

On the Underside of History

How Subterranean Solidarities are Created?

Dear friends,

the simplest way for me to start would be to say: “*Mike’s right!*”

By agreeing with Mike van Graan’s point in his recent weekly column that “*cultural exchange is almost always initiated from within hegemonic cultural paradigms*” I would like not only to thank him for inviting me but also to explain to you why I am here.

In April this year, I had a speech in Brussels, inside European Commission’s conference on culture as a vector of development in a post-conflict situation. My point was extremely simple: coming from Slovenia, part of former Yugoslavia, we experienced that the war is not something happening to the others somewhere far away. So, out of this experience we wanted to tell the world that culture can not prevent conflicts, quite on the contrary: **culture alone is never enough**. Once you’ve heard a poet shooting from the hills above Sarajevo, once you’ve heard about the film director shooting on the spot of human tragedy, you become suspicious, because you’ve learned that it is always about real social conflicts, about real *rappports des forces*.

So, it is only by dealing with **real powers**, with the potentials to change the social conditions that we are in a position to really **encourage and empower the people**.

The crucial question for us is: if it’s about real arms, **can the arts become such arms** – can they really be *artes liberales*, not only liberal but liberating? What if, then, suddenly, instead of songs and movies, we are talking artists and authors, borders and visas, solidarities and communities, resistance and revolution?

“*I haven’t heard your speech, but I’ve heard that it fits our conference*” wrote Mike – and here I am. So, only few words pronounced inside a certain hegemonic cultural paradigm (and European Union is such a paradigm *par excellence*), a **certain doubt** expressed towards the hegemonic discourse, literally transposed me to another side of the world, across the continent, to another environment “*where different views can be voiced openly without fear and where there are shared spaces for cultural exchanges*”, as Mike is rather ironically quoting Sharing Diversity report by ERICarts Institute.

I would like **to continue this doubt**. I would like to question the possibilities of certain artistic articulation “on the underside of history” to undermine the usual stereotypes of cultural dialogue. I would like to do it inside this conference, dedicated explicitly to “creating the meaning”, and I would, if you don’t mind, like to be a part of “**mining of the meaning**” when it becomes an opinion, a cliché or a stereotype.

Can art as a process of individual separation, *isolation*, and collective re-creation become a laboratory of new social trends? Can it still move people and collectives, islands and continents?

In order to ask my first question, **how can art still move today** – things in time, people in space, events in history, something inside each man and woman – I will use the same movie as in Brussels. Because, honestly, they were not only words that moved, they were images and sounds – from a feature film by a Serbian director Goran Marković, *The Tour*.

A group of theatre actors from Belgrade is literary trapped between three different armies in the Bosnian war.

(movie clip)

This was our world less than 15 years ago. Coming from the heart of Europe sometimes means being close to the hell of war, as close as you can get to the heart of darkness.

What I’ve learned from this moving scene is that **there are no innocent songs**: the same song can save someone’s life or can walk someone else into death. Therefore, we should go further, **beyond songs, deeper under the surface**. In order to undermine the usual meaning, we should ask ourselves who put the mines in the ground in the first place – or, in what mines the warlords of today are digging?

“Back in 2001, a UN investigation on the illegal exploitation of natural resources in Congo found that the conflict in the country is mainly about access, control and trade of five key mineral resources: coltan, diamonds, copper, cobalt and gold. According to this investigation, the exploitation of Congo's natural resources by local warlords and foreign armies is "systematic and systemic," and the Ugandan and Rwandan leaders in particular (closely followed by Zimbabwe and Angola) had turned their soldiers into armies of business: Rwanda's army made at least \$250 million in 18 months by selling coltan, which is used in cell phones and laptops. The report concluded that the permanent civil war and disintegration

of Congo "has created a 'win-win' situation for all belligerents. The only loser in this huge business venture is the Congolese people."

This is how my mentor and friend, Slovene philosopher Slavoj Žižek, described situation in Congo a few years ago, underlining that **“beneath the façade of ethnic warfare, we thus discern the contours of global capitalism”**: a multiplicity of territories ruled by local warlords controlling their patch of land, each of the warlords with business links to a foreign company or corporation exploiting the mining wealth in the region. This arrangement fits both partners: *the corporation gets the mining right without taxes, the warlord gets money...* “The irony,” writes Žižek, *“is that many of these minerals are used in high-tech products like laptops and cell phones - in short: forget about the savage customs of the local population, just take away from the equation the foreign high tech companies and the whole edifice of ethnic warfare fuelled by old passions will fall apart.”*

I’m tempted to use this last sentence to re-phrase our crucial antagonism between local, particular cultural identities, engaged in peace-keeping “intercultural dialogue”, and global, violent oppression and domination. Just take away from the equation the global domination – and the whole edifice of ethnic particularities fuelled by old oppression will fall apart. That’s how we analyzed our own wars – and put it into global transitional context, not just into the usual stereotypes of “Balkan business”.

The standard topic of how global capitalism corrodes and destroys particular life-worlds should be therefore countered by the topic of how these particular life-worlds are always based on domination and oppression and conceal hidden antagonisms. Being on the side of loser means at the same time being on the side of Serbian peasant in Croatia and on the side of Bosnian widow in Srebrenica: **on the underside**. When I asked Žižek before travelling here what message can bring to you, he was short and explicit: *Fight for Universal!* There’s a major difference between fighting for “world peace” (“peace of the graveyard”, as Madeeha Gauhar would say) and fight for the Universal. The emerging emancipatory universality is **the universality of those who cannot find their “proper place” within their particular world**.

Some of the most brilliant minds of our time meet at this point: Žižek is talking about “*the lateral link of excluded in each life-world*”, Alain Badiou gives the same name, *les exclus*, to all those who are not in the world of things and signs, and Susan Buck-Morss, the author of

Hegel, *Haiti and Universal History* (2009) elaborates it in a way that would allow us to include into our debate the concept of “subterranean solidarities”:

*“rather than giving multiple, distinct cultures equal due, whereby people are recognized as part of humanity indirectly through the mediation of collective cultural identities, **human universality emerges in the historical event at the point of rupture.** It is in the discontinuities of history that people whose culture has been strained to the breaking point give expression to **a humanity that goes beyond cultural limits.** And it is our emphatic identification with this raw, free, and vulnerable state that **we have a chance of understanding what they say.** **Common humanity exists in spite of culture and its differences.** A person’s nonidentity with the collective allows for **subterranean solidarities** that have a chance of appealing to universal, moral sentiment, the source today of enthusiasm and hope.”*

I didn’t understand a word of *Three Colours* performance the other night – but I understood it completely. I experienced this same enthusiasm in the Hector Pieterse museum – by looking through the window! It is always this raw, free and vulnerable state that we have a chance of understanding it. And I’m tempted to think that the impact that the cinematographic images of Goran Marković had on my Brussels audience can be explained exactly because of this same “emphatic identification with this raw, free and vulnerable state”.

If we’re taking these last lines deadly serious, we should be paying special attention to the notion of “*a person’s non-identity with the collective*” – because **art as our key issue is exactly the double process of individual separation and collective re-creation:** of isolation and creative eruption..

Therefore I would like to include into this debate a short, moving text of Gilles Deleuze from the fifties, long before his major works. It was included in his post-mortem collection of essays, it even gave the first volume the title, since it’s called *The Desert Island and other texts*.

The text was originally meant to be published in the special issue of *Nouveau Femina* magazine, but never was. What is so moving about it – and why is it interesting for our purpose? Because he talks about the two sorts of islands: **the continental** ones, born out of a separation from the continent as a result of a **fracture**; and **the oceanic** ones, either atolls or volcanic, bringing to the surface something from below, from the underside.

Those two kinds of desert islands, continental and oceanic, derived or original, testify about the major opposition between the ocean and the earth: the continental ones reminds us that the sea is bellow earth and can always break it, fractured it; the oceanic islands show us that the earth is there, bellow the sea, preparing its forces to break through the surface.

Deleuze's starting point is that the imagination has found in geography the confirmation of something it knew before; *so the science makes the mythology more material – and the mythology makes the science more dynamic, more moving.*

So, when a man is attracted to the islands, he repeats the double movement that has produced the islands themselves: to dream about the islands means dreaming about the *separation* and about the *re-creation, restart*. Thus, the movement of imagination of the islands takes over the movement of their production – but not with the same object: if the island separated itself from the continent, the man *separates* himself from the world by going to the island; if the island created itself out of the sea, the man *recreates* the world out of the island. “*If the island is nothing but the dream of a man, the man is the pure consciousness of the island*”, writes young Deleuze. And here intervenes the key conceptual couple of this text: on one side, individual imagination is not enough: *il faut l'imagination collective*, you have to have **the collective imagination**, the deepest rituals and mythologies. But on the other hand, if you really want to modify the situation, you can never count only on what you had found on the island, no matter how magic it was: no, you have to *operate general redistribution of the continents, state of the seas, lines of the navigation.*

Collective imagination, general redistribution ... those are two key concepts of **art as a social practice**. “*Literature*”, writes Deleuze, “*is an attempt to interpret the myths we don't understand anymore, because we don't know anymore how to dream them nor reproduce them*”.

So, if we want to discover the real mystery of the islands as a geographic image of a human imagination, this very specific *cognitive mapping*, there must first be a non-identity with the collective, a *solitary* separation from the continent (of inter-cultural dialogue) – and then the re-creation of subterranean *solidarity*, the lateral link of the excluded, volcanic energy, able to reach beyond cultural limits towards universal humanity.

On such a tough trip from *solitary to solidarity*, one is tempted to use the famous Napoleon's sentence: *On attaque, et puis, on le verra!* (Let's attack, we'll see later).

There's a certain revolutionary logic in it: in order to invent new forms of life it is not enough to construct new social reality in which our dreams would be realized, but it is necessary to **reconstruct these dreams themselves!** And now you already know me – when it's about dreams and nightmares, it's for me always about movies – because *movies are the stuff the dreams are made of.*

So, when the warlord in our movie said that it was **a war and not a movie set** – he was at the same time right and wrong. He was partly right, because without understanding the real power relations we risk not to know the lyrics and to individually lose the war – but he was fundamentally wrong, because it was exactly this movie set that set the tone of a possible **reconstruction, re-creation** that went far beyond acceptance and tolerance. Or as professor Ndebele would say: *a set of new experiences set the frame for a new perspective*". And I would add: for the perspective of *the possible*.

Search for possible – that could be one of the definitions of art as a social practice and real soft power with hard evidence. This same movie was the example how coproduction, collaboration and cohabitation were possible – and how new possibilities were opened. Movies can do this kind of magic, they can reconstruct the dreams themselves..

So, it will be no surprise for you when I tell you that when late Slovene president, Janez Drnovšek, was deciding whom to send to Darfur, he had chosen **not a warrior, but a film maker**, Tomo Križnar. Not everybody at that time understood our president, but the time has shown how visionary he was. Coming from the heart of Europe, from Mittel-Europe, sometimes helps to understand the heart of our own human darkness. Sometimes, you need a Vienna doctor for that, and sometimes being a president of a country that felt apart opens your eyes for the universal values of the century that was falling apart.

This trip to Darfur was definitely not to a movie set, but to a war. But the "Balkan lesson" was clear: *as long as we worship art & culture only as the pain-killer for war, we are losing it.* We have to fight back, **fight for the universal** – in Africa and in the Balkans!

That's why it was not enough to pick up the mines from the ground: no, something ought to be done also with all this toxic and deadly words. When Slovenia established *International Trust Fund for demining*, we used the sentence "*To heal the wounds of soil and soul*".

Healing the souls means meeting the kids from Bosnia and taking them through subtle and thorough process of social and psychological rehabilitation. For the last three years, around 50 children, together with their teachers and a certain number of Slovene kids, coming from difficult social background, spent a summer in Slovenia, being involved in the art and intercultural workshops: painting, taking pictures, articulating their experience, talking, maybe even dreaming again.

That's how you reconstruct real trust, **recreate real solidarity**, rebuild simple, yet the most difficult belief into the other. As long as we are not able to reach beyond cultural limits towards universal humanity, we will try to sing poems without knowing the words. It might sound well, but it can also do a lot of damage, deadly damage.

Let me conclude with two practical examples of what we're doing in Slovenia.

There used to be times, maybe a century ago, when "breaking news" for some local newspaper in Trieste, Ljubljana or Vienna was the fact that some brave white men went to Africa. It was by a strange mixture of adventurous spirit and humiliating paternity that such articles were written.

I'm sincerely proud that today we live in the world that is able to recognise that the real adventure today is exactly the opposite: **that four brave women from Rwanda travel to Slovenia**. When I was in Brussels, I was only able to show you the announcement in the newspaper.

(ppt slide 1)

But now I can show you that our four heroes have arrived – and that a small island of solidarities has been created in the autonomous zone Metelkova, just in front of our own Ministry of Culture in Ljubljana. Yes, they did it!

(ppt slide 2)

Without common efforts of Peace Institute from Ljubljana and Nyamirambo Women's Center from Kigali, Rwanda, our small island would never know those four brave women and would stay even smaller somewhere on the other side of the sea. Nyamirambo Center was established to support local disadvantaged women in their pursuit of education, training, responsible community based tourism – and documentary film production! So, for our brave guests, Slovenia became this strange island somewhere far up-north, yet to discover.

Don't we all live for the day **when we become someone's stranger** or foreigner – because it is at that particular moment that we discover the stranger in ourselves – and we understand how cruel and unjust we were most of our times.

Those marvellous women have travelled to our small island – and in the collective imagination of our people, no larger than two millions in Soweto, their names joined the names of musicians like Youssou N'Dour (Senegal), Khaled (Alger) or Salif Keita (Mali) and film directors like Moussa Sene Absa (Senegal), Abderahman Sissako (Mauretania), Kollo Daniel Sanou (Burkina Fasso) and Mahamat Saleh Haroun (Tchad).

Without initiatives such as Druga godba, *That Other Music* world musical festival in Ljubljana, and Kino Otok, *Film Island* Festival in Izola, Slovenia would probably not know about all those incredible authors.

We all need such **simple visits with radical consequences** that literally shake our world, more than mines and more than poems. It is through such social experiences and experiments that we really create post-conflict situations and **empower people**. And that's what it is about.

So, allow me, dear friends, to conclude my travel through continents and islands by invoking for the last time **one island that we created literary out of nothing**. There is a city on a Slovene coast, called Izola – thus bearing the Italian origin of the name, *isola*, an island. The enthusiasts from the national cinematheque have decided to create a festival that want to be especially open for the foreign, strange and unknown cinematographies, in one word, for *les exclus*. There's – apart from the quality of the films, of course – one condition to participate: the director should bring his or her own film by himself or herself.

Oops, you would say, who could travel today to all those small, unknown festivals, especially big movies stars. But it worked! Directors came, movies are shown – and since the major evening screenings are open-air, on the central *piazzeta*, the wind from the Iranian movie plays with strong Adriatic north-west wind *burja* and the rain from Philippine movie can not be distinguished from the local tears.

And when you ask a local organiser, a student volunteer, why is he spending all those late night summer hours in Izola, his answer is: because we're creating something new.

(ppt slide 3)

I would like to show you the final picture, simple, but yet highly symbolic: creating a movie screen on the shore of the Adriatic sea looks almost like building a raft. But it's not *le Radeau de Meduse*, the raft of dying, neither the boat people raft of despair: it's a frame for a new perspective.

That's what art is about: experiencing something new and creating new experiences, isolating and re-creating, filling the violent break in continuity with the endurance to resist inside this break. Thus, we move **from the aesthetics to the ethics**: So, from the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, I'm bringing you a few warm voices for the subterranean solidarities. Because no man is an island: it's a consciousness of an island, it's a thought of an island. The more radical is a thought, the more radical are the shores of our experiences and the edges of our existence. Thank you very much – and welcome to our island.
