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From Minor Literature to Neoliberal Noir: The Detective Novels of Sergej Verč

Abstract: In this article, we analyze the politics of representation in the detective tetralogy (1991-2009) of the late Slovenian and Triestinian writer Sergej Verč. Addressing several aspects of Verč's primary literary semiotic device of schizophrenia, we trace a simultaneous literary and chronological shift from minor literature to neoliberal noir.

We expose the fundamental representational ambiguity by analyzing the detective triad (murder-victim-criminal), the fetishization of detective clues, the erotization of detection, and the underlying binary oppositions. Verč's detective novels critique the Slovenian capitalist transition but also reproduce culturally conservative representations of gender, sexuality, and family.

Keywords: Slovenian Literature; Sergej Verč; Minor Literature; Neoliberal Noir; Trieste; De(mythologization); Schizophrenia; Politics of Representation; Detective Novels; Critique of Capitalism; Cultural Conservatism.

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The Minor, Domestic and Noir of the Detective Novel

In the 20th and 21st centuries, many arguments have been made about the cultural and historical conservatism of the detective novel. The detective novel has been called conservative because it affirms modernity in its repressive tendencies. According to Moretti, at the core of the detective genre is Jeremy Bentham's spatial-social principle of the panopticon as defined by Michel Foucault. He recognised the panopticon as an effective form of social control.¹ Classic detective stories and their structure are associated with disciplinary society and the development of disciplinary apparatuses.² Many critics agree on the inherent conservatism of the detective genre, either because detective novels are meant to reassuringly confirm the worldviews of their readers³ or because they affirm the value of private property as one of the fundamental values of capitalism.⁴

Although it should be noted that several authors argue that the genre of crime fiction is inextricably linked to liberal values and societies⁵, the conservative line of

argument emphasises the inherently conservative logic of detective novel: its plot is based on the dynamics between the display and resolution of crime or between disruption and restoration of social order. A linear logic of order-disorder-order organizes the underlying structure of the classic detective narrative. Criminals and their victims disjoint the world while the detective re-assembles it. Representing the social reality by using semiotic displacements and condensations, the detective novels draw on manifest cultural discourses, which permeate the relations between elementary characters of the detective triad (detective-victim-criminal). However, salient relationships are based on latent structures of meaning, organized by binary oppositions between good/evil, male/female, private/public, etc., that naturalize cultural meanings. To deconstruct detective novels is to research fundamental social conflicts and the prevailing or transforming values, norms, habits and anxieties of the socio-historical *zeitgeist*. Therefore, the deconstructive analysis explores the relationships between latent binary oppositions and the one between cultural discourses.

In this context, the dichotomy of John Cawelti is useful. The structural difference between classic and hard-boiled detective stories is organized by binary oppositions of aesthetical/ethical, rural/urban, peaceful/violent, rational/intuitive and evil as deviance/omnipresent evil⁶, the former term belonging to the classic, the latter to the hard-boiled detective story. The classic detective is an aristocratic, bohemian and disengaged character who solves crimes and establishes discipline and order by the art of detection, while the hard-boiled detective is ethically involved in the detection,

solving crimes by violent methods, failing to eradicate social evil.⁷ In this sense, the classic detective story can be labelled as culturally conservative and the hard-boiled as culturally pessimistic.

Postmodern hard-boiled detective novels could be designated as melancholy noir, which refuses to “cover or move beyond the traumatic insistence of the historical real”⁸, and reminds of “the violence of the past that has yet to be confronted and the violence of the present that has been purged from the dominant cultural narratives of the era”⁹. The noir function can be described as, “[...] the temporality of negative affect, [the] conception of the present that is shot through with chips of the unresolved past, [...] the disavowed, yet painful present, [and oriented towards redemptive futures]”¹⁰. The noir narratives “give expression to an unacknowledged form of historical violence”¹¹, and the psychological traits of characters present the site of displacement of “larger social conflicts that characterize an era”¹².

Following noir as a functional affect, as discussed by Breu¹³, I propose the existence of noir of different types and intensities, in which the noir affect is deployed to achieve different goals. Since Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial* could be considered as a dialectical detective novel, joining the detective, the victim and the criminal in the character of simultaneously guilty and innocent Josef K., or as a noir novel in terms of a narrative “of dissolution and failure”¹⁴, one cannot overlook that minor (not minority literature as a narrower term) literature¹⁵ is ontologically similar to noir, as “literature written by members of the minority in the language of the majority”¹⁶, and characterized by the “impoverished language [...],

the persistence of discursive themes of escape and foreignness, the collectiveness and politicalness of the subjective expressions of the main protagonists, and the humanist character and universalizing tendencies that foster intergenerational and intercultural reconciliation of [past and present conflicts]¹⁷. Both minor literature and noir address the collective sociopolitical problems of ethnical (also racial, sexual, and similar) minorities, using unsettled and anxious melancholy language directly or indirectly linked with enigmatic crime.

Similarly, however, and much more explicitly, the noir function is deployed in neoliberal noir and its variation of domestic noir of 21st Century detective fiction. Christensen argues that (the ambiguous) neoliberal noir¹⁸ addresses the “creeping anxieties about the privatised risk”¹⁹. Regarding the detective triad, the neoliberal noir features “/t/he poor turned into criminals [as] the epitome of a more general condition of abandonment and precarization”²⁰, a self-caring detective who protects the public good by pursuing private interests, which is one of the elementary neoliberal ideological dogmas.²¹ In domestic noir, the home, the household, the family and intimate relationships are marked by feminist undertones as well as by alienation, anxiety, unhomeliness, directly endangered by a violent partner, and indirectly by neoliberal social and economic measures.²² Further on, the perspectives of minor literature, neoliberal noir, and domestic noir will be used to analyse detective novels of Sergej Verč and to reveal common semiotic patterns. Before we analyse Verč’s novels from these perspectives, we will present a short historical overview of Slovenian detective fiction.

In this article, I discuss neoliberalism as culturally conservative and follow Wendy Brown’s reading of Hayekian neoliberalism as a moral-political project and her argument that moral traditionalism is the quintessence of neoliberal rationality that negates the idea of a social (state) by attributing the roles of the democratic social state to the traditional patriarchal family.²³ Brown’s argument pertains to the recent rise of neoliberal right-wing authoritarianism in the West and the gradual yet radical decline of historically won personal liberties and social-economic reforms (e. g., abortion rights, worker’s rights).²⁴

Short Historical Overview of Slovenian Detective Fiction

In parodical Slovenian detective tales of the 19th Century (crowned by Ivo Šorli), criminals were mainly foreigners (Prussians, Germans and Jews). They endangered the Slovenian values of equality and community, protected by Slovenian or Slavic detectives. This general pattern of the detective triad continued well off into the 20th Century. Furthermore, the foreign, non-Slovenian criminals were presented as greedy and falsely rich adulterers going after Slovenian property and wealth. Usually, they attempted to acquire wealth by ‘stealing’ Slovenian women of prosperous descent. Women were passive victims equivalent to a form of property which needed to be distributed among poor but honest and hard-working Slovenians. The detective’s work was linked with saving the Slovenian wealth and the idea of an independent state.²⁵

Šorli’s hard-boiled detective story *Traps and Snares* [*Pasti in zanke*, 1922] and

Ljuba Prenner's classic detective story *The Unknown Offender* [*Neznani storilec*, 1939] are considered the first Slovenian detective novels. The latter, written by Prenner, together with the destiny of its author, a transgender lawyer, bears witness to the stagnation of the Slovenian detective/crime novel during the second and after the Second World War. During the war, Prenner joined the communist Liberation Front of the Slovene Nation that fought against fascism. After the war, he legally defended the political opponents of communism in show trials. As a consequence of his 'counter-revolutionary' activity, his law licence was suspended, and his literary activity was also prohibited. Because of a massive gap between elite literature and popular literature in literary criticism, the normative genre of social realism and socialism's self-praise about its ability to abolish crime altogether, the detective genre and the crime novel were considered suspicious and superfluous until the 1980s.²⁶

Slovenian detective fiction began its ascendancy in the '80s and '90s after the breakup of Yugoslavia and especially in the 21st Century. However, the Slovenian detective novel was influenced by post-modernist intertextuality, experimentation and other metafictional elements, which rendered the previously desconsidered trivial genre closer to high literature than to popular fiction. Part of the disabling of the popularity of Slovenian detective fiction at the beginning of the 21st Century were also many crossovers of detective fiction. Reflecting on the prevailing taste of mass readership, interested in romantic pulp fiction, romantic crime novels from Darja Hočevar alias Stella Norris²⁷ and

erotic crime novels from Janja Vidmar²⁸ were missing murderers or cadavers. Their stories were focused more on the action, machinations, lies and love than on the detection and resolution of crime. From the first wave of interest, followed by partial resorption into romance, in the pleiad of serial detective fiction writers of the 21st Century²⁹, Slovenian detective fiction began its still lasting efflorescence in the second decade of the 21st Century with Avgust Demšar's classic detective stories of domestic noir³⁰, with Tadej Golob's Scandinoir infused hard-boiled neoliberal detective novels³¹, and with popular political thrillers of Mojca Širok.³²

Minor Detective Novels of Sergej Verč

The late Triestinian and Slovenian writer Sergej Verč [1948–2015], one of the two minor Slovenian detective fiction writers³³, wrote a series of four detective novels titled *Roland's Pillar* (*RP – Rolandov steber*, 1991), *The Secret of the Turquoise Jellyfish* (*STJ – Skrivnost turkizne meduze*, 1998), *Funeral Masquerade* (*FM – Pogrebna maškarada*, 2003) and *The Man who Read Disney Comics* (*MRDC – Mož, ki je bral Disneyjeve stripe*, 2009). His novels are relevant because they are placed in the Italian city of Trieste. This historically multicultural city, which represents the synecdochal symbolic space of the Slovenian state (as nostalgic and split), is ridden with historical traumas of Triestinian Slovenians and with the questions of national identity after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Verč's novels range from the early 90s to the late 2000s. They draw on the social-political transition from the Slovenian socialist past to the capitalist future, interrogating the cultural

transformation under globalism and consumerism. Therefore, it is not surprising that the prevailing semiotic device and metaphor in his novels is schizophrenia, a prevalent leitmotif in minor literature. As we will show in the continuation, the metaphor of schizophrenia is deployed as a historical metaphor for bilingualism and binationality through Trieste's (de)mythologization. Schizophrenia, a link between crime and identity, is also deployed in terms of the duality of the detective genre and as a mental disease, at the beginning of the detective series, a psychological malaise consequential of the cultural history of Trieste, and by the end of the detective series, a psychological malaise, consequential of capitalist consumerism.

In the Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, Verč's novels are minor. However, it can be argued that the inherent normalizing conservatism of the genre is returning to major with the resolution of each detective case. They are focused on the resolution of intergenerational political conflicts. The process of detection is indirectly linked with uncovering historical Triestian and Slovenian traumas. Remembering traumas would ideally disavow them. However, as is often the case in psychological traumas, in reality, remembrance of traumatic events can serve as a re-traumatizing occurrence that does not resolve but reinforces the repetitive nature of the trauma. In *RP*, the murderer is Kazimir Levec or Blaž Stante, a Slovenian with a double identity, a renowned diplomat, a patron and a financial imperialist, an opportunist and an informant, who has collaborated with partisans and with Italian fascists during the Second World War (he murders to find lost Nazi gold, he dies in a final shoot-off with

the detective Perko). In *STJ*, the detective Perko is resolving a murder case of a woman Maria Schläger, which occurs in the railway tunnel of the former railway line between Trieste and Hrpelje, which represents a relic of the idealized Habsburg monarchy. By the end of the story, Perko proves that the spiritually and morally empty murderers belong to a former Triestian cultural group, which attempted to revive a historically real scientific Vienna group (1924–1936) and awaken the utopian thought in Trieste. In *MRDC*, the murderer is a Slovenian-Italian father of an ideal bourgeois family Rajko Budin, an everyday Slovenian man. He starts murdering strangers when he is fired from a corrupt Slovenian firm. He is an avid reader of Disney comics, in which he finds emotional comfort and which function as a metaphor of the phantasmagoria of and disillusionment with life under capitalism. The political and collective component of Verč's minor detective novels is expressed mainly through the critique of Trieste, the bilingual historical identity of its residents. The detective cases are solved, murderers are caught and sanctioned, but their destiny is presented as a lingering consequence of unresolved historical catastrophes.

Trieste as a lost city was a leitmotif already in the nationalist mythological historiography of Italian Irredentists and fascists at the beginning of the 20th Century. After the annexation of Trieste to Italy in 1920, the mythologization of the lost, once prosperous, cosmopolitan port city of the Habsburg monarchy began. The violent Italianization and ethnic chauvinism of Italian nationalists and fascists against Slavic people in the 1920s and 1930s, beginning with the arson attack on the

Slovenian Cultural Centre in 1920, and the division of Trieste into Zone A and Zone B after World War II contributed significantly to the sense of disenfranchisement among Slovenians living in Trieste. In the '90s, Trieste was re-mythologized or reorientalized with the formation of new European nation-states in numerous esoteric and nostalgic historical works. Through the perspective of imperial nostalgia³⁴, the majority of historical works drew on the Triestinian historical multiculturalism and hybridity and the contemporary decay of the peripheral city. The fetishized logic of simultaneous praise and devaluation of the city finds its counterpoint in the myth of a local Triestinian singularity or *Triestinitá*, which originates from the downfall of the Habsburg's monarchy. *Triestinitá*, an imagined tradition, became a way of constructing a Triestinian identity related to lost and idealized past. Originally, *Triestinitá* had a role "to replace the multifarious national allegiances with a powerfully individual and intensely local system of identification"³⁵. After the Second World War, *Triestinitá* increasingly became an object of commodifying the imperial past and literary culture. In the '90s, the mythical Triestinian singularity became an existential and escapist literary metaphor of local authors that ought to turn Trieste into a "private Disneyland of memory"³⁶.

Like the local writers of his milieu, Verč fits the tradition of (de)mythologization of Trieste. He describes the inhabitants as nihilist, two-faced³⁷, untrustworthy and jealous³⁸, paranoid and ignorant³⁹, and Trieste as a city where "they never truly liked Slovenians"⁴⁰. The literature of Triestinian Slovenians in the 21st Century is characterized by a vital nihilist component, devaluing

the image of the city which has not become open and cosmopolitan, as it was expected after the Second World War. Similarly, Slovenia has also not become prosperous as it was expected after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Once a prominent and prosperous multicultural city in the Habsburg's monarchy, Trieste has become a province.⁴¹

Regarding the linguistic component of minor literature, the language of detective novels is stereotypically impoverished, minimalist and schematic. In this sense, Verč's novels are also sober, avoiding linguistic experimentation. However, Verč was neither an Italian who wrote in the Slovene language, nor a Slovenian writing in the Italian language. Nevertheless, he managed to alienate the familiar language by a minor distortion and a literary *Triestinitá*, which produces an unexpected and globalized noir affect of "a particular provincial environment as the story's setting"⁴².

His novels are written in Slovenian, but the majority of characters talk in the Italian language (the Slovenian minority in Trieste speaks the language of the majority), but the readers only learn about this in certain dialogues when they are reminded that the characters have started talking in the Slovenian, English or Serbian language. This produces the alienating illusionary impression that the text has been translated from Italian to Slovenian.

The characters are minor, and they are becoming non-identical with themselves in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense. Victims, murderers and the detective share dual, Slovenian-Italian identities and psychological pathologies. Their identities are incompatible, superabundant and literally or metaphorically schizophrenic. Starting with the victims – in *RP*, the primary

victim is a schizoid Sanja Haderlap, an ex-Carinthian Slovenian and an Italian citizen with a Slovenian passport. In *STJ*, the primary murdered victim is a melancholy singer and a psychiatric patient Maria Schläger. In *FM*, the supposedly main victim is Emil Luin, an ex-Slovenian citizen with an Italian Passport (staged funeral), a paedophile, pimp, smuggler, and an adulterer. In *MRDC*, seven people are murdered. All of them are linked to a decaying, once prosperous Slovenian company in Trieste, typical of capitalist schizophrenia. The corrupted and aloof manager of the company, Valter Svetlič, becomes a nationally awarded businessman.

These diverse characters represent a unified subjective field of culturally-historical division, idealization and devaluation of Trieste. The characters are bilingual, binational and mentally ill (schizophrenic or bipolar). Their pathological status is in the fore already in the first novel *RP*. Detective Perko's BA thesis title states "Delict behaviour of the paranoid-depressive binational population in the region of Trieste"⁴³.

The Minor Detective Commissioner Perko

While there is a historical and ontological affinity between the detective and the criminal or the (psycho)analyst and the patient, Perko is far from an impartial analyst. He is a bilingual and binational Triestinian character himself, and he is also 'schizophrenic' in terms of the dichotomy between a classic and hard-boiled detective provided by Cawelti. Perko is a bohemian, comparable to other classic detectives by his cultural taste for art, manifesting itself most beautifully in the art of detection. He

solves detective cases in the abundance of Mediterranean cuisine, wine and cigarette smoke, in a relaxed, collegial ambient but also on solitary melancholy walks around Trieste, reflecting on Trieste's glorious history as a bitter tourist guide, acknowledging that the cosmopolitanism of Trieste is "distinctively of commercial, not cultural origin."⁴⁴ Despite his affinity for elite culture and the art of detection, Verč's novels include many hard-boiled scenes in which Perko's corrupted inclinations and rustic ways come to the fore, for example, interrogation with blackmailing or using a pistol.⁴⁵

The novels start as classic detective stories, in which a body is found, and Perko interprets clues with deductive reasoning and the help of forensic analysts, and they end as hard-boiled stories. Perko first explains the murder mystery theoretically. He toasts to the successfully resolved detective case with his colleagues. However, he must get the criminal's confession, either by trickery as in the *STJ* or through a violent final shoot-off like in the other three novels. Perko is ethically distant through his bohemian lifestyle and haughty Triestinian melancholy and ethically involved through his bi-national identity and professional calling. He becomes the head detective of the public Triestinian police bureau precisely because of his Slovenian identity (the victim in *RP* is Slovenian-Italian). He is transferred from Salerno to his home town to symbolically repay the debt to the Slovenian identity he has abandoned as an Italian speaking Slovenian. However, by chasing and killing Slovenian-Italian murderers, he never has to choose between the two identities, which shrinks away from the collective politicalness of minor literature. His ethical debt seems false, as is his

melancholy, which perpetuates this debt as well as the lost *Triestinitá*. The collective catharsis is never reached, and the historical traumas are only symbolically surpassed with the resolution of the murder mystery. Notably, such is the case also because of the complex and schizophrenic nature of evil in Verč's novels.

In classic detective stories, evil is a social anomaly, abolished by detective's work, which restores social order, and in hard-boiled detective stories, evil is omnipresent and impossible to eradicate. Perko indeed solves and reconstructs all detective cases in the context of a police procedural but single murders are always intertwined with international, organized crime that can hardly be summarized. From corrupt legal institutions to global corporations, from the anonymous Italian and Serbian mafia to the obscure local pimps – the detective stories are built on the overabundance of crime, criminal identities and evil, impossible to trace, explain or eradicate. Interestingly, Perko is satisfied with the completion of his 'minor' work. At the end of each novel, his melancholy usually vanishes as he returns to Eboli in Salerno⁴⁶ or vacations with his new partner Jasmin Fortuna. In the first novel, they have a short, first romance. In the second novel, after the detective case is solved, they visit Venice⁴⁷, in the third novel, they travel to South America⁴⁸, and in the last novel, they fly to Djerba.⁴⁹

Fetishized Detective Clues and De-eroticized Detection – Towards the Neoliberal Noir

In the political economy of Karl Marx, a fetish is a commodity, surrounded by the aura of holly, enigmatic and mystical.

This aura stems from the fact that man has invested the commodity with thinking, phantasms, and pleasures in capitalist production. The backside of the fetish is (un)covering and mystification of social-economic relations.⁵⁰ The role of the fetish in the detective story is delegated to clues, which are invested with cultural meaning. Functioning as semantically and ideologically rich cultural cryptograms, they (un)cover and (de)mystify the criminal's identity and eventually enable the reconstruction of the crime. In Verč's novels, we trace an ontological shift in the nature of detective clues and their embeddedness in the context of crime that coincides with the chronology of Verč's publications and with Slovenia's transition from independence to trials and tribulations of social life under capitalism and the European Union (EU).

In the first two novels, *RP* and *STJ*, the crime scenes were subdued to historicization, aiming to demythologize the Habsburg myth of Trieste. In the second two novels, *FM* and *MRDC*, the crime scenes are becoming more banal. In the last novel, *MRCD*, crime is embedded between Budin's pathological schizophrenia and de-historicized capitalist corruption. The murder motifs are not instrumental as in the early novels, where nihilist Triestinitians murder to obtain financial gain or bourgeois pride, and schizophrenia is no longer a metaphor of bicultural identity. Budin, a diagnosed schizophrenic man who reads Disney comics and calls his wife *mama*, murders excessively and irrationally, with no personal gain in sight, while fleeing from the harsh reality of unemployment and the broken image of perfect family life. The surplus of evil is joined with the semiotic surplus, linked with detective clues.

In Verč's early novels, detective clues were banal everyday objects such as buttons, cigarette butts, envelopes, newspapers, registration plates, telephone numbers and forensic findings of organic and inorganic materials. As much as these objects were banal, detective Perko has infused them with meaning in the detection process. From the perspective of the identification of the murderer, detective clues were crucial. In the later novels, especially in *MRDC*, detective clues lose their detective relevance. In the second novel, *STJ*, the detective clue is a broken Swiss watch (the brand Swatch) with a missing gemstone of a turquoise jellyfish. It represents a collective cultural fantasy of capitalist social welfare. In the 90's social-economic discourse, Slovenia was often imagined as the new Switzerland. The watch is already a fetishized detective clue, yet it is still crucial for resolving the murder mystery or the detective case. Detective Perko has to use the knowledge of local horologists to decode when it was purchased and when it stopped working, which proves to be vital for identifying the greedy murderer. However, in the last novel *MRDC*, the main detective clue becomes the criminal's talisman, an object infused with cultural meanings⁵¹, but redundant to the resolution of the detective case. In *MRDC*, Budin clumsily leaves Disney comics at the crime scenes. However, since he reveals himself as the murderer to detective Perko (Budin writes him a letter of confession), Disney comics have no relevance in the detection process.

Therefore, the fetishization of detective clues reveals another chronological transformation in Verč's novels, typical for neoliberal noir. Detective Perko's status

transforms from an engaged public servant to a redundant and privacy-oriented detective. In this sense, Verč's last novel *MRDC* precedes the truly neoliberal detective character of Taras Birsa from a contemporary Slovenian writer Tadej Golob. In light of the murderer's self-confession, the redundancy of detective Perko reflects the neoliberal detective who magically solves crimes, protects the public good and distributes justice by pursuing depoliticized private interests and practising self-care (body, finances, family relations, vacation).

Because of their ambiguous (un)covering role in the detective narrative, detective clues can also be considered as fetishes from the perspective of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. In Freud, fetishes are partial and surrogate objects that protect the man from a traumatic absence of the mother's lack of penis or symbolic castration. While it is impossible to explain why they resolve the fear of castration in such a way, some men become fetishists in order to avoid becoming homosexuals.⁵² It might seem that the comparison between sexual fetishes and detective clues are outdated or farfetched. We might not have been inclined to revert to this comparison if it were not for the apparent change in the nature of Perko's detection. The fear of symbolic castration can thus be interpreted as the detective's fear of inability to solve the detective case. If the detective clues are fetishes from the perspective of Freud's psychoanalysis, then the detective's work or detection can be considered a latently erotic activity, which reinforces the heteronormative sexuality. The extraordinary contradiction of Verč's detective series is that the eroticized status of Perko's detection is completely manifest until the

mentioned detective clue appears (Disney comics), a manifest fetishist detective clue.

The eroticized detection in the first three novels is manifest on two intertwining and complementary levels. On the one hand, Perko's detective success is dependent on his sublimation. On the other hand, Perko is rewarded for his sublimation with a monogamous heterosexual partnership. In the first three novels, Perko is portrayed as a lascivious detective who is constantly obstructed by equally lascivious women when he is trying to interrogate them as witnesses or suspects⁵³. He is a successful detective because he never indulges in an erotic relationship with these women or because he never succumbs to his own urges. In *RP*, the first novel, Perko is presented as a divorcee, an insatiable and troubled womanizer rewarded with a short romance with Jasmin Fortuna after successfully solving the detective case and saving her life in a final shoot-off. Jasmin is the only woman in Perko's romantic life in all four novels. In the subsequent two novels, Perko's detective and personal success are dependent on resisting the seduction of other women. In *MRDC*, the last novel, seductive women disappear, and fetishist clues appear. Perko perceives his detective work as a burden and yearns for more private time and a vacation with Jasmin. Perko is rendered helpless and redundant in the face of international corruption and financial machinations, the completely overwhelming and omnipresent evil.

The Undomesticated Victims

The fourth chronological metamorphosis, accompanying the changing nature of murder motives (from instrumental

to excessive), the redundancy of the detective character and progressive fetishization of detective clues, is the modified nature of the detection. The last structural transformation in Verč's novels is the gradual fusion between victims and criminals, which sheds an appa(e)aling light on representations of sexuality and gender, which are initially overshadowed or even masqueraded by the more prominent discourse of (de) mythologization of Trieste.

In *RP* and *STJ*, the status of victims is indisputable. However, in *FM* (Emil Luin, a Triestinian representative of a Montenegrin cartel, falsely buried and supposedly in hiding but, in reality, kidnapped and poisoned by his wife Zora Luin because of his incestuous relationship with their adopted daughter) and in *MRDC* (Rajko Budin), the primary criminals are also victims. The fusion between victims and criminals is culturally conservative for two reasons.

The origins of crime often lead to (incestuous) family relationships within the domestic environment. Together with parricide, incest is one of the most antisocial acts, directly rejecting the logic of a society that demands exogamous partnerships.⁵⁴ The incestuous origins of crime do not generally connote a failure of a traditional family that should have taken care of other-directed, 'mercantile' sexuality as well as the care of a separate household or housing, partially attributed to the functions of the welfare state. Together with the personal history of the victims and criminals' psychological pathology, the leitmotif of incest contributes to the privatisation and individualisation of crime, separated from social relations. In *RP*, Janko Soban, Kazimir Levec's secretary, was unknowingly in a relationship with his sister Sanja

Haderlap. Her promiscuity (a result of her mother's neglecting upbringing) eventually led to her murder. In *STJ*, Maria Schläger, a melancholic Swiss woman and an owner of a shop of Swiss watches, also had a relationship with several men from the Triestian cultural club and was killed by dr. Foicher's jealous wife. In *MRDC*, Budin's schizophrenia is explained due to his upbringing and the pathological relationship with his mother.

Second, the privatized and personalized causality of the investigated crime shows common characteristics for most victims in Verč's novels. Apart from the arbitrary victims in *MRDC*, they live or used to live (before they were murdered) in polyamorous partnerships and led socially non-conformist sexual lives. Even though on the manifest level of meaning, the novels problematize Triestian endogamy and exogamy concerning the national identity and anxieties about Slovenian cultural assimilation, they also naturalize polygamy and non-heteronormative and non-conventional forms of sexuality as universally problematic. In this sense, Verč the writer killed women, who had more partners – nymphomaniacs, prostitutes, “whores on duty”⁵⁵, “charming floozies”⁵⁶ and “devilish seductresses”⁵⁷: Sanja Haderlap, Maria Schläger, Marina Grlinger, Silva Luin, Jelena Duranović, Josipa Begović, Ester Bradetich in *Violeta*. After all, adulterers Kazimir Levec and Emil Luin, divorcee Herman Zimmerman and homosexuals Darko Devetak and Aldo Terčon also die.

Similarly to Verč's detective novels, written in the same period roughly, Söderlind has noticed the same pattern in the crime novels of the Swedish writer Håkan Nesser (1993-2003). His detective triad

typically represents heteronormativity, homophobia and sexism – good women are in a monogamous relationship, while evil women are deservedly single or dead.⁵⁸ As known, the patriarchy marks women and men. That is why criminal sanctioning in Verč's novels, as well as in any hardboiled evergreen, is linked with the domestication of female (victims) and male sexuality (detective). However, patriarchal domestication does not eradicate social evil. The standard underlying ideological message of Perko's resolution of detective cases seems to be that stable monogamous relationships will protect us from evil. Despite the (over)abundant cultural semiosis, the detective's work, the naivety and inadequacy of victims, and the guilt of murderers are symbolically linked with culturally conservative value. This self-disturbing minor trait historically traverses different languages, generations and political projects.

Conclusion

The detective novels of Sergej Verč have been analyzed as minor literature, which builds the detective narrative on the overabundance of Slovenian-Italian social identities, linguistic alienation, endless semiosis and collective and political utterances about Trieste. The noir affect in Verč's novels is produced by schizophrenia as the prevailing semiotic device, encompassing the detective genre and the detective (between classic and hard-boiled), exploring the culturally historical identity, traumas and psychological wellbeing of Triestians. Schizophrenia is used to (de) mythologize Trieste and life under capitalism and to camouflage the naturalization of conservative ideas. Verč demythologizes

the historical image of a multicultural and cosmopolitan Trieste through nihilist local characters (victims and criminals) while simultaneously reproducing *Triestinitá* through a detective character that functions as a tourist guide. The detective, victims and criminals share a dual Slovenian-Italian identity, which is linked with allusions to historical traumas in *RP* and *STJ*, while in *FM* and *MRDC*, schizophrenia becomes a dehistoricized psychological malaise. In the novels from the '90s, in times of Slovenian postsocialist transition, Verč follows a literary formula, according to which solving crime is linked with attempts of solving historical trauma and with questions of national identity, while in the novels of the noughties solving crime is progressively linked with the domestication of interpersonal or psychological evil, the only form of evil that is seemingly possible to contain. A chronological shift towards neoliberal noir marks Verč's detective novels. This is displayed in the fetishization of detective clues and the de-eroticized detection process, transforming the detective character from a melancholy public servant to a redundant, privacy-oriented detective. From the perspective of domestic noir, homes and households are endangered by capitalist corruption but become uncannily by inadequate sexual identities and sexualities.

In the comparative historical perspective of the politics of representation in the Slovenian detective triads from the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th Century, the practical, latent function of the detective cases' resolution in Verč's novels seems to be based on an anachronistic proposition. Although the nation (and Slovenian women) cannot be defended

against the 'greedy foreigners' anymore, at least we can still save the holy institution of marriage.

In 2019, at the Sarajevo Film Festival, the adaptation of Golob's detective novel *The Lake* was first screened. The contemporary Slovenian detective novel earned the title of (sub)Alpine noir. The glocalized syntagma exposes some of the appropriated elements of the Scandinavian noir, such as the melancholy detective and the excessive violence. The syntagma most probably originated also from the presupposition that the contemporary Slovenian noir is characterized by a unique aesthetics of the natural and cultural environment.

However, long before the literary and film industry had been able to convince the Slovenian audiences with culturally glocalized scandinoir, Verč's minor detective novels proved that chiaroscuro of political representations characterizes the Slovenian detective novels in the 21st Century more profoundly than the aesthetics of snow-capped mountain peaks and dark valleys.

They engage in a popular social-political critique of capitalism, consumerism, corruption, and nationalism on the manifest level of meaning. However, the detective triad's binary oppositions reproduce culturally conservative representations of sexuality, gender, and family. By examining the connections between various tropes of detective fiction and culturally conservative neoliberalism, I sought to provide an original interpretive reading of representations in a Slovenian literary detective series (1991-2009) written during the transitional period between socialism and capitalism. In the context of the initial recognition of Brown's (2019) argument of the conservative core of neoliberalism, the given ambiguous

combination of representations can be interpreted speculatively and retrospectively, first, as a part of the widespread mood of yugonostalgic return to a more traditional, socialist, and idealized past as a result of disenchantment with capitalism⁵⁹, second, as tropes and values inherent in (either) the detective novel and (or) Slovenian culture, and third, as an inconspicuous retroactive reflection and precursor of the more recent and radical cultural conservative shift in which anti-globalist, anti-multiculturalist, patriarchalist, and essentialist identitarians

blame the moral and economic decline of contemporary Western societies on cultural, religious, and sexual freedoms and differences, and call for a more “traditional” way of life while fully supporting economic privatization measures, restrictive social policies, and the suppression of human rights.

In this sense, it is perhaps not far-fetched to suggest that similar patterns of cultural critique and retrotopian representations can be found in the crime fiction of other post-socialist and neoliberal European states.

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NOTES

1. Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, London, Verso, 1983, p. 193.
2. Simon During, *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 141-159.
3. Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000. Detection, Death, Diversity*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 5.
4. Eric Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*. London, Pluto Press, 1984, p. 9.
5. Because of the origins and historical popularity of the detective genre in England, France, the United States of America, and the Scandinavian countries, many intellectuals have considered detective fiction inseparable from the national heritage of political democracy. On the other hand, the genre was banned under Italian fascism, German Nazism, and Soviet communism. Learn more about the dichotomy between conservatism and liberalism of crime fiction in Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*, New York; London, D. Appleton-Century Company, 1941; Jose Saval, "Crime Fiction and Politics", in Janice Allan et al (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Oxon; New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 327-334; Carlos Uxó, "Crime Fiction and Authoritarianism", in Janice Allan et al (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Oxon; New York, Routledge, 2020, p. 388-396.
6. John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 80-161.
7. Slavoj Žižek, Rastko Močnik, "Spremna beseda [Foreword]", in Slavoj Žižek, Rastko Močnik (eds.), *Memento Umori [Memento Murders]*, Ljubljana, Državna založba Slovenije, Ljubljana 1992, p. 295-349.
8. Christopher Breu, "Public Violence as Private Pathology: Noir Affect in The End of a Primitive", in Christopher Breu and Elizabeth A. Hatmaker (eds.), *Noir Affect*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2020, p. 61.
9. *Ibidem*.
10. *Ibidem*.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 60.
12. *Ibidem*.
13. Christopher Breu, "Public Violence as Private Pathology", p. 59-63.

14. *Ibidem*.
15. In this article, the terms “minor literature” and “minor (detective) novels” are used contextually in three ways: first, within the Deleuzo-guattarian conceptualization; second, as literature by ethnic minority authors; and third, with respect to the detective novel as a minor genre. The syntagma never refers to literature of lesser literary quality or impact.
16. Gilles Deleuze, Felix, Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, p. 16.
17. Primož Mlačnik, “Minor Literature in the Case of Brina Svit”, in *Przekłady Literatur Słowiańskich*, vol.10, no. 2, 2020, p. 208.
18. More about neoliberal noir can be found in Andrew Pepper, *Unwilling Executioner: Crime Fiction and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 228-232.
19. Matthew Christensen, “Managed Risk and the Lure of Transparency in Anglophone African Detective Noir”, in *Textual Practice*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2015, p. 320.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 317.
21. *Ibidem*, p. 327-328.
22. Diane Waters, Heather, Worthington, “Domestic Noir and the US Cozy as Responses to the Threatened Home”, in Laura Joyce, Laura Sutton (eds.), *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 210.
23. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 1-14.
24. On links between cultural conservatism and neoliberalism, see also: Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, New York, Zone Books, 2017.
25. Igor Grdina, “Spremna beseda” [Foreword], in *Neznani storilec [The Unknown Offender]*, Ljuba Prenner, Ljubljana: Mihelač, 1992, p. 150–151; Matjaž Kmecl, *Od pridige do kriminalke [From Sermon to Crime Novel]*, Ljubljana, Mladinska knjiga, 1975, p. 120.
26. Igor Grdina, *The Unknown Offender*, p. 152.
27. *A Mysterious Disappearance [Skrivnostno izginotje, 2006]*; *Crazy in Love [Noro zaljubljena, 2007]*, *Jealousy does not Die [Ljubosumje ne umre, 2009]*; *Dark Apparition [Temna slutnja, 2009]*; *Love with a Stranger [Ljubezen z neznaniko, 2009]*; *Personal Encounter [Osební obračun, 2011]*; *Revenge in Cold Blood [Hladnokrvno maščevanje, 2011]*.
28. *Doctor with a Black Scalpel [Doktor s črnim skalpelom, 2012]*; *The Seducer [Zapeljivec, 2013]*; *The Avenger [Maščevalec, 2013]*; *The Abyss of Passion [Brezno strasti, 2013]*; *Murderer with a Flaw [Morilec z napako, 2013]*; *Rebecca [Rebeka, 2013]*; *Taste of Blood [Okus po krvi, 2013]*; *Embrace of the Red Prince [V objemu rdečega princa, 2013]*; *Lucia: Turbulent Times [Lucija. Vibarni časi, 2013]*.
29. Janko Valjavec, Tone Frelih, Goran Gluvić, Sonja Koranter, Tomo Rebolj alias Aaron Kronski and others.
30. *Oil on the Balcony [Olje na balkonu, 2007]*; *Retrospective [Retrospektiva, 2008]*; *Thin Ice [Tanek led, 2009]*; *Europe [Evropa, 2010]*; *Hotel Abazzia, 2011*; *Obsessions in a Time of Crisis [Obsedenosti v času krize, 2012]*; *Miloš, 2013*; *Pohorje Transversale [Pohorska transverzala, 2016]*; *The Island [Otok, 2018]*; *The Church [Cerkev, 2020]*.
31. *The Lake [Jezero, 2016]*; *Lenin Park [Leninov park, 2018]*; *Valley of Roses [Dolina Rož, 2019]*; *The Virus [Virus, 2020]*.
32. *The Contract [Pogodba, 2018]* and *The Evidence [Evidenca, 2021]*.
33. The other is Josef Strutz, a Carinthian (Austrian) Slovenian, who wrote three detective novels: *Short Spring: Inspector Mangart's First Case [Kratka pomlad: inšpektor Mangart in njegov prvi primer, 2005]*; *Camouflage at the Pool: Inspector Mangart's Second Case [Kamuflača na bazenu: inšpektor Mangart in njegov drugi primer, 2011]*; *Dreamland: Inspector Mangart and the Theft of Pernhart's Ribnica [Sanjska dežela: inšpektor Mangart in rop Pernhartove Ribnice, 2016]*.
34. Pamela Ballinger, “Imperial nostalgia: mythologizing Habsburg Trieste”, in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* vol 8, no. 1, 2015, p. 84–101.
35. Katia Pizzi, *The Literary Identity of Trieste*, London, New York, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, p. 48.

36. *Ibidem*, p. 52.
37. Sergej Verč, *Skrivnost turkizne meduze* [*The Secret of the Turquoise Jellyfish*], Trieste, ZTT EST, 1998, p. 31.
38. Sergej Verč, *Pogrebna maškarada* [*Funeral Masquerade*], Ljubljana, Cankarjeva založba, 2003, p. 18.
39. Sergej Verč, *Mož, ki je bral Disneyjeve stripe* [*The Man who Read Disney Comics*], Ljubljana, Modrijan, 2009, p. 103.
40. Sergej Verč, *Rolandov steber* [*Roland's Pillar*], Trieste: Založništvo tržaškega tiska, 1991, p. 41.
41. David, Bandelj, " (Raz)vrednotenje podobe Trsta v sodobni poeziji Slovencev v Italiji" [Devaluation of Trieste Image in the Contemporary Poetry of Slovenians in Italy], in *Annales* vol. 21, no. 2, 2011, p. 390.
42. Sergej Verč, *Roland's Pillar*, p. 41.
43. *Ibidem*, p. 21.
44. Sergej Verč, *Funeral Masquerade*, p. 76.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 153.
46. Sergej Verč, *Roland's Pillar*, p. 201.
47. Sergej Verč, *The Secret of the Turquoise Jellyfish*, p. 247.
48. Sergej Verč, *Funeral Masquerade*, p. 279.
49. Sergej Verč, *The Man who Read Disney Comics*, p. 247.
50. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, New York, The Modern Library, 1906, p. 81-96.
51. Disney culture is known for simplifying and masquerading the social reality and history of the West. Disney comics represent globalized American dreams, where "the sky is the limit" for individuals who can overcome all social, economic, cultural and political obstacles by relentless hard work and dedication.
52. Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism", in James Strachey (ed.), *The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. XXI), London, Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1927, p. 155.
53. Sergej Verč, *The Secret of the Turquoise Jellyfish*, p. 117-123; *Funeral Masquerade*, p. 51-54.
54. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, London; New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 153.
55. Sergej Verč, *The Secret of the Turquoise Jellyfish*, p. 232.
56. Sergej Verč, *Funeral Masquerade*, p. 195.
57. *Ibidem*, p. 228.
58. Söderlind, Sylvia, "Håkan Nesser and the Third Way: of Loneliness, Alibis and Collateral Guilt", in Paula Arvas and Andrew Nestingen (eds.), *Scandinavian Crime Fiction*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2011, p. 162-163.
59. See Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz*, Ljubljana, Peace Institute, 2008.