The Origins of Totalitarianism' from 1951 Hannah Arendt warned that 'all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain' (Arendt 1951, preface; Assmann 2016, 39). Oblivion has been the general approach in war-destroyed Europe in the period following the end of World War II, whereas the Shoah and the Armenian Genocide are the most prominent cases showing that as long as national collectives remember traumatic harm done to them, these memories remain 'active' and will not be erased by the perpetrators' forgetting and denial policies. Since the 1990s, Western Europe – or the EU – has been very successful in its efforts to acknowledge the ethical dimension to memory: (1) to mourn and remember one's own victims and dead, (2) to do the same for the victims and dead for which they are responsible, and (3) to include both in its collective (national) memory (Assmann 2016, 33). It can be concluded that in Western Europe, the memory of the Holocaust has been 'europeanized' (Radonić/Uhl 2016, 10ff.). But what about other parts of Europe? Vienna-based social scientist Ljiljana Radonić in her research on the East-West gap in memory politics finds that the countries of the former Eastern bloc remember the GULag rather than the Holocaust. The fact that Croatia belonged to socialist Yugoslavia which after 1948 held a non-aligned position between the Eastern and the Western bloc may explain Croatia's denialist stance at least partly, but what about Turkey? At present, denialist right-wing nationalism is on the rise also in several Western European countries.

Berlin historian Jörg Baberowski's research of Stalin's terror (2012) was cause of heated debate among specialists, but his findings about the dynamics of violence are razor-sharp (2008, 2015). He argues that the breakdown of order, or a government misusing its monopoly on violence will open the gates to unlimited terror, where legal spheres turn into spheres of violence (Baberowski 2015, 43). He relies on Montesquieu's 'The Spirit of the Laws' (1748) about the division and misuse of power as much as on psychological research and his own findings. Among others, he cites from a letter of Sigmund Freud to Albert

Einstein from 1915: 'Wherever society cancels reproach, also suppression of evil lust will stop, and mankind will commit deeds of cruelty, malice, treason and brutality no one would ever have thought compatible with the given cultural level.' Baberowski concludes, as others have before him, that violence is an option of human behaviour that is always present and therefore must be controlled (Baberowski 2015, 43, 213). Despite of these facts, much of the research done on the topic has a tendency to explain violence as something pathological or rooted in social deficits, and to explore ways to prevent it in the idealistic, but vain aim to overcome it, rather than to study violence as such (Baberowski 2015, 137). Focusing on Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany, Baberowski explores how unleashed violence establishes its own law and dynamics, how 'normal' men turn into killers on command, how a space not sanctioning violence attracts criminals who enjoy the power of killing and terrorizing people, how torture turns human beings into bodies marked for the rest of their lives — but also how the establishment of nation-states encourages the formation of spaces which prepare the elimination of minorities through ethnic cleansing and genocide, if the new regime regards them as an alleged danger for the ethnic, religious or racial unity of the majority (Baberowski 2015, 90ff.).

Historical inputs on Turkey and Croatia, which demonstrate the connection between the end of empires, nation-building and genocidal violence, led over to the screening of Nezahat Gündoğan's 'Hay Way Zaman. Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları' [Unburied in the Past: The Missing Girls of Dersim], her first documentary from 2013. The director explained that back in 2004, she had done research on a dam project planned in the region of Tunceli. She did interviews with locals and was struck by the fear many expressed of being soon deported again. She tried to find out more and realized that the official historical narrative of 1938/39, which suggests that there had been a Kurdish uprising repressed by the Turkish Army was a construction shared by both the state and Kurdish resistance fighters such as Nuri Dersimi. Gündoğan wanted to find out more. Together with her husband and partner Kazim, she conducted roughly 400 interviews. They decided to turn this material into a documentary and tell the story of the deportation of the Alevi, Kurdish and Christian population of Dersim from the perspective of women and children. Putting together the pieces, they recognized a systematic pattern of girls being lost, abducted, and then adopted by Turkish-Sunni families.

After the screening, the discussion turned around the state repression in Dersim, which goes back to the 16th century, when the Sublime Porte prosecuted the so-called Crimson Heads, or Qizilbash Alevis, who belong to the Shi'a, in opposition to the official Ottoman doctrine of Sunni Islam. The classical social historical explanation neglects such aspects of long-standing cultural and religious repression in favour of a narrative which describes the events of 1938/39 as a feudal uprising of a backwards minority group against the modernizing efforts of the Turkish state. Nezahat Gündoğan also talked about the long and difficult process of winning her protagonist's confidence. It was not easy to convince Emoş Gülver to participate in the first place. Gülver's consent meant to embark on a long mental journey during which she had to face her deeply buried childhood trauma and the fact that her life so far was built on lies; a mental journey for which the director had to take personal responsibility. The film is full of emotion, in sharp contrast to scholarly research which is based on the paradigm of objectivity. But as is often the effect of art, the film raised an issue which was later taken over by academia for closer investigation. Positive reception in the media and the prestigious awards won at the Film Festival of Antalya in 2013 were an important recognition for the director as much as for the protagonist, who was present at the ceremony: Emoş Gülver perceived this as a liberation. Finally, it was possible to talk publicly about these things, to recognize and mourn the innocent victims of state repression, at least to a certain extent.



Nezahat Gündoğan discussing her documentary 'Hay Way Zaman'. Foto by Nataša Mišković.

The second day, Friday 14 October, was dedicated to Lordan Zafranović's opus magnum 'Zalazak stoljeća. Testament L.Z.' from 1993. This 200 minutes work addresses the responsibility and unresolved guilt of Croatia for aggressive nationalism and war crimes committed under the regime of Ustaša leader Ante Pavelić's NDH (Independent State of Croatia) state during World War II. The film has a complex story of formation and constitutes the immediate reason why the author was forced to leave his country in 1991. Shown in many international festivals, and part of the film collection of the Holocaust Museum Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, it could only be screened in limited and protected environments within Croatia so far, and never on Croat state TV, the initial producer. Up to this day, Zafranović is regarded as a whistle-blower and punished with an implicit ban on his profession. The film evolves around the spectacular war criminal trial against NDH Minister of Interior Andrija Artuković, which took place in 1986 in Zagreb, then Yugoslavia. Acclaimed director Zafranović, at the peak of his career, was commissioned by Television Zagreb (today Croat State Television HRT) to document the trial. He chose the perspective of the judge, who in the film is present only by his voice. The accused is shown as an invalid old man whose claims to have known nothing are exposed as a lie in view of abundant evidence, but who at the same time evokes pity when he bursts into tears at the sight of his son, who is among the spectators in the court room.

Franjo Tudjman, the later president of Croatia, had attacked Zafranović for a documentary on the Ustaša concentration camp Jasenovac already in the 1980s. When he came to power in 1990, he put the director on top of his black list of state enemies. Zafranović was forced to flee, not without taking along a copy of his latest documentary. As expected, the new president rehabilitated the Ustaša NDH state and started a huge campaign to revise Croatian history. The effects of this policy are drastic. A recent example is Jakov Sedlar's latest film 'Jasenovac – the truth', which premiered last year in the presence of Zagreb's political elite and which openly denies the existence of the Ustaša concentration camp, saying that the camp was used by the communists. As in Turkey, official history narratives in Croatia oscillate between denial and fabrication. The young generation, grown up after the Yugoslav succession wars, is divided between blind nationalism and curious questions.

After the screening of Zafranović's work, which easily arrested the attention of the participants despite its length, the director explained that he had constructed the film with as much effect on spectators as possible. It is the result of a long artistic process about his own relation to Croat society and Croat history from the 1930s to the 1990s, about the violent end of Yugoslavia, the insanity of war and the crimes committed in the name of the Croat people to which he belongs. He converted his own abhorrence, pain and desperation into a visual spiral, which culminates in explicit images of bodies destroyed in war and concentration camps merging with the grotesque faces of painted deranged people from scenes of his early feature films.



Lordan Zafranović watching his 'Zalazak stoljeća. Testament L.Z.' Foto by Nataša Mišković.

The explicit images of violence were subject to several inquiries. The film is not 'family-friendly', watching at times extremely hard to bear.¹ Zafranović says he wanted to warn the spectators in the strongest possible outcry from the evil, denouncing Tudjman's denialist policies. Working on the film, he had an inner urge to confront the visual evidence with all

¹ However, the worried comment of a participant on the problematics of blunting and imitation of violence seems to belong to the sheltered reality of Switzerland, and to recent Western practices of image censorship. See a report by Hannes Grassegger and Till Krause on image censors working for Facebook, *Das Magazin* 50, 17 December 2016, 8–16.

his energy, to disclose the evil and to purify himself from it. His fierce emotionality combined with sharp analysis is in sharp contrast contrast to Gündoğan's approach, who narrates her story in a quiet and cautious way. Gündoğan had chosen the perspective of women and children in order to prevent any political provocation and to protect her own involvement. She had been imprisoned as a student for political reasons and studied film directing after her release from prison in 2001. Her own intense emotions are reflected in the film in an indirect way: She uses the gaze of her protagonist over the majestic landscape of Dersim to express deep pain and sorrow, certainly not only this woman's, but also her own. Zafranović's initial hope that his film could support the process of reconciliation between the peoples of Yugoslavia and help to prevent the outbreak of a new war was bitterly disappointed. In the process of film editing, he realized to what extent the images of propaganda from the 1930s/40s and from the 1990s look alike. He knows that Croatia is not an exception in its unwillingness to talk about the evil done to others, no society will. Moreover, film is a business generally financed by large companies and by states which will pay attention to the way in which they are presented. Authors will rarely succeed in sticking to their own initial vision, and not many are willing to deal with such hurtful topics. If it is done, then at the cost of endangering one's career and one's dearests' safety, as Zafranović and Gündoğan both know very well.

Everybody was under the spell of the emotional power and intensity of the two documentaries, as different as they are in their choice of style. Gündoğan uses calm and quiet landscape shoots to transport feelings of grief, loss and pain. Identification with her protagonist Emoş supports the spectator's access to the core issue of the film. Zafranović's aesthetics are original, powerful, and direct. They create a vortex which forces the spectator to watch, confronting him with the author's pain and grief. The film is meant for the large screen; a small TV screen enhances its documentary character. Is there a gender aspect to their approaches beyond the conclusion that the film by the male director represents the perpetrators' group, the film by the female director the victims' side? Gündoğan's work offers a female perspective in relying on the personal relation to the protagonist, who allows the director to follow her in her search for her lost roots; the director's initial role in convincing the protagonist to take this journey is never disclosed. Zafranović takes the spectator on his own personal journey which he has meticulously planned in advance,

speaking his own voice-over, presenting himself as the main actor in the process of drawing, researching and editing the film. He confronts the spectators directly and does not allow them to escape the vortex. Both films are very personal beyond the documentary character, and based on personal experience. Through the gaze of her protagonist Emoş Gülever, Gündoğan finds a way to express her own pain and anger after a long and unjust prison term. Zafranović fought the return of right-wing nationalism and watched his country fall apart from exile. Ashamed, desperate and powerless, but unbroken, he denounces the crimes he sees as loud as he can.

I will highlight only part of the heated final discussion which followed. The most intense and moving issues were raised by the youngest among the participants, with family connections in the region. What does being a Croat mean today? Hate Serbs? How to tackle the often-heard reproach that as somebody living abroad, one does not qualify to judge? How to deal with feelings of hate, if belonging to the victims' side, or guilt, if belonging to the perpetrators' side? Several participants declared that they did not want to be the victims of their parents' past. But how to deal with one's own parents' pain and hate? It is of ultimate importance to face this hurtful past, to reconcile and come to peace with it, if the vicious perpetuation of hate and pain is to be broken.

What is the contribution of film in coming to terms with genocidal violence and memory? The two documentaries screened during this workshop use emotion to force spectators to look closely where it hurts, to make their message clear. As a film director, Zafranović will produce a piece of historiography just as scholars do, but he will not restrict himself to present historical facts, but strive to convey as much emotion as possible in order to make his message clear to the maximum — also to a next generation which has not experienced the period about which he is talking. Gündoğan knows perfectly well that history is written by the hunters, not by the lions — and she still wants to rewrite the history of the lions. She cannot escape a state system which defines the categories that determine where one belongs in the national sense. To talk about past and present violence, social consensus is a *sine qua non*. This requires mobilization from below, in a long, patient and persevering process. Artists can play a part in this process, destabilizing the national historical narratives.

The two cases demonstrate, once more, how fragile independent research into the history and memory of violence is, and how high the personal cost for those who dare to challenge fixed national narratives. Neither the Turkish nor the Croat case are singular. Past pain and guilt seem easiest to be dealt with by denial and oblivion, whereas a close look requires courage and perseverance. The challenging exchange with the two film directors offered first-hand information what it means to work under difficult circumstances, and it helped to bridge the gap between personal memory and historiography. Moreover, it gave a strong impetus to reflect one's own professional ethics, and to think about the use — or alleged absence — of emotion, visual techniques and dramaturgy in academia.



Evening screening of Lordan Zafranović's feature classic 'Occupation in 26 pictures'. Foto by Maria Fritsche.

We closed the two intensive days with yet another film, an evening screening of Lordan Zafranović's feature classic 'Okupacija u 26 slika' from 1978, a tale about friendship and the city community of Dubrovnik destroyed by fascist occupation and war. I would like to close this contribution with special thanks to Cicek Ilengiz (Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin), who never left Nezahat Gündoğan's side and tirelessly translated for her between English and Turkish, and to Ljiljana Reinkowski (Slavic Studies Basel) and Sandra King-Savić (Cultural Studies St. Gallen), who kindly assisted me in doing the same for Lordan Zafranović. I am grateful to Bilgin Ayata, who enthusiastically supported the idea to organize this workshop, and to the Basel Doctoral School of Social Sciences and the Rector's Office of the University of Basel, without whose generous financial support this workshop would not have been possible.

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Nezahat Gündoğan (*1968) had started her studies in architectural design in 1987, when she was arrested due to her political opinions. After her release in 2001 she completed her undergraduate degree and attended a filmmaking course organized by the Human Rights Foundation in Turkey. Together with her husband Kazim Gündoğan, she wrote the book "Dersim'in Kayıp Kizlari: Tertele Ceneku" (The Missing Girls of Dersim, Istanbul 2012). She has released three documentaries on the Dersim issue, from different perspectives, which received a lot of attention in Turkey and beyond.

Lordan Zafranović (*1944) started to make experimental films as a teenager in his hometown Split, where he studied ship engineering, literature and visual arts. He was awarded a scholarship at the prestigious Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague, where he studied as a master student of Elmar Klos from 1968 to 1971. He and his fellow students Rajko Grlić, Goran Marković, Goran Paskaljević and Srdjan Karanović, and later Emir Kusturica dominated Yugoslav cinema from the late 1970s to the 1980s as the 'Prague film school'. His biggest success is the Yugoslav and Czech box office hit 'Okupacija u 26 slika' (Occupation in 26 pictures, 1978), which together with 'Pad Italije' (The Fall of Italy, 1981) and 'Večernja zvona' (Evening bells, 1986) forms a WWII trilogy on fascist occupation and communist revolution.

Tags: violence, genocide, gender, memory, documentary film, Yugoslavia, Croatia, Turkey, Dersim

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