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Haunting Lessons¹

Abstract: This paper examines horror through works by three artists taking the sites and remains of extreme violence as their subject matters: Australian actress Kym Vercoe's performance piece, "Seven Kilometres Northeast," (2010) Bosnian director Jasmina Žbanić's film based on the same piece, "For Those Who Can Tell No Tales" (2013) and Bosnian photographer Ziyah Gafić's ongoing project, "Quest for Identity," begun in 2011, a series of photographs of the material remains found in mass graves around Srebrenica, several of which are displayed in the Srebrenica Memorial Room in the former Dutchbat headquarters in Potočari. Vercoe's and Žbanić's works focus on Višegrad and specifically upon the Vilina Vlas spa, which was used as a rape camp during the Bosnian war. Spaces such as these where acts of violence occurred carry more than traces; they are replete with the environments of past events that linger and animate them. They are what Avery Gordon describes as haunted sites of social life that are not easily perceivable but make their presence felt. Through examining these artistic works, I argue that they reveal how the seemingly inanimate may become an animated site of horror yet are also engaged creative attempts to transform psychic and spatial abjection motivated by a productive haunting of "something-to-be-done".

Key words: haunting, war violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina, genocide, absence

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“To look for lessons of haunting when there are thousands of ghosts...” –

Avery Gordon, *Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997, 64)

Many of the squat stone houses in Gvozd, a small former industrial town on the border between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are riddled with crater marks from mortar shells. Many of its residents are also visibly and invisibly wounded; one of the women I worked with there had a deep puncture on her upper arm where a shell had exploded at close range. An abandoned clothing factory that served as a military outpost for the Serbs during the 1992–1995 war is the largest building in town and once inside, one can find steel grey rocket grenade cases measuring several feet long and square wooden boxes stamped *metak* (bomb shells) in Cyrillic. Some in the town are too afraid to enter this space; others regularly trespass there to collect these charged remains of war and fashion them into something new. In their hands, an army helmet becomes a flower-planter; a rocket grenade case becomes a bench.

While working as a journalist in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2005, I experienced similar spaces, feelings and responses: the numerous buildings in Sarajevo riddled with pock-marks of shelling and the scorch marks of fire; the miles of seemingly pristine green fields and mountains around Srebrenica that still contain the remains of genocide victims underneath; the individuals who described themselves as still haunted by war; the others, mostly young people, who resented the mere mention of a present still marred by the recent past.

During the time I spent in Srebrenica in 2005, I was invited along with other members of the national and international press to witness the unveiling of a mass grave, the Budak grave where more than 600 bodies were found. I recall the multiple shocks of that experience: the coming close to bullet punctured skulls, bones, vertebra, and the twisted remnants of clothing strewn across a long rectangle of muddied earth. Bright orange flags were stuck where there were signs of evidence – though it started to seem to me at that moment that evidence was everywhere: under the earth and upon it, in the air, in what looked to me to be an ominous mist hanging over the surrounding mountains. A bright orange arrow shaped flag pointed at a bullet hole in a skull; I photographed it, creating evidence of evidence. It seemed like the right thing to do or at least something to do in this environment of not knowing what to do, or how, or how to be, or why.

Seeing its unveiling was particularly potent for many reasons, not the least of which was realizing when we arrived at the grave that it was located very near the same area where just a day before I had been walking through fields, somehow enjoying the lush landscape, even though several of the trees I passed had the customary green and white death notices for the upcoming burial at Potočari attached to them. I had been walking in a thoroughly haunted landscape,

one haunted as Gordon has conceptualized it: “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” (Gordon 2011:2). This knowledge embodied its own particular type of horror and prompted a search for what the lessons of haunting might possibly be – and who or what might be teaching them.

Spaces may become haunted by the past and made into uncanny environments (Rose 2009) and to enter one of these former spaces of violence is to experience the “direction of ambivalence” that Freud describes as being how the *heimlich* develops “until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*,” an atmosphere of disorientation and intellectual uncertainty that Ernst Jentsch describes as part of the *feeling* of the uncanny. A space in which acts of violence occurred carries more than traces; one could argue that they are replete with the environments of past events that linger and animate them. Mass murder, sexual violence, genocide and colonial violence (Pile 2005; Trigg 2012; Schindel 2014) leave residues that permeate the environment and may create a subconscious yet distinctly perceived and perceptible environment of horror and haunting. They embody what Julia Kristeva termed ‘abjection,’ that which transgresses “borders, positions, rules” and that “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 1982). The ambiguity of the uncanny is coupled with what Kristeva argues is the ambiguity of the abject. In the case of spaces of violence, this dual ambiguity may take the form of a discomfiting dialectic of horror and fascination. In these spaces meaning collapses (Kristeva 1982) but new meanings may also be formed. What interests me in this essay is to explore how abjection relates to space to produce a psychic disruption and how in the cases I examine, that disruption is a productive haunting (Gordon 2011) and meaning-giving to horror, expressed in artistic forms.

Yet at the same time, each of these works shows how the inanimate may become a site of horror. This sense of horror in part arises because the particular sites in question create “phantom pains,” sensing the presence of people, places and things that have been obliterated (Bille, Hastrup and Sorensen 2010). Abandoned places may encompass this type of pain and are part of an “anthropology of absence” (Bille, Hastrup and Sorensen 2010), the affect of what is absent upon people’s experience of the world, both material and spiritual. They are the visual representation of “the presence of absence” (Bille, Hastrup and Sorensen 2010) and in embodying this feeling, allow the individual who visits them to enact his/her own particular type of felt absence, whether longing for a missing person, a past time or a remote feeling. In each of the works I examine, I argue that absence has a key relationship to horror. In the work of Vercoe and Žbanić, it is the invisible (absent) yet present sense of the afterlife of extreme violence that animates the space of the hotel and of Višegrad. Gafić’s photographs of the material effects of the dead, who may still be missing or whose bodies have only been partially found, emphasize the absent body destroyed by mass political violence.

“Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either.
A ‘something’ I do not recognize as a thing.”

– Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

“I can’t imagine. I can’t imagine. I can’t imagine.” Kym Vercoe repeats these lines rhythmically as she stands in the hallway of the Vilina Vlas hotel in her performance piece, “Seven Kilometres Northeast” (2010). “I can’t imagine,” Vercoe says one more time. “And then I think to myself, well neither could they,” referring to the approximately three hundred Bosniak women who Serb forces at the direction of paramilitary leader Milan Lukić raped, tortured and killed in the Vilina Vlas hotel in Višegrad (located approximately seven kilometers from the center of town), turned into a rape camp in May, 1992.² The war crimes that happened in that hotel are beyond her belief – and beyond Vercoe’s knowledge of Višegrad before she spent one disturbed and sleepless night in the hotel while visiting the town on a weekend trip while on a trip to Belgrade for a theater festival in 2008. Structured like a *bildungsroman*, the one woman performance piece combines video projections of Vercoe’s own footage and photographs from Bosnia-Herzegovina with her personal narrative of how she transformed from an innocent abroad charmed by the postcard picturesque scenery of Višegrad, Ivo Andrić’s lyrical opening description of the Višegrad bridge and the inviting description of the Vilina Vlas hotel she reads in her guidebook to Bosnia Herzegovina,³ to experiencing the hotel and the town itself as a site of suffering-horror, an abject site where her sense of self and meaning violently and initially inexplicably collapse. Troubled and anxious during her night in the hotel yet fully unaware of its history, Vercoe experiences what Kristeva describes as an unrecognizable but meaningful and crushing “something.” She experiences *feelings* of abjection and only later learns the facts of this “terror that disassembles” and why her identity is disrupted in the violence of a space in which none of her feelings are familiar – and unfamiliar in a way and to an extent far beyond the inherently potentially disorienting experience of being a foreign woman staying in a hotel in a new town for the first time. Her physical anguish in the room creates abject reversals: the comfort of the hotel room becomes intense discomfort, the desire to be there turns into the need to flee the room and Višegrad itself (she returns to Belgrade the next day), and her feelings of curiosity, admiration and fascination with the place turn to disgust, bewilderment and eventually, shame. As an experience of the abject, Vercoe does not cease separation from it; the hotel becomes for her a space constantly remembered (Kristeva 1982, 8), even if there is a desire to make it into a space

² For accounts of women imprisoned and raped in Vilina Vlas, see Alexandra Stiglmayer, “The Rapes in Bosnia Herzegovina” in Alexandra Stiglmayer (ed.) 1992.

³ Tim Clancy’s *Bradt Guide to Bosnia Herzegovina*. Since Vercoe’s project, the entry on the hotel has been erased.

of oblivion and constant memories of it prompt her to return to the hotel and to Višegrad two years later. Her position first as a tourist almost fully unaware of the history of the wars in the former Yugoslavia and of the region itself is an initial source of shame, augments when she returns.

“My brain is screaming,” Vercoe states upon her return, quoting a book on thanatourism. “What am I doing here?” she asks herself against a shot of the hotel projected in the background. “I started to think of myself as the accidental thanatourist,” she remarks, keenly anxious about deriving pleasure from visiting “the houses of the dead.” This anxiety is reinforced, perhaps, because Vercoe knew little about the region before her first visit, and returns primarily to investigate her Višegrad. Indeed one of the most common questions she gets from Bosnians who have seen or heard about her piece, she states in the performance itself: “How could you not know what happened in Višegrad?” It is difficult to understand how Vercoe could not have any understanding of the region’s history or even only of Višegrad if she were as reading Andrić’s novel as closely as she proclaimed to be. Albeit a work of fiction, it is also a historical novel that includes what one could be considered one of the most graphic and visceral descriptions of a torture and killing to be found in literature.⁴ In her performance piece (and in the film), she does not show any awareness of the annual Srebrenica commemoration, even though she arrives in Sarajevo on July 8, just days before it takes place on July 11.

After seeing a production of Vercoe’s performance piece staged in Sarajevo, Žbanić decided to make it into a film. “*For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* is a story of memory and the energy of places that remain full of drama, pain, and denial,” she said. “I wanted to explore the possibility of humans being able to “see” what is invisible and the fact that all human beings are responsible for this planet, no matter what our nationality, religion.”⁵

“The proof of the existence of the monster is its victims
It is not direct proof but sufficient”

– Zbigniew Herbert, *The Monster of Mr. Cogito*

The image on the poster for *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales*⁶ is jarring: a body is curled into a fetal position, completely swathed beneath white wrinkled

⁴ This scene in Andrić’s novel in which the peasant Radislav is impaled is analyzed by Lynda Boose (2002, 71-96) in the context of Serb social memory and sexual violence committed against Muslims during the 1990s wars.

⁵ “TIFF Interview: Jasmila Žbanić and Kym Vercoe” Melissa Silverstein *Indiewire* October 8, 2013.

⁶ The English poster for the film used the same image. The French version of the film’s poster shows Vercoe sitting on a Vilina Vlas hotel bed placing flowers into a pile like an offering and translated the original title as, “Les Femmes de Višegrad” (“The Women of Višegrad”).

sheets so bunched up and tangled that the viewer can almost feel the body's distress. Whether the person beneath them is alive or dead, male or female is unclear. The film's title is stamped on the bottom in blood red – not the red of blood as it emerges from a wound, but the darker, more burnt red of blood after it has dried.

While Carroll's concept of "art-horror" has been critiqued for its separation of artistic representations of horror from "natural horror,"⁷ the distinction he perhaps falsely delineates or merely does not persuasively enough elaborate is useful in thinking about Žbanić's film: the horror expressed in *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* is intensified exactly because its subject matter is "natural horror" expressed through art. While it would be fully inaccurate to describe Žbanić's film as a horror film (or an "art-horror" film), it does have several qualities that Carroll outlines as part of the genre: it tries to elicit an affect in the viewer that mirrors or at least is sympathetic to that of the main character; her relationship to the monstrous changes, from what Carroll describes as characterizing the horror genre, viewing monsters as "abnormal...as disturbances of the natural order" (Carroll 1987, 52) to a view closer to a fairy tale⁸ where monsters "are part of the everyday furniture of the universe" (Carroll 1987, 52).

By the end of the film, Kym views the 'monstrous' events at Vilina Vlas as part of a much broader atmosphere of violence and its continuing potency and effects. Her reaction in the hotel room is inexplicably visceral, "threat...compounded by revulsion, nausea, disgust," (Carroll 1987, 53). The "monster" in this film is revealed to the audience in the form of knowledge and not visually but aurally as we listen to Kym watching ICTY testimony about the rapes at Vilina Vlas on youtube after she returns to Australia. Then too, Kym's reacts as if a monster has been revealed to her: "we often see the character shudder in disbelief, responding to this violation of nature" and the character reacts with "loathing...terror and disgust" (Carroll 1987, 54) to this being that is both "threatening *and* impure" (Carroll 1987, 55). "When I read [about Vilina Vlas' as a rape camp], I felt I was breaking down," Vercoe said. "I remembered the negative energy I sensed in that hotel room...I washed my shirt and took it out to the balcony to dry. In order to avoid rape and torture Bosniak women used to jump out of windows to their deaths." Any trace of the *heimlich* in its meaning of the 'homely' that Vercoe even attempted to experience in that room was violently displaced by the *heimlich* in its meaning of something hidden whose existence was first *felt* and then understood. "It was also possible," she continues, "that some [women] had been raped in the bed I was lying in." (Vercoe cited in Bećirović 2012, 182).

⁷ See in particular Paul Santill 2007, and John Taylor 1998.

⁸ It is perhaps worth recalling here that the name of the hotel/spa, "Vilina Vlas," literally translates as "Fairy's Hair," which also is a type of fern that grows in the area.

Žbanić's film too, embodies a central theme of horror stories: *knowledge* as a driving force for the protagonist, and two of its most common motifs: discovery and overreaching. In the discovery plot, the protagonist realizes that "a monster" is responsible for the existent death or violence, but "the authorities dismiss the very possibility of the monster" (Carroll 1987, 57). At the same time, in *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (2013) Kym is an "overreacher" who embarks upon "hidden, unholy or forbidden knowledge" (Carroll 1987, 57) and is warned not to pursue it. Žbanić was warned that filming in the city would be dangerous for the entire crew because of the film's subject matter and the fact that Žbanić is well known as the director of *Grbavica* (2007) and is herself Bosniak, she asked a Serbian friend to pretend to be the director and did not reveal the film's real plot. Fearing violence, the crew explained it to the residents of Višegrad as a film about an Australian tourist's enjoyable experiences visiting Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The film's geography is centered around what one could define as a marginal space, one part of "ordinary social life" but one whose very transformation from a spa into a rape camp and back into a spa again might categorize it as a hybrid space between two horrors: the horror of its past use as a rape camp and the contemporary horror as re-made into a hotel. In the context of Višegrad, however, where Serb forces used several other private and public buildings as rape and torture camps for Muslim men and women⁹ that were then returned to their original uses after the war, what might horrify is not that this space lies *outside* cultural categories, but that it is accepted by some as part of "ordinary social life" (Carroll 1987, 57).¹⁰ This continues to be the case at Vilina Vlas whose current website describes it as a curative rehabilitation center and is replete with numerous photographs of the hotel, its restaurant, bar, swimming pool, the surrounding forest, and perhaps most interestingly, photographs of people of all ages receiving physical therapy, doing group exercises and generally being very well taken care of.¹¹ Vilina Vlas is also mentioned favorably by the town of Višegrad and the Sarajevo tourism center as a destination and by the country's foreign investment promotion agency as a promising business for investment from abroad.¹²

⁹ Hasan Veletovac primary school, Petar Kočić primary school, Uzamnica, army barracks, the Bikavac hotel, Višegrad fire station, Višegrad high school, the local hydroelectric plant and the Varda furniture factory. See Bećirović 2014, 128-129.

¹⁰ See Bećirović (2014) on the topic of denial of war crimes in Višegrad and Marta Vidal, 2016, <http://www.balkandiskurs.com/en/2016/01/25/pionirska-house-silence-and-denial-in-visegrad/>

¹¹ Interestingly, as of this writing in March 2016 the link to the English language version of the site is present on the website but inoperative. See http://www.vilina-vlas.com/o_nama.php

¹² See: Višegrad Tourist Organization, "Hotel Vilina Vlas" <http://www.visegradturizam.com/english/hotel-vilina-vlas> Tourism Association of Sarajevo Canton. "Bosnia and Herzegovina Revealed" Tourism brochure <http://www.sarajevo-tourism.com/udoc/>

In a 2014 interview, Žbanić responded to the question of why Vercoe felt sick in the Vilina Vlas hotel room even though she had no prior knowledge of what had happened in the hotel.¹³ “The atmosphere in Višegrad is very heavy. The horrors of war crimes are felt in every step. There are hardly any Bosniak women in the city. The Bosniak population was indeed 63% before the war and 1% after the war.” Žbanić, too, complained of feeling ill while filming in Višegrad. “I understand Kym’s illness because I also experienced it during the filming,” she said. “I woke up every night because of nightmares. The main editor of the film, Yann Dedet, had the same experience. The same thing happened to the French theater writer and director, Pascal Rambert when he came to present his play ‘Love’s End’ in Višegrad. Strange.”

Unlike Žbanić, Vercoe did not have any generational connection to Bosnia-Herzegovina or Višegrad that would have allowed her to internalize or indirectly remember the violence that took place at the Vilina Vlas hotel. She did not come to the experience, then, with any of what Marianne Hirsch has defined as “post-memory,” a memory tied to inter- or trans-generational connection to a traumatic or violent historical event (Hirsch 2008). Her experience staying in the Vilina Vlas hotel for only one night is closer to what Michael Taussig describes in *What Color is the Sacred* (2009) as the bodily unconscious (2009, 22). “Our bodies as well as our outlook change in a dangerous world now subject to rising seas, hurricanes, and pestilence,” he writes. In the midst of “planetary crisis and meltdown” (2009, 22), the body comes into a new way of knowing itself, what he terms a “preemptively apocalyptic knowledge” (2009, 22). This new type of knowledge prompts a “an almost mystical sensitivity to that other body, the body of the world” (Taussig 2009, 88).¹⁴

While Taussig’s focus is on new mind-body relationships that he argues may well be arising from global warming, what if one were to extend his idea of the bodily unconscious to spaces and memories of global violence and of sexual violence in particular? Vercoe’s performance piece and Žbanić’s film certainly portray Vercoe’s bodily knowledge of the horror of sexual violence as the driving force for her to investigate the place and to create a play based upon what happened there. In this case, fear and horror follow from the known, not the *un-*

brosure/Final_EN_V2.pdf 2014 and Foreign Investment Promotion Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Investment Opportunities in Bosnia and Herzegovina” March 2012 <http://www.sarajevo.ba/ba/files/bcentar/investment-opportunities-fipa.pdf>

¹³ These are my own translations from the article, “Les femmes de Višegrad – Rencontre avec Jasmila Žbanić” April 4, 2014 À Voir, À Lire <http://www.avoir-alire.com/les-femmes-de-visegrad-rencontre-avec-jasmila-zbanic>

¹⁴ Also see Dylan Trigg (2009) for an analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of the body, its relationship to trauma in particular and how the “making space and time inclusive of the body” (Trigg, 90) relates to past and present temporalities.

known: what truly horrifies is what Vercoe learns has existed in the Vilina Vlas and in Višegrad – rape and murder – and what also exists in Vilina Vlas and in Višegrad – a desire among many to deny that it ever happened. Bećirović has argued this denial, along with the lack of efforts on the part of Serbs to mitigate the genocide and with the fact that there are no Bosniaks in the town has resulted in genocide “still at work” in Višegrad (Bećirović 2014, 127).¹⁵

Žbanić has explained that this denial and silence is at the core of what she sought to disrupt with her film (Simić and Volčić 2014, 385). In the context of Višegrad in particular and the former Yugoslavia more generally, naming something specifically as “horror” has a complicated relationship to both denial and to silence. In her ethnographic study of responses to mass violence in post-conflict Serbia, Jelena Obradović-Wochnik (Obradović-Wochnik 2013, 112) details the frequent use of the word *užas* (“horror”) among her informants in referring to war crimes, the war generally and even the whole of the 1990s. She attributes this to an avoidance in giving particular names to things, such as naming events as war crimes, and giving the details of wartime experiences (Obradović-Wochnik 2013, 112).¹⁶ In this sense, “horror” is used as a way to evade detailing the specific *horrific* details of a period or an event. Horror as a verbal reaction and expression in this context seems more akin to a sort of masking than it is to a revealing. It is a naming in the service of concealing, whether purposefully or because the individual uses “*užas*” to express the inexpressibility of what s/he has experienced. The inability and sometimes unwillingness to describe may relate to trauma but also to the “public secret” (Taussig 1999).¹⁷ Secrecy is the “that which is known but cannot be articulated” and which “lies at the very core of power” (Canetti 1984, 290).

The force field of violence that remains in the space of Vilina Vlas and in the town of Višegrad – what Maria Tumarkin has termed a “traumascape” (Tumarkin 2005), a place transformed physically and psychically by suffering, is made more horrific by the attempts to erase these transformations. For Vercoe, history occurred as a symptom (Caruth 1991) and coupled with the denial of history, Vercoe experiences a horrifying sensory knowledge that eventually prompts her to create with and *against* horror. If there could be any “pleasure” derived

¹⁵ Related to genocide as “still at work,” see Hikmet Karčić 2014.

¹⁶ As she notes, the oral histories of Serbian and Bosnian veterans of the 1990s wars also frequently use *užas* to refer to the war, to the period and to the experience of the wartime period generally. They also repeat the incomprehensible and unimaginable nature of violent events of the war. See Obradović-Wochnik 2013, 112-116 and Rill, Helena and Tamara Šmidling *Slike tih Vremena* Belgrade and Sarajevo Centar za Nenasilnu Akciju, 2010, http://www.nenasilje.org/publikacije/pdf/Slike_tih_vremena.pdf

¹⁷ On the topic of the “public secret” in the former Yugoslavia, see in particular: Jasmina Husanović 2015, and Maria B. Olujić 1998.

from horror in this context, it might be Vercoe and Žbanić's creative action. As Žbanić explained, "I was trying to find poetry in this brutal thing."¹⁸

One of many questions that this "brutal thing" raises is who the monster is (or who the monsters *are*). For Vercoe, knowledge of the war crimes at Vili-na Vlas and the continuing denial of them is at least one of them. As Simić and Volčić correctly point out, the representation of victims and perpetrators is uncomplicated in the film and the Bosnian Serbs are portrayed more like caricatures than like characters (Simić and Volčić 391, 2014). Vercoe's own personal struggles as a Western "thanotourist" do not engage the larger issues of "watching" and "participation" that plague and conflict her about the Višegrad residents. In her essay, "Why We Need Monsters" (2004) Slavenka Drakulić takes on many more complex questions not addressed in Vercoe's performance nor in the film: "What must happen to make that ordinary man see an enemy in a colleague or a neighbor? How is it possible for hatred, humiliation, brutality to become legitimate behavior? What political, social, and psychological processes in a society make such thinking possible?" (Drakulić 2004, 192–193).

and me with no hands
and me with no days
and me with no eyes

– Mak Dizdar, *Stone Sleeper*

Every single one of Bosnian photographer Ziyah Gafić's photographs in his ongoing project, "Quest for Identity," begun in 2011, is shot against the same background, the scarred and scratched metal forensic tables on which the International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP) assembles the bodies of victims of the Bosnian war at the Tuzla investigation center. The tables are visibly inscribed with the autopsy and identification process; scalpel cuts leave zigzagging scratches all over them. One might imagine these scars to form their own haphazard record of the identification processes that have taken place on them: the assembly of bones, the piecing together of personal belongings.

Placed upon these tables is the archive that forms Gafić's project: the personal remains of people killed in the Srebrenica genocide.¹⁹ These are what he

¹⁸ "TIFF Interview: Jasmila Žbanić and Kym Vercoe" Melissa Silverstein *Indiewire* October 8, 2013.

¹⁹ His project follows Bosnian photographer Tarik Samarah's photographs of the personal effects found in mass graves in Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as Gilles Peress' *The Graves: Srebrenica and Vukovar* (1998); photographer Jonathan Hollingsworth, documenting the deaths of migrants crossing from Mexico to the United States through Arizona, focuses part of his project on their found personal effects his book *Left Behind* (2012), examples of what Eyal Weizman has called "forensic aesthetics" (2012).

calls “simple objects”²⁰: family photographs, celebrity photographs, eyeglasses, watches, prayer beads, a pocket sized Koran, a shaving brush, a *jezva*, even a glass eye and a hearing aid. These products of human labor, artifacts made for human use and consumption, are now “orphaned” to use Gafić’s expression. “Once the forensics and doctors and lawyers are done with these objects,” he said in a 2011 interview, “they become *orphans* of the narrative. Many of them get destroyed...or they get shelved – out of sight, out of mind.”²¹

Seeing these lone artifacts at an ICMP facility in central Bosnia several years ago inspired the project. Gafić imagined that photographing these material remains, essential to families for the purposes of identifying their relatives, could make the process easier. On a practical level, the archive (online and available as an iPad app) allows individuals to avoid the potentially re-traumatizing experience of being in proximate, tactile contact with the personal remains that their loved one was carrying or wearing when executed. The online accessibility of his photographs distinguishes this project from the *Books of Belongings*, books of photographs of the personal effects of individuals killed in the 1990s was created by the International Committee of the Red Cross to help in the identification process.²² This is particularly important in the Bosnian context, where the process of searching for and identifying missing persons from the war is a lengthy and some have argued insensitive and inadequately supported social process.²³ For its practical value to the victims’ families, Gafić describes “Quest for Identity” as “the most important project” he’s ever done.

The archive that Gafić is creating has even more potency when once remembers that Serb forces shelled Bosnia’s National and University library for three days in August, 1992, destroying 90% of its collection, one that contained unique archival material for the study of Bosnian culture²⁴ Three months earlier, shells destroyed the most comprehensive collection of Islamic manuscripts and

²⁰ Eng Karen, 2014, TED blog <http://fellowsblog.ted.com/2014/08/25/orphans-of-the-narrative-bosnian-photographer-ziyah-gafic-documents-the-aftermath-of-war>

²¹ Eng Karen, 2014, TED blog <http://fellowsblog.ted.com/2014/08/25/orphans-of-the-narrative-bosnian-photographer-ziyah-gafic-documents-the-aftermath-of-war>

²² The ICRC published the first *Book of Belongings* for Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2000; since then, there have been more books for Bosnia-Herzegovina as well as *Books of Belongings* for Kosovo and Serbia. The photographs in these books show the material object next to an identifying number. While these books have not been made available to the public, an example is published in Danzinger Nick and Rory McLean 2010.

²³ Monica Kleck of the Freudenberg Foundation, Tuzla has detailed the ways in which re-traumatization of the identification process for the families may occur: psychological support is rarely given, and when mass exhumations could entail family members being asked to walk among bodies to identify them. See Monica Kleck 2007.

²⁴ See Andrés Riedlmayer 2007.

periodicals. While these cultural archives have been permanently destroyed, the archive of personal material belongings and bodily remains of the war dead continuously expands. At present, the regional number of missing persons is approximately 14,000.²⁵

What Gafić describes as the “absolute detachment” of his photographic process and production infuses the images with an affective strike to the viewer. The photographs’ uniformity of composition, lighting and size echo the repetition of objects. Their purpose is multilayered: the photographs are evidence but they are also allegories of horror, structures of a sequence with a “result [that] is not dynamic but static, ritualistic, repetitive” (Owens 1980, 52). As a series, “Quest for Identity” is this type of narrative arrested in place (Owens 1980, 57). This repetition is itself poignantly horrifying: it is the traumatic repetition of violence during the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia, the repetitive ongoing search for missing people. As a photographic series, these images of objects constitute a sort of perverse *wunderkammer* of the aftermath of genocide.

Like corpses, these material objects “suggest the lived lives of complex human beings” (Verdery 1999, 28). The object reinforces the absence of the body that it belonged to, or that used it, or that carried it or wore it on the body. And if the expectation of photographic evidence is part of atrocity, as Sontag argues (Sontag 2003, 83), Gafić’s photographs certainly provide that. “Such evidence, is, usually, of something posthumous; the remains, as it were – the mounds of skulls in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, the mass graves in Guatemala, and El Salvador, Bosnia and Kosovo” (Sontag 2003, 83). “...This posthumous reality is,” she writes, “often the keenest of summations.” (Sontag 2003, 84). This posthumous reality has particular bitterness in the case of Bosnia, where reports of detention camps were documented as early as 1992 and because Western media attention was high but made little difference in raising mass awareness about the Bosnian war and genocide in Srebrenica.²⁶

The material remains and the photographs then themselves take on the quality of an uncanny fetish object, “animism with a vengeance,” matter that “strikes back” (Pels 1998, 91). What may strike back at the viewer in particular is the complex significance of both the objects and the photographs of them. Produced by genocide, the objects also show the decay that comes from being buried underground for at the very least a year if not several years,²⁷ yet another remind-

²⁵ Approximately 10,000 are missing from Bosnia-Herzegovina, 2,000 from Croatia, around 1,900 from Kosovo conflict and 13 from Macedonia.

²⁶ See Stjepan Meštrović and Robert Cushman 1994.

²⁷ The exhumations at Srebrenica began in 1995. Gafić began his project in 2011; also see David Rohde, “Graves Found That Confirm Bosnia Massacre” *Christian Science Monitor* November 16, 1995, that details the first finding of mass graves in Srebrenica.

er of the violence of the individuals' deaths and the difficulty of exhumation and identification. They are potentially what Ariella Azoulay calls "emergency claims," photographic statements of horror that establish that a "disaster" existed and still necessitate action (Azoulay 2008). The objects photographed are also akin to relics: just as the relic did not represent but *was* the saint (Pels 1998, 104) the individual objects could be imagined to not just identify the individuals to whom they belonged but to stand in for their possibly missing or partially found corpse. Many of the objects photographed also eerily emphasize the missing body: there are eyeglasses without eyes to look through them; a hearing aid without an ear; a comb without hair. Reminders of mortality and the grief of the living, Gafić's numerous photographs of watches and timepieces seem almost like grievous illustrations to Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, if one might recall Barthes' attention to clocks, watches and time more generally in the book, an homage to his recently deceased mother, an exploration of Photography "not as a question (a theme) but as a wound" (Barthes 1980, 21).

In Gafić's photographs, it is the *absence* of the body that renders the images horrific but also intimate; it is their *punctum*. The body as the conventional site of suffering and one necessary for testimony and in human rights work "because it is what people have in common with others" (McLagan 2007), is necessarily transferred to the material object. The material object of the deceased whose body may have been found, partially found or not found at all stands in for the body – and may speak as testimony through its incarnation in the photograph. The material object has been a witness and the act of photographing it allows it to potentially "speak."

What partially motivates "Quest for Identity" is this desire for *prosopopoeia* – what Eyal Weizman has described as the speaking back of material objects for the humans made absent by violence, whether it is displayed online (on the iPad app or on Gafić's website), as published in his book of the same name, or as the photographs are displayed in the Srebrenica Memorial Room in the former Dutchbat headquarters. What Sontag called the "extramural life" (Sontag 2012) of photographs – their potential existence in varied forms outside of a museum archive – is at the core of this project. It is, in fact, these photographs numerous extramural lives, lives with both private and public purposes, that enrich their potential for acting as embodied sites capable of transferring a sense of experience through space and time (Lowe 2014, 229).

"Pathos, in the form of a narrative, does not wear out. But do people want to be horrified? Probably not" (Sontag 2003, 83). The photographs that retain horror, she writes, are those that one cannot bear to look at often: "the faces of horribly disfigured First World War veterans...the faces melted and thickened... of survivors of the American atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the faces cleft by machete blows of Tutsi survivors of the genocidal rampage

launched by the Hutus in Rwanda...” (Sontag 2003, 83).²⁸ There are certainly ample examples of such photographs from the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia: Danilo Krstanović’s “A couple killed on their bicycle, Sarajevo” (1992) showing a man and woman with their mouths agape and arms outstretched lying dead next to their fallen bicycle; Gilles Peress’ photographs of corpses in Srebrenica graves; Darko Bandić’s photograph of Ferida Osmanović, a Bosniak woman who hung herself in a tree near a Tuzla refugee camp after finding out that her husband had been killed by Serbs;²⁹ the defaced photograph of a Bosnian family found when they returned to their house that had been occupied by Serbs;³⁰ Damir Šagolj’s “An Infant’s Funeral in the village of Svrake” (1996), a close up of a tiny coffin being carried by family members; Šahin Šišić’s “Djure Djakovića Street” (1992), a nearly abstract shot of blood drenched pavement after a mortar attack in Sarajevo – there is an unfortunate abundance of images from which to choose, each of which might be described as retaining horror in its own particular way. Each might probe the viewer to challenge what it means to identify a photograph as horrific and what it means to be horrified, particularly if one considers what Sontag described as photography’s potential to simultaneously transfix and to anesthetize (“there is pleasure in flinching,” she wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others*) as related to horror’s capacity for repulsion and fascination.

²⁸ In *Regarding the Pain of Others* she describes the photographs of “real horror” as either those that “catch a death actually happening” (Sontag 2003, 59), those “condemned to die” (2003, 60); images of “tormented, mutilated bodies” (Sontag 2003, 95). Sontag’s most revealing, most candid description of horror in her own work is a personal experience that would become the basis for the majority of her theoretical work. In *On Photography* (1977), she describes this experience as an “encounter” and it is her first of such “with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror” (1977, 19), photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. “Nothing I have seen -- in photographs or in real life -- ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs -- of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead, something is still crying” (Sontag 1977, 19-20).

²⁹ A large scale print of this photograph is exhibited in the Srebrenica Memorial Room where Gafić’s series and other photographs are displayed.

³⁰ For a thoughtful article on this photograph, see Sharon Sliwinski, “On Photographic Violence”, 2009, 303-316. This photograph is included in Ron Haviv’s *Blood and Honey: A Balkan War Journal* (2000).

Yet in Gafić's photographs, there is disrupted what Barthes described as the essence of the photograph at work: it both announces death and "has something to do with resurrection" (Barthes 1980:84) and "does not necessarily say *what is no longer* but only and for certain *what has been*" (1980:85). Ann Stoler conceptualizes the ruin as both "a claim about a thing and a process affecting it" (Stoler 2013) and argues that "the noun freezes too easily into stasis" while the verbal form is active and expresses the ongoing process that is ruination. The material remain possesses a similar dual linguistic function. As Stoler has written in the colonial context, material and psychic structures remain tactile and present to some and to others, they are events distinctly relegated to the *passé composé*. Gafić's photographs are documentary evidence of the remaining force of post-war violence: its persistence, its processes, contained within each object – and still affecting the people who continue to grieve the missing and the found dead.

The *absence* of the body renders the images quietly horrific but the photograph of the material remaining announces a restoration, albeit one that is also a warning. "Genocide is not only about killing. It is also about denied identity," Gafić has written. "However, there are always traces, remnants of the perished ones that are more durable than their fragile bodies and our selective and fading memory of them."

"The non-living present in the living present...that
which lives on"

– Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

In her reflections on *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Avery Gordon emphasizes that haunting, as distinct from the unrelenting repetitiveness of trauma, is always "registering the harm or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present" (Gordon 2011, 2). Haunting is therefore often fearful and fear inducing, but is also always *productive*, whether socially, politically, artistically or personally. Haunting creates a "something-to-be-done," (Gordon 2011, 2). It is not about "invisibility or unknowability *per se*," but "refers us to what's living and breathing in the place hidden from view: people, places, histories, knowledge, memories, ways of life, ideas" (Gordon 2011, 2). Haunting is an "emergent state," where "the ghost arises carrying the signs and portents of a repression in the past or the present that's no longer working" (Gordon 2011, 2).

These rousing ghosts are reminiscent of Benjamin's dialectical image arising in what he argued was the perpetual state of emergency in which we live and which is not the exception but the rule (Benjamin 1968, 254). Rather than recognizing a historical past for "the way it really was," "it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin 1968, 255). These bursting, flickering flashes of danger are for Benjamin "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past." (Benjamin 1968, 259). For Gordon,

however, these flashes are the ghosts reminding us of not just memories of the past but the contemporary and imminently future dangerous repression-to-come.

This is what Vercoe's play, Žbanić's film and Gafić's photography series do. Rather than mere memorials, they are attempts to create haunting lessons for the viewers. It is up to them – to us – to transform these hauntings into “something(s)-to-be-done.”

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Lekcije koje progone

Ovaj rad se bavi užasom kroz radove troje umetnika koji koriste lokacije i ostatak ekstremnog nasilja kao teme. U pitanju su: performans australijske glumice Kim Verko "Sedam kilometara severozapadno", film bosanske rediteljke Jasmile Žbanić zasnovan na tim performansu, "Za one koji ne mogu da govore", i projekat bosanskog fotografa Zijaha Gafića koji je još uvek u toku, "Potraga za identitetom" – serija fotografija materijalnih ostataka pronađenih u masovnim grobnicama u okolini Srebrenice, od kojih su neki izloženi u Memorijalnoj Sali Srebrenice u bivšem sedištu holandskog bataljona UNPROFOR-a u Potočarima. Rad Verkoove i Žbanićeve se fokusira na Višegrad i posebno motel Vilina Vlas, koji je bio logor u kojem su vršena sistematska silovanja tokom rata u Bosni. Mesta poput ovih na kojima su se dogodili činovi nasilja nose više od tragova; ona su prepuna okruženja i uslova proteklih događaja koji u njima ostaju i oživljavaju ih. Ejveri Gordon (Avery Gordon) ih opisuje kao ukleta mesta društvenog života koja nisu lako opažljiva ali se njihovo prisustvo oseća. Masovna ubistva, seksualno nasilje, genocid i kolonijalno nasilje ostavljaju tragove koji prožimaju okruženje i mogu stvoriti podsvesnu ali jasno uočljivu i prepoznatljivu atmosferu užasa i ukletosti. Ova mesta utelovljuju ono što Julija Kristeva naziva 'abjekcija' – poniženost, bedastoća koja prelazi „granice, pozicije, pravila“ i „remeti identitet, sistem, red“. Ispitujući ova umetnička dela i referencirajući sopstvena iskustva kao novinara koji je radila u posleratnoj Hrvatskoj i Bosni i Hercegovini, istražujem kako dvostruka priroda abjekcije korelira sa materijalnim ostacima i mestima ekstremnog nasilja i kako proizvodi psihičko remećenje. Moj argument je da ova dela razotkrivaju kako naizgled neživo može postati živo mesto užasa, ali da su uključena u kreativne pokušaje da transformišu psihičku i prostornu abjekciju motivisanu produktivnim porivom „da se nešto uradi“.

Ključne reči: užas, umetnička dela, mesta ekstremnog nasilja, ukleta mesta društvenog života

Les leçons obsédantes

Cet article traite l'horreur dans les travaux de trois artistes qui choisissent pour sujet les sites et les traces de la violence la plus extrême. Il s'agit de la performance de l'actrice australienne Kim Verko *Sept kilomètres au nord-est*, puis du film de la réalisatrice bosnienne Jasmila Žbanić basé sur cette performance, *Pour ceux qui ne peuvent parler*, et enfin du projet du photographe bosnien Zijah Gafić, toujours en cours, *À la recherche de l'identité* – série de photographies des vestiges matériels trouvés dans les charniers des alentours de Srebrenica, dont certains sont exposés dans la Salle mémorielle de Srebrenica dans l'ancien siège du bataillon hollandais de UNPROFOR à Potočari. Les travaux de Verko et de Žbanić se concentrent sur Višegrad et notamment le motel Vilina Vlas, un véritable camp de viols systématiques au cours de la guerre en Bosnie. Les endroits comme celui-là dans lesquels se sont déroulés des actes de violence portent plus que des traces; ces endroits sont remplis de tout ce qui entoure les événements du passé, de ce qui reste en eux et les anime. Avery Gordon les décrit comme des endroits maudits de la vie sociale qui ne sont pas facilement perceptibles mais dont la présence peut être sentie. Les crimes de masse, la violence sexuelle, le génocide et la violence coloniale laissent des traces qui imprègnent l'environnement et peuvent créer une atmosphère inconsciente mais clairement perçue et perceptible de l'horreur et de l'obsession. Ces lieux incarnent ce que Julia Kristeva appelle "abjection", ce qui dépasse les « frontières, positions, règles » et « perturbe l'identité, le système, l'ordre ». En analysant ces œuvres d'art et en se référant à ses propres expériences comme journaliste ayant travaillé dans la Croatie et la Bosnie-Herzégovine d'après-guerre, j'examine comment la nature double de l'abjection entre en corrélation avec les vestiges matériels et les lieux de la violence la plus extrême pour causer des perturbations psychologiques. Mon argument est que ces œuvres révèlent comment un site en apparence inanimé peut devenir un site de l'horreur animé, et qu'encore sont engagées les tentatives créatives de transformer l'abjection psychique et spatiale motivée par une hantise productive « de faire quelque chose ».

Mots clés: horreur, œuvres d'art, lieux de violence extrême, lieux hantés de vie sociale

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