

3rd Annual HUAmS/CAAS Workshop

Quarter of a Century after the Fall of the Berlin Wall: Perspectives and Directions in Croatian and Regional American Studies

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Abstracts

Stipe Grgas (Zagreb)

The Demise of “America’s Communist Ally”: An American Studies Perspective

As the title of my presentation indicates, ex-Yugoslavia had a relationship to the United States that set it apart from other countries which belonged to the socialist camp. That relationship has been described by many authors who have pointed to various parameters: material and financial assistance, military factors, political ties, etc. With hindsight it is obvious that the position Yugoslavia was able to maintain stemmed out of historically specific geopolitical circumstances. What has been less remarked is that the relationship was embedded in a particular time of capital. Those authors who take into consideration economic factors too easily jump from these factors to a monocausal explanation of the breakup of the former polity. In my presentation I will be arguing for a more nuanced explanation, one that not only maps the changed geopolitical situation of the late 1980ies but that registers the mutation of capital in the post-Fordist world. I will be proposing that those accounts of the demise of Yugoslavia that revert to economic causes rather too easily assign malign agency to international monetary bodies and personages. I will propose that we contextualize the demise of Yugoslavia and what afterwards ensued in the region within a broader mutation of capitalism. My subtitle is meant to indicate that it is from the discipline of American Studies that we can appreciate this mutation and how the region targeted by my presentation has fared and continues to fare under the sway and hegemony of American capitalism.

Tatjana Jukić (Zagreb)

Derrida's America between Declarations of Independence and Specters of Marx

Departing from Hannah Arendt’s claim that the American Revolution provides the standard against which subsequent revolutions can be analyzed, also that subsequent revolutions failed to engage the conceptual purity of the American model, I will address Jacques Derrida’s “Declarations of Independence” where Derrida renounces Jefferson’s thought as inadequate and excuses himself from engaging it on critical terms. Given the fact that Derrida later

mobilizes Marx in order to explore similar concerns, I propose to analyze how Derrida's Marx constitutes the position from where to reassess Derrida's America. This then is of critical value to understanding socialism insofar as its formation is premised on the event of the revolution, as well as to understanding postsocialism insofar as revolution remains constituent to its *raison*.

Maša Kolanović (Zagreb)

Postsocialist America: Re-visiting USA in Literature of Post-Yugoslav Dissidents

After the breakup of Yugoslavia, United States of America was one of the first and most common destinations for post-Yugoslav dissidents. Prominent post-Yugoslav authors Dubravka Ugrešić and Slavenka Drakulić wrote their first collections of essays (*Američki fikcionar*, 1993; *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, 1992) reflecting turbulent political, cultural and social changes after the break-up of Yugoslavia in which America is very often place of distanced position in their dissident views but also functions as a place of numerous cultural and political comparisons with postsocialist Europe. The paper will examine the role of America in their critical views on the breakup of Yugoslavia, how America was shaped as a cultural metaphor and re-viewed as a real environment, how socialist legacy is articulated in their perspective and how the disintegration of Yugoslavia shaped their postsocialist perspective on the United States.

Jelena Šesnić (Zagreb)

A Diasporic American Mirror for Late Socialist and Early Democratic Croatia

My focus will be on the image of the USA as a paradigm of the free market and a functional democracy that could be disseminated as an ideal to be coveted in late socialist Croatia and then, in the next phase following upon the events of 1989, emulated in the YU successor countries. The case of Croatia will be instructive but by no means the only representative or available response in the period complicated furthermore by the country's descent into a bloody war in the course of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The other element that acts as a foil for the image of the USA first in late socialist and later early democratic Croatia is the strong diasporic connection that has mediated the image of the USA back to the home country in complex ways in these two phases. My archive will comprise the fictional and factional texts by our diasporic writers (Blažević, Goss, Novakovich), as well as those Croatian writers that in this period thematize the US in their non-fiction writings (Jelušić).

Sven Cvek (Zagreb)

Fordism, socialism and the end of a workers' state

This talk represents a draft for an inquiry into the relationship between labor and the project of Yugoslav socialism. Starting from the surviving traces of a culture of labor, I will offer

precursory remarks on the historical vicissitudes of Yugoslav labor, and its ruin brought about by the parallel processes of political-economic crisis and restoration of capitalism in the late 1980s.

Hrvoje Tutek (Zagreb)

Croatian Neoconservatism in the Aftermath of the Great Recession

Institutionalized in its current form in the postsocialist transition (George Soros and his Open Society Institute being the most visible, and perhaps notorious, influence in the 1990s), the Croatian civil society has predominately been a vehicle of reformist liberal ideas, with a smattering of left-wing elements to complete the picture. However, in the last couple of years, a noticeable new development can be detected: a whole spectrum of new conservative forces, indistinguishable in their institutional modus operandi from the liberal ones, has appeared. From Catholic Church-sponsored anti-gay marriage initiatives, to various “moral issues NGOs” and free market think-tanks, there has been a surge in conservative civil society activity. What is interesting about many of those is that they replicate or adapt ideologies, symbolism, and modes of political activism originally emerging in the United States to the Croatian context. Thus we can find “pro-life” activists joined in prayer in front of public hospitals, free market advocates denouncing “big government” in the press, and other examples of Americanized conservative discourse and activity. Since these are necessarily deployed within the wider context of traditional ethnonationalist, welfare state, Catholic conservative ideology of the 1990s, my aim in this paper will be to theorize the points of convergence between these different strands of conservative ideology, and to situate the neoconservative surge in the historical context of the Great Recession.

Gordan Matas (Split)

Reflections on the breakup of former Yugoslavia in the works of Aleksandar Hemon

In his collection of short stories *The Question of Bruno* as well as in his novel *The Nowhere Man* Aleksandar Hemon questions the position of ex-Yugoslav immigrant in the United States. His writing is primarily informed by his personal and familial situation which serve as the starting point in the exploration of his identity. Frequently feeling situated between the two worlds, Hemon decides that his position is a privileged one since he perceives himself as an author whose position is a space of overlapping and opportunities, rather than a space of reduction and disadvantages. Such a position enables new, more fluid identities as well as an opportunity to participate in a democratic exchange of ideas and information. As a professional writer, Hemon believes he can be a bridge between different cultures and that is a position that he readily occupies.

Lovorka Gruić Grmuša (Rijeka)

Thomas Pynchon's Readings of Croatia

This paper traces Pynchon's engaging views of Croatia and its political fabric in his novel *Against the Day*, focusing on the Uskok community and their ideological descendants. Revealing a cross-cultural analysis, Pynchon incorporates Western (and Great Powers') views of the region, for Croatia is situated at the intersection of Central Europe, Mediterranean, and the Balkans (and the West has often referred to it as part of the Balkans), as well as framing representations grounded on local scholarship. Traversing the realms of states and ethno-national groups, as well as the disciplines of history, literature, anthropology, and politics, this account (following Pynchon's footsteps) tries to illuminate the Uskoks' urge for sovereignty and self-determination, informed by scholarship from the region, as well as by Western historical chronicles, marking their position within the Balkans' larger social ecologies and European role systems.

Through semi-mythical constructs of ancient cultures and stereotypical configurations of the alleged and ingrained Balkan savagery, Pynchon speaks of the Western outlook on the 'barbaric' peoples, ridiculing Westerners' unjustified assumptions and ideas of superiority. However, in order to secure realistic and fictive positions alike, existent in the discourse of Southeastern Europe and the West, the author balances both views, stressing Western, civilized and diplomatic domination, colonialism and control of the Balkan peoples, while trying to illustrate the Easterners' understanding of imperialist powers, neighboring folk and their notion of self-determination.

Borislav Knežević (Zagreb)

(Mis)Learning from American Education: What Is American About Bologna?

The paper deals with the awkward relationship between the project of harmonizing European higher education usually referred to as the Bologna process and American higher education. The paper argues that the Bologna process is effectively neither a pure misreading nor a faithful imitation of the American model, but a loose, easily bendable framework, which has on the one hand helped the construction of the European Higher Education Area, a common European space for establishing educational and research links between universities, teachers and researchers across Europe, but on the other hand it tended often to produce simulacral forms of harmonization when it comes to the structure and functioning of the university as an institution. A significant disadvantage for the Bologna process has been the onset of a massive recession which meant that the issue of funding (while always an important one) has come to dominate the public debates while the questions of the organization of higher learning and of the character of university education as such have often been eclipsed. The paper does not seek to advance a detailed comparative analysis of the issues of governance, funding, organization, curriculum, and social role of higher education in the United States and Europe, but to suggest that so far European reform was often ornamental, and not really based on a studious reading of the American model of the university.

Kalina Maleska (Skopje)

Influence of American Movies on Reading Literature

Throughout the history of the American movie industry, numerous novels have been the inspiration and the essence of movies. This practice has continued in the last couple of decades – books that have been popular or, in other words, widely read by audiences have been made into movies. And, as the practice in university-level literature classes in the last several years has showed, these movies, in turn, have been influencing the reading habits of students. This essay explores the influence of American movies on reading literature. The epic *Beowulf*, for example, had not been of much interest to students traditionally; but since the appearance of the movie *Beowulf*, students are trying harder to read and understand the epic. Steven Spielberg's *War Horse* has raised the interest and contributed to the better understanding of war poetry. So, even though culture studies have produced research according to which the movie industry has reduced the scale of reading literary works, this essay will provide a different perspective and will attempt to show that there are cases in which movies, and especially American movies, have contributed to raising the interest in reading literary works.

Marko Lukić and Zlatko Bukač (Zadar)

The Marvel of Subverting the American Dream

The rise of the popularity of comic books and graphic novels, as well as their increasingly successful film and television adaptations, undeniably raises questions of the validity of this constantly reinventing artistic form, both from the point of view of a creative process (developing from the context of the popular culture imaginarium), as well as from the point of its value and contribution to contemporary cultural and social discourses (both within a strictly American context, as well as on a larger global scale). A particular, and what could almost be defined as a traditional point of debate when discussing the position of comics or graphic novels within the American context, is their relations to the (de)construction of the notion of the American dream. This is particularly true for a number of serialized publications dedicated to the adventures and misadventures of the numerous superheroes, such as the ones that readers can encounter within the dominant serialized publications presented by companies such as *Detective Comics (DC)* or *Marvel*.

What this presentation proposes is an insight, through a specific case study, into the polyvalent nature of the superhero narrative, and its relation to the contemporary discourses focused on race, tolerance and multiculturalism. The presentation aims at addressing the specific case of the *X-Men* series (published by *Marvel*), as an ideal example of a narrative almost exclusively anchored within the American popular culture imaginarium, and therefore actively shunned from what is perceived as being the academic mainstream discourse, which regardless of its dislocated position and recognition, actively problematizes issues such as genocide, intolerance, diversity, gender and racial rights that happened during the 20th century, as well as more contemporary problems developing after 9/11. Furthermore the paper will present the idea of an open critique of the American dream encapsulated within a subversive

discourse, and hidden beneath the perpetuation of certain stereotypes concerning gender and racial representations.

Sanja Runtić (Osijek)

Contemporary Native American Realities: Reflections on Indigenous Sovereignty and the Washington Redskins Debate

The paper draws upon the controversy over the use of indigenous-related sports emblems that has recently sparked a series of protests against “Washington Redskins” name and imagery across the United States. It focuses on the visual aspect of the debate, tracing the white-supremacist foundations of Washington team's insignia to the institutional construction of Native identity through popular Indian head pennies and buffalo nickels in the period between 1859 and 1938. Pointing at the seemingly paradoxical discrepancy between the minted messages and the systematic political, legal, and military invasion on American Indian sovereignty in the period, it proceeds to deconstruct the paradox by exposing the numismatic pictorial language as a manifestation of the same ideological project and the configurations of power that have remained unchanged to this day. The continued circulation of indigenous-based iconography in contemporary American context shows that the same cultural imagination continues to serve not only as a powerful rationale for European America's historical, national, and political narrative but also as a form of "anti-conquest" that both obscures and enacts the established formulas of colonial domination and control. Observing the alterations of the “Washington Redskins” logo design across some of the key moments of the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century—the McCarthy era, the Civil Rights Movement, post 9/11 sentiment, the global financial crisis, the campaign against ethnic studies, and the illegal immigration debate—the analysis explores how various forms of national anxiety transcend into identity through the politics of representation. In that light, it regards recent activism against mass-mediated symbolization of indigenous identity as an important arena in which centuries-long hegemonic discourses are contested against new venues of self-determination and internal decolonization.

Tomislav Brlek (Zagreb)

Rock & Roll and the End of History

The tail end of the 1980s witnessed the inauspicious conjunction of such self-serving notions as the End of History claiming distinction to the tune of some of the most enervated sounds recorded by man. It was certainly no coincidence that the formerly demanding aural shapes of rock&roll started to ring as hollow as the sound bites saturating the nascent mediascape precisely at the point in time which proclaimed itself as present everlasting. The daunting modernity averted, ringing the changes on soporific refrains became as remunerative as regurgitating sedative political platitudes. Combining the analyses of Jacques Attali and Bernard Stiegler, the present paper aims to show that these cultural phenomena ostensibly unrelated but for the critical fact of being funnelled by popular demand are both predicated

upon the vested interests of manipulating technology to alleviate thought by procuring experience vicariously. Greil Marcus's assessment of American culture at the beginning of the end of the 20th century as being informed by a nihilism we live out as if it were real life, making its avatars happy as a pig in shit and precisely as capable of saying what we mean, would soon be rendered germane all over the virtual world without end.