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"Where normal people see Romans and Gauls, you see Ustashe and Partisans"

Rome in contemporary Croatian novel

Abstract The article employs critical discourse analysis to explore the portrayal of Rome and contemporary Croatian society in a novel set within the historic confines of Diocletian's Palace in Split, Croatia. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Baudrillard and Debord, the study investigates themes of historical authenticity, cultural commodification, and societal critique. While the novel presents Rome as a multifaceted symbol embodying themes of fascination, commodification, and political resonance, its depiction often veers towards clichéd stereotypes and shallow commodification. Similarly, the critique of contemporary Croatian society, while ostensibly critical, often lacks depth, resorting to superficial caricatures. Despite its attempt to provoke introspection, the novel risks oversimplifying complex socio-political issues, offering limited substantive critique.

Keywords Rome, Diocletian, Split, novel, discourse

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INTRODUCTION

The article studies the novel "Tomorrow is the new lunch" by Ivica Ivanišević, a well-known and very popular Croatian journalist, columnist, editor, and novelist.

The main goal of the research is to determine the way in which Rome is presented in the novel, and its reception in Croatian society today. Therefore, the main research questions are: How does Rome appear in the novel, that is, how is Rome presented by the author, what meanings are associated with Rome in the novel, and, how is contemporary Croatian society presented in the novel. The research method used to achieve the research goal is discourse analysis, or as Fairclough calls it critical discourse analysis.[1] The main dataset used for the analysis is obviously the text of the novel itself. However, besides this main text, I also analyze the cover of the novel, and I consider book reviews, and three roughly 50-minutes-long interviews that the author gave, in which he talks about his work and about the topics he addresses in this novel.

The novel starts with a description of a 'Roman' reenactor's dead body and garment laying in the *decumanus* of the Diocletian's palace in today's Split, Croatia. The main theme of the book is a police investigation of three murders committed throughout the novel in the center of Diocletian's Palace, which are peculiar because all the victims are dressed in costumes: the first in the costume of a Roman legionnaire, the second in the uniform of an Ustasha soldier from the Second World War, and the third in the uniform of a member of the French Foreign Legion. Another seemingly important topic is tasty and unhealthy food, which the protagonist, inspector Nalis, is almost obsessed with and thinks about almost constantly. However, in the subtexts, through his characters, the author talks about various aspects of use of Roman history today and about various characteristics and problems of Croatian society.

1 Gee (2011), Fairclough (2010)

ROME AS A TOURIST SPECTACLE

The novel starts with a prologue titled in Latin, "incipit prologus", followed by a description of a Roman reenactor's dead body and garment laying on the floor of a street that once served as the *decumanus* of Diocletian's palace. While describing the reenactor's clothing and equipment, as well as the place where the body is situated, the author uses Latin terms: *cassis, lorica segmentata, scutum, gladius, pugio, pilum, caligae, Porta occidentalis, Decumanus.* However, he declines Latin terms in Croatian cases and adds suffixes to them not in Latin but in Croatian, so the reenactor is not lying dead 15 meters *a porta occidentali,* but 15 meters "*od Porte occidentalis*" which is not correct according to the rules of any of the two languages. Later in the novel the protagonist also passes through "*Portu septemtrionalis*".[2] This blending of Latin terms with grammatical rules of Croatian language does not seem to be a deliberate choice, a certain kind of character perspective, creative expression, symbolism or subtle commentary, but a an oversight, a result of the author's lack of a formal educational background in literature or linguistics. The author seems unaware of the linguistic inaccuracies or the incorrect usage of Latin and Croatian language elements, even if he is a renowned journalist and fiction writer.

The protagonists and the narrator describe the Roman location as scenic, however, throughout the novel the author does not provide much historical information about the archeological site where the plot takes place. How he understands the site the reader learns after the first crime, when inspector Nalis thinks about new possible murders and suspects that the murderer may take a new victim's body to "the shithole".[3] He explains to his young out-of-town colleague that the term refers to a "colorful folk name for the southeast quadrant of Diocletian's Palace. It looks nice now, but not so long ago it looked awful, hence the comparison with a toilet".[4] Even if with the crude and satirical tone and his word-choice he may seem to mock the archeological site, he is not completely wrong. The site unfortunately was favored among drug dealers, addicts and squatters for decades and it had been vandalized by graffiti and garbage. A major restoration campaign has been a strategic, decades-long project of the Ministry of Culture's conservation department in Split. Therefore, inspector Nalis' de-

2 Ivanišević (2020) 45

3 All translations from Croatian to English are my own.

4 Ivanišević (2020) 167

scription provides a local perspective on the site. This colloquial expression is still often used by some people familiar with the area, emphasizing its historical struggles with neglect, decay, and social problems.

In the beginning of the second chapter, at the crime scene we meet a young police officer Nina Krajač that comes from the north of the country, from the capital Zagreb, and she is immediately struck with the location. As the narrator tells us, "For hours she didn't think about anything else but her new job, which seemed to her to be the best in the world. The crime scene resembled a Hollywood movie set."[5] Nina Krajač's perception of the crime scene as resembling a Hollywood movie set points to Baudrillard and his concept of hyperreality.[6] In this context the distinction between Roman history, its representation in Hollywood films, its reception through those films, and the actual place where the crime happens is blurred. The crime scene, resembling a Hollywood set, suggests that the experience of the Roman palace and the reenactor's body is mediated through films, or more generally, through pop-cultural representations. The immediate association with a movie set highlights how Roman history is often filtered through simulated and idealized representations, creating a hyperreal, fictional environment. At another place in the novel the author is even more explicit:

> "But more than anything else, [inspector Nalis] was troubled by the following question: why was the victim dressed as if he had stepped out of one of those Christmas movies in which Christ speaks Italian with a Roman accent, and the Romans speak little, but that's why they beat the Son of God a lot? Was [the victim] dressed as a legionnaire even before the execution and, if so, why? If, however, they subsequently costumed him, what did they want to convey? Yes, that's what it was about. Such grotesquely ritualized death implied some message. The trouble was that Nalis knew nothing about the content of the message, nor about the identity of the person to whom it was addressed."[7]

The victim's costume, resembling a legionnaire from Rome, becomes a Baudrillardian simulacrum – a representation that has lost its connection to an original reality. The dressing of the victim in this manner transforms the crime scene

5 Ivanišević (2020) 17

6 Baudrillard (1981)

7 Ivanišević (2020) 67

into a staged event, where symbols and signs take precedence over any direct connection to historical or authentic references. The characters ask themselves what this all means, why is the victim dressed like this. Inspector Nalis's struggle with understanding the message behind the victim's costume and the ritualized death aligns with Baudrillard's notion of the "unreadable". In a hyperreal environment, signs and symbols may circulate, but their meaning becomes increasingly elusive and difficult to decipher.[8] What is more, simulacrum comprises, not only the body, but also the surroundings. And the whole context, as the author sets it, is Debordian: the officer Krajač perceives the crime scene and the murder itself as a sort of a spectacle.[9] This was suggested already by her first quotation above, but soon becomes even more explicit:

> "The narrow street that connected the Iron Gate of Diocletian's Palace with the Peristyle was, of course, closed to citizens. But the murmur of the people, locals and tourists, pressed behind the yellow ribbon stretched by the inspection team, and of the privileged spectators from the windows and balconies overlooking the former Decumanus and today's Krešimirova Street, made it difficult for Nina to communicate with her colleagues. The noise created by the voices of the curious may have complicated the investigative routine, but it created a seductive impression that everyone gathered – pathologist, forensics, criminologists, police officers – was engaged in a fatefully important job. Of whom only Nina's was more important, because it was to her, a young, graceful newcomer, that the chief entrusted the investigation into the death of a young man dressed as a Roman legionnaire. She couldn't even dream of such a first working day."[10]

The atmosphere is "seductive", and Nina is overwhelmed with the crime scene and its surroundings. It is a filmic dream-come-true situation for the protagonist. The seductive impression created by the spectacle, where everyone appears to be engaged in a fatefully important job. Even though the reality of the crime scene is tragic, the mediated experience makes it alluring and captivating. All the above quotations directly point to the perception of Rome as a spectacle,

8 Baudrillard (1995), (1981) 125

9 Debord (1967). When citing Debord's seminal work, *La Société du spectacle,* I do not cite pages in the book, because I do not find this citing style precise enough. Instead, I directly cite Debord's axioms according to their original numbers.

10 Ivanišević (2020) 17–18

one received through Hollywood films. The closed street, restricted to citizens, becomes a stage for the spectacle. So, the crime scene is not only a physical location but also a staged event. The crime scene, with the gathered crowd behind the yellow ribbon, symbolizes the separation between the spectacle and the everyday life of the city. This aligns with Debord's idea that in a society dominated by the spectacle, reality is mediated and separated from direct experience.[11] The noise and murmur of the people behind the ribbon aligns with Debord's concept of alienation through images, where the seductive spectacle draws individuals into a mediated experience, creating a detachment from the real, unmediated world.[12] The crowd's fascination, the separation from everyday life, and the importance attributed to the investigation all contribute to a Debordian interpretation of the scene as a spectacle within a society dominated by images and representations.[13]

Moreover, the first conversation that Nina and her superior, detective Nalis, have in a tavern just after her seeing the crime scene, tells us that the low-quality simulacrum of 'Roman' reenactment is a project that happens during the tourist season, and is sponsored by the Croatian National Theatre in Split, and the local Tourist board. "You heard, I presume," tells Nalis to Nina, "that here in the season [...] the city is full of young people dressed as Romans. Tourists like to take pictures with them. Even adults, let alone kids, who could understand it." The author distances himself from this practice, and disapproves its authenticity, by having Nalis calling the costumes the reenactors wear "quasi-historical uniforms". Later Nalis asks himself "why did the killer dress the victim in a cretin costume of a legionnaire?".[14] Nina also explains that "A Roman sword is not the same as a pistol or an automatic rifle. It can be bought without any problems at a million places in Italy, they are probably imported from China, and you don't have to register it anywhere. And not to mention the skirt, helmet, or armor."[15] The mention of Roman swords being easily bought without registration, possibly

11 Debord (1967) 7: "La séparation fait elle-même partie de l'unité du monde, de la praxis sociale globale qui s'est scindée en réalité et en image"; 25: "La séparation est l'alpha et l'oméga du spectacle."

12 Debord (1967) 30, 31

13 Debord (1967) 37

14 Ivanišević (2020) 76

15 Ivanišević (2020) 19

imported from China, reflects a critique of consumer culture. The commodification of historical artifacts and symbols contributes to a culture where objects lose their original meaning and become part of a market-driven spectacle. The author here refers to a project called "Changing of the Guard and Diocletian's Salutation", developed by the Croatian National Theater in Split and the local Tourist board, that despite its shortages, after years became one the most prominent tourist products of the two institutions, that also makes a lot of profit. Already when the spectacle starts, only by hearing the music one can perceive it as a spillover of sword-and-sandal Hollywood films:

The bells of the nearby cathedral ring and let people know that it is noon. After the church bells stop, music from Ben Hur starts playing loudly on a small square, composed of Roman pillars, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque, as well as XIX century and XX century buildings. On the balcony of the nearby 15th century palace, 'Roman soldiers' pretend to play the Roman *cornu* horn, even if most of them do not move their lips at all. People approach the wooden construction on which two by two, young men dressed as Roman soldiers start appearing from the former *vestibulum* of the palace as in military walk-rhythm. First appear two '*aquilifers'*. They obviously have no military experience whatsoever. The 'emperor' enters holding a hand of the 'empress' who is dressed in blanket-like clothes. He seriously looks at the crowd and raises his hand in a form of a salute, as if he was in a Hollywood film, while the 'empress' simply waves like anybody may do today. As Ben Hur music comes to an end, the 'emperor', like a bad comedian, signals the end with a hand gesture. He gestures and mimics to the audience that he wants their applause for the 'musicians'.

He shouts *Ave,* the audience responds *Ave.* He is not satisfied so he just waves aside. Then he salutes them in Latin. He tells them that he is happy to welcome them in his palace, and that the door of the palace are open for them. At that point he shows the wrong passage. The script of the performance expects that the whole audience does not understand what he says, so he tells it again in English. As a concluding gesture, he shouts *Ave,* the audience responds, but he is not satisfied so again he waves aside. He looks at the 'empress' and points his finger down as an emperor would do in gladiator fights in Hollywood films (*pollice verso*), which makes the audience laugh. For one more time he repeats *Ave* and soldiers repeat the same, leaving the stage. Music from Ben Hur starts again to mark the end of the performance.[16]

16 They play *Panem et circenes* by Miklósz Rózsa from the film Ben Hur, Stegic (2016)

This lowbrow reenactment that the author takes as the lite motif for his novel represents a form of Baudrillardian simulation and simulacra. It is a simulated version of Roman life that lacks historical authenticity and does not distinguish between a Roman emperor's *Adventus* and a change of the guard. Diocletian, to whom this performance refers to, was not an Emperor at the moment he moved to his palace in Split. The only Roman thing in the reenactment and in the novel is the stage. Diocletian's palace in Split, Roman monument protected since 1979 by UNESCO is promoted as a unique example of an antique imperial palace that evolved into a city. Due to a tourist boom which occurred in Croatia and Split in particular in the 21st century, the local branch of the Croatian Tourism Board hired low quality centurion impersonators to imitate Diocletian's imperial guard and to perform this very commodified quasi-theatrical show on the Peristyle of the palace. They also hired other Roman-soldier-impersonators to stand like theme park mascots and take pictures with tourists at the Golden gate of the palace and at other venues in the historical center, such as the fortification bastion Cornaro. The music from Ben Hur contributes to an exaggerated version of Rome. This example from Split, as well as consequences and relations it establishes in society, does not correspond to examples from other cities. For instance, centurion impersonators in Rome have become a public and media problem in regard to their inauthenticity, aggressivity and alleged relations with organized crime.[17] In Split, on the other hand, this project has resulted in new reenactment projects funded and promoted by public bodies and institutions.

The novel in question does not analyze the phenomenon in depth but criticizes it only superficially. Even if Rome is not the only theme of the novel, the way the author presents it and chooses to engage it only superficially by repeating pop-culture stereotypes and not going in any depth, results in a portrayal and understanding of Roman culture and history very close to that of Hollywood films and low-quality reenactment spectacles intended for mass audiences. That is why two problems in this performance are transferred to the novel: the problem of historical inauthenticity accompanied by interference with popular imaging. The reenactment itself does not recognize that honor guards are historical formations with military and ceremonial roles; they take part in every regulated military and political system. Amongst more prominent honor guards is indubitably the Papal Swiss guard, which retained its original function until today and did not degrade into a commodified product. In addition, in popular

17 La Repubblica (2022)

culture and Hollywood films especially, Roman soldiers have been presented as strong figures.[18] In this context it is worth mentioning that Split became famous as a tourist destination after having been selected as a film location for TV series *Game of Thrones,* when substructions of Diocletian's palace (just below the 'set' of the reenactment) served as Daenerys Targaryen's throne room and a place to keep the dragons. This culture seems to have influenced not only the creation, but also the reception of the popular reenactment on the Peristyle of Diocletian's palace.

The entire scene exemplifies the society of the spectacle, where the reenactment is not just a representation, but a spectacular event staged for the consumption of a mass audience. The performative elements, such as the 'emperor' mimicking Hollywood gestures, contribute to the constructed nature of the spectacle. By looking at the word choice and explanations the author gives, films seem to have also influenced the novelist's perception of Rome. Both historical inauthenticity and interference of popular imaging are products of the culture commodified for profit in the society subject to tourism. They are made suitable for tourists' consumption and oversimplified at the expense of authenticity. The detachment of the audience is evident as the 'emperor' signals for applause, and the audience responds mechanically. This reflects Debord's idea of alienation in a society dominated by images, where genuine participation and engagement are replaced by passive consumption.[19] In addition, a high-ranking employee of the renowned cultural institution, the Croatian National Theatre in Split, created the performance, the Theatre officially produces it, and another wealthy institution – the tourist board – financially supports it. Despite all of that, the performance does not have the permit issued by the Ministry of Culture's conservation department. Since the Diocletian's palace is protected by the Ministry of Culture as cultural heritage of highest national importance, conservation department in Split issues permits for manifestations within the palace, and even if the organizers of the event after several years eventually submitted a request for the permit, their request was refused, among other things, with a remark that it is necessary to create a scientific study of the manifestation itself, that is,

18 For instance, in Riddley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* (2004), William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Marvin Leroy's *Quo Vadis* (1951) or the TV series *Rome* (2005–2007).

19 Debord (1967) 12

to harmonize the manifestation with historical facts related to Diocletian's stay and public appearances in the palace in Split.[20] In combining Baudrillardian and Debordian perspectives, the scene portrays a hyperreal, spectacular event that is detached from historical authenticity, emphasizing the performative nature of the spectacle, its ties to consumer culture, and the role of authority in constructing and profiting from the simulated experience.

On a similar note, towards the end of the novel the author states that during the tourist season, that lasts for a greater part of the year, he thinks of the old town as a kind of amusement park. This is in accordance with the historical reenactment as emblematic of that commodification. However, this may not be only a critique of the commodification of the city for tourist consumption and an understanding of Diocletian's palace as a kind of theme park, but it may also be indicative of a possible underlying racism:

> "For six or maybe even seven months of the year, the city center looked as if the authorities had leased it in its entirety, along with the streets and squares, to interested bidders from all over the world. As if in some kind of anthropological amusement park, the curious, comfortably reclining on the restaurant or bar terrace with an obscenely expensive glass of cocktail, could see the entire range represented by the phrase 'human race', all colors, all shapes, all ages of colorful species look around at its beautiful and ugly specimens united by the desire to have a good time with the faith that Split will enable them to do so. To Nalis' great surprise, it seems that this faith has been serious, because year after year the number of tourists only grew. That amusement park was bypassed by the locals, except, of course, those who served the needs of the hungry and thirsty multitude of nomads."[21]

The author does not appreciate the multiculturalism that happened in Split as a tourist destination. This also does not seem to be an evocation of multiculturalism of the Roman Empire. The author's view on the "'human race', all colors, all shapes, all ages of colorful species, [...] its beautiful and ugly specimens" is controversial, and it is not clear what the author wants to say. The phrase raises questions about how the author perceives and presents the diversity of people visiting Split. The reference to "its beautiful and ugly specimens" is highly charged and could be interpreted as objectifying and devaluing individ-

20 Conservation Department in Split (2023) 2

21 Ivanišević (2020) 204

uals based on their appearance. The term "species" may be dehumanizing, emphasizing a problematic objectification. Also, who are the "curious" that gaze the people passing by? The viewers are obviously very wealthy, as they are drinking "an obscenely expensive glass of cocktail." This adds a layer of privilege to the imagery, reinforcing potential power imbalances. It suggests a socio-economic disparity between the observers and the observed. This could imply a power dynamic reminiscent of colonial exhibitions or a human version of zoological parks, where people were imprisoned as slaves and exhibited as exotic animals for the astonishment of wealthy Western Europeans, which is an abhorrent reference. On a similar note, in an interview with a university history professor and public intellectual Dragan Markovina, the author complains that Croatia is a chauvinist country, even if paradoxically in the same interview he points out that he has a "controlled ancestry for 500 years, on every side, in Split". Also, when referring to people with different opinions, cultural backgrounds, and such, he often uses the term "krvna grupa", that means "blood type".[22] This also instigates controversial xenophobic associations. Shocking controversies like these are not isolated incidents in the author's expression. For instance, during an interview at a book fair in Croatia, while commenting on his constant surprise at negative social phenomena, crime, war profiteering and the like, Ivanišević said that he "surprises himself every morning, like a retarded child he wonders how this is possible and it pretty much embarrasses him".[23] The use of the phrase "retarded child" is not only politically incorrect, but more importantly it is insensitive and uncivilized due to its derogatory nature towards individuals and small children with intellectual disabilities. Such language goes against basic principles of humanity, inclusivity, respect, and dignity and contributes to the stigmatization of a very vulnerable part of the community. Writers, especially those in the public eye, have a social and ethical responsibility to use language that does not perpetuate discrimination or harm. Here, Ivanišević's language unfortunately creates an opposite result, he thinks he is funny and by using this offensive language he normalizes discriminatory attitudes in public discourse and contributes to a divisive social environment.

Together with this disturbing paragraph, one needs to address the title of the novel itself. "Sutra je novi ručak" equals "Tomorrow is another lunch". This is a straight-forward reference to Scarlett O'Hara's line from *Gone with the Wind,*

22 Oslobođenje (2022) 18'

23 Sajam knjige (2021) 18'50"

"Tomorrow is another day", regardless of the source that Ivanišević cites, be it the original Margaret Mitchell's novel from 1936 or Victor Fleming's film adaptation from 1939. Since Ivanišević does not engage with the controversial aspects of the source material, it could be seen as a lack of critical awareness regarding the racial and historical implications of *Gone with the Wind.* His paraphrase is only a parody of the original sentence. Ivanišević only thinks about the food and does not take the responsibility for the association this phrase or the sources may encourage. Food is one of the main themes of the novel. The protagonist, inspector Nalis, thinks all the time about what he could eat next. In fact, in the beginning of the novel we meet him at a doctor's office, he is thinking about food voraciously while waiting for the diagnosis after the tests performed during his stay in the hospital. He is almost obsessed with food, at one point he dreams about a luxurious buffet all for himself.[24] Again, like the amusement park, food is not an innocent remark, but a means to ridicule religion. When describing inspector Nalis eating, the narrator states that "the first bite imbued him with the kind of bliss that, the blasphemous unbeliever suspected, a baptized soul would feel at the moment of Communion. Each subsequent one only emphasized that sensation for the palate".[25] On the same note, while looking at another person eating in a restaurant, Nalis was "moved by the sight; the man was really melting with love as he brought each morsel to his mouth, he wasn't actually having dinner, he was taking Communion".[26] Also, at one point Nina Krajač states that food is Nalis' favourite topic, one he contemplates "with pious admiration".[27]

A DEAD 'ROMAN' ON THE COVER

The cover of the novel features a photograph or photomontage created through human manipulation or the use of artificial intelligence. The use of a photomontage, especially one manipulated through human intervention or artificial intelligence, aligns with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. The image on the

24 Ivanišević (2020) 83

25 Ivanišević (2020) 108

26 Ivanišević (2020) 125

27 Ivanišević (2020) 174

cover does not represent a direct reality but a simulation, emphasizing the idea that the cover serves as a hyperreal representation of what is popularly understood as 'ancient' Rome, either republican or imperial Rome. In the lower right corner, there is a small logo of the publishing house. On this cover, at the top, the author's full name is printed in white color. Below, in the same font and color, the title of the book is printed in bold letters, almost double the size, in three lines. The background is quite dark, while most of the light is concentrated in the middle, both on the cover and in the foreground, where a man (or a puppet) dressed in what appears to be the costume or a uniform of a Roman soldier-legionnaire from Hollywood films is placed. The figure is shown lying on the ground in a narrow street. The representation of a Roman 'soldier' in a dramatic pose and the play of light draw attention, turning the cover into a visual spectacle for potential readers. The deliberate choice of 'ancient' Rome as a motif for recognition aligns with the commodification of historical and cultural symbols. Rome, often romanticized and popularized in the media, becomes a marketable and recognizable image to attract potential buyers of the book. The book cover, by selecting this specific motif and presenting it in a visually striking way, participates in and repeats the commodification of Roman imagery for market appeal. Most of the soldier's body is visible, while the head is obscured by a container with a green plant. It is not entirely clear what street is depicted; it cannot be confidently identified as one of the alleyways in Diocletian's Palace or the remains of medieval Split. By appearance, it certainly resembles a street in a Mediterranean city, especially those in the center of Venice, Italy, implying it may be a stock photograph bought on an online platform. Parts of the facades of the surrounding houses are quite dilapidated, as is the case with many in Split and even more so in Venice. There are no details about the cover or the used photograph in the book. This motif could be characterized as an old city, a historical core. However, to an uninformed reader, it might be challenging to recognize architectural layers and the historical period of the venue, even if Roman setting is suggested. The intentional ambiguity regarding the specific location and architectural layers relates to Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum. The blending of potentially different historical periods and locations creates a simulation that challenges straightforward identification.

ROME AND FAR-RIGHT POLITICS

Another motif from popular culture that embodies Rome in the novel are Asterix and Obelix. On her first official workday, inspector Nalis showed his young colleague Nina an A4 drawing with the two characters that welcomed him at his office door. Nina recognized them remotely from a cartoon, but Nalis explained (perhaps even mansplained) to her that they were "originally comic-book heroes, and only later they moved to cartoons and feature films." Nina doesn't understand why they are relevant, and Nalis explains that "he, the fat guy, is Obelix, and she, the tiny one, is Asterix, and they are dealing with a corpse that is, uh, a Roman".[28] This is an interference of the author's biography into the text of the novel, since he is a big fan of comic books or graphic novels. In fact, the first book he published as the sole author was dedicated specifically to graphic novels.

But the comic book reference is not just an example of a pop-culture intertextuality or a blending of high and low culture. A colleague that must have stuck the Asterix-and-Obelix paper on Nalis' door, saluted Nalis and Nina with his right-arm raised in a Fascist style, the so called 'Roman salute' and a greeting "Ave, Gauls!". The author does not recognize the fact that the 'Roman salute' is not associated with the Gauls, but, as (neo-)fascists like to believe, with Romans. Nalis accused his colleague of being Fascist again, but the colleague replied that "where normal people see Gauls and Romans, he sees Ustashas and Partisanas".[29] This was not a passing comment, because the second murder victim that appeared in the novel was wearing a black uniform of the so-called Black Legion, an elite unit of the far-right Ustasha movement and the army of the Independent State of Croatia that existed between 1941 and 1945. Young Nina asks somewhat naively where one can find an Ustasha uniform, and Nalis tells her bluntly that one could find it "in grandfather's wardrobe, in the archives of theater and film companies, in antique stores… It's not a big problem. We did not import the Ustashe, it is our own, originally Croatian product. And they were not few. After all, they are not few even today". The author's portrayal of obtaining Ustasha uniforms from places like a grandfather's wardrobe, archives of theater and film companies, and antique stores adds a satirical tone, and satire is one of the most important elements of all his writings. This approach forms a kind of cultural critique typical for Ivanišević, where the author uses satire to question socie-

28 Ivanišević (2020) 29

29 Ivanišević (2020) 33

tal norms and values. It critiques the casual and almost banal accessibility of symbols associated with the dark period in history. So satire serves as a form of political commentary. The author seems to be making a statement about the fragility of societal attitudes towards historical events and the potential for political ideologies to resurface.

While thinking aloud about the potential next murder, Nina perpetuates her boss's words and states that "a Roman legionnaire's uniform is easy to get, an Ustasha uniform is even easier because you don't have to buy it, you just have to take it down from your grandfather's attic or borrow it from your first neighbor".[30] The ease with which one can find such uniforms in various places, as mentioned by Nalis and Nina, suggests that these symbols have not disappeared from the cultural landscape. In this way, they strengthen the idea of a part of Croatia being nationalist. The author plays on this imagery and a few pages later one of the characters states that if the news about a person killed in Ustasha uniform reaches the newspaper, "[they] are done! Even before noon, the whole country will be trumpeting about Split, which has once again become a problem city, in which the spirits of Nazism come to life".[31] Here one needs to point to the fact that according to the author's historical and political comments, he does not recognize the layers of political, military and historical complexity when it comes to Roman period. In other words, he doesn't seem to see anything problematic about the relationship of the Romans to the Gauls. Instead, he reinforces a simplistic narrative. On the other hand, he rightfully condemns the Ustashe regime.

The author plays further on with this Ustashe imagery in the novel. First, inspector Nalis finds another photocopy stuck on the door of his office. This time it was not Asterix and Obelix but portraits of Jure Francetić and Rafel Boban, two prominent Ustashe commanders during the Second World War. Nina thought this was funny, but Nalis replied that he would rather be "a fat Gaul, than a fat Croat". Nalis was furious, and while they were leaving the office immediately after that, "a whistle was heard from somewhere to the tune of a song that heralded the dawn, and with it the arrival of two mass murderers", that is Boban and Francetić.[32] Here he refers to a marching song of the Ustashe from the Second World War called "Evo zore evo dana", in English "Here comes the dawn,

30 Ivanišević (2020) 86, 87

31 Ivanišević (2020) 90

32 Ivanišević (2020) 91, 93

here comes the day". Even if Nina suggests that the colleague that stuck the joke on the door may even not be Fascist, the scene still suggests that a part of Croatia may be Fascist today. In addition, even if it might not be a conscious author's choice and a direct comparison, the decision to put the two victims in a 'Roman' and a Fascist uniform coincides with the frequent fascination with Rome by the supporters and protagonists of far-right politics. For instance, in 2018 the extremist Italian political party, CasaPound, put posters depicting a Roman soldier on the walls of Rome to commemorate Alberto Giaquinto, a seventeen-year old militant of the Youth Front of the Italian Social Movement. He was killed by a police officer during the riots at the first anniversary of the never-resolved assassination of three other young militants from the same organization on January 7th, 1978, in front of their headquarters in the street Acca Larentia in Rome. Italian Social Movement was a political party born after WWII that followed many of the controversial political beliefs of Mussolini. Also, the Italian court of cassation in a process against the commemorators performing the Roman salute several years ago ruled in January 2024 that the related 'Roman salute' is not a crime, unless its goal is to reestablish the Fascist regime.[33]

Read in this context, Ivanišević's choice of the uniforms of his victims may be understood as another, more subtle critique of the far-right politics.

Furthermore, in accordance with the critique of the far-right Croatian government during the Second World War, the author mocks another character, commander Akrap and his critique of the former Communist Yugoslavia. Akrap defines Yugoslavia as a "community where citizens were under continuous police monitoring" recalling sarcastically his life in "a harsh socialist order that afforded them many and insurmountable traumas". Inspector Nalis doesn't share his opinion and with his body language he somewhat indirectly expresses his dissent, but Akrap reinforces his condemnation of the Communist system when nobody else supports him. Also, when talking to Nina later, Nalis mocks Akrap's understanding of Yugoslavia as a country of "Goddless Communism" against today's democratic Croatia. He mocks the idea of the Communist regime as "dark forces of the past".[34] Indirectly the author also criticizes Akrap's view: Nalis recalls the intellectual, cultural, and political movement for the independence of Croatia from Communist Yugoslavia and stating that in that mass movement, "he firmly believed that the quantity will not yield quality", and between the

33 Giuffrida (2024)

34 172, 174

lines he suggests that he was not wrong.[35] At another place the author, again by using Nalis' voice, is even more explicit, he states that people who criticized Socialism were basically not thinking with their head:

> "Most of the people Nalis knew spoke with disgust of the socialism they had lived through in their youth or had only heard about it from the stories of their elders. Those he didn't know were even more resolute in that sense; for years, maybe even decades, he has not heard anyone on television loudly, clearly and unreservedly defending the socialist order or, God forbid, advocating for its return. It was obviously very important, even crucial, for everyone to enjoy the right to freedom of opinion. Then again, only rare acquaintances of Nalis actually consumed that right. The rest, the overwhelming majority, were just waiting for someone to think for them and tell them what they themselves should think."[36]

It is noteworthy that he downplays the fact that it was not any kind of socialist order in question, but the one strictly controlled by the Communist regime.

FROM ROME TO CROATIA: A CRITIQUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

There is a sense of nostalgia for the life under the former Communist regime that one can read throughout the novel. What is more, this is also reiterated in the description, or more precisely, in the official book review that the reader can find on the back cover of the novel: "nostalgia for a fairer world and a more authentic Split; a lucid critique of the devastation of moral and social values. There is still a lot of beauty and kindness, unwavering love for the local". The unnamed reviewer seems to share a lot of Ivanišević's worldview: "With his first crime novel, Ivica Ivanišević wrote an insightful analysis of the anxious time in which we all suddenly feel a little redundant".[37] He seems to be of similar generation, because there is no other cue for deciphering who could be the "we" that "feel a little redundant" today. The review is more a part of the publisher's marketing

35 187

36 Ivanišević (2020) 147

37 Ivanišević (2020) back cover

strategy and an ode to the novel, than an objective evaluation of the book. There is an underlying synchrony between nostalgia for the Communist political system and his negative opinion of today's Croatia. What is more, while speaking about literature, Ivanišević indirectly admits his own escapist tendencies and describes his writing process as an attempt to escape from reality: "We who write are doubly blessed, because you can escape from your life in two ways, by reading about other lives or writing other lives. A relatively healthy way of escaping from reality".[38] Later in the same interview he again stresses that he would most rather close himself in a book which he is writing, that the most important thing is that he writes books in order to escape from the world he is surrounded by.[39] He frames it as his own coping or defense mechanism. In that sense the author implies that his writing is not a way to critically engage the reality, but to the contrary, to disengage it. Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, where representations become detached from reality, can be linked to escapism in literature. In creating alternative worlds through writing, authors construct hyperrealities that serve as simulated escapes.

So, the question is, what kind of country and society he lives in today, how he depicts it besides the partial survival of the remains of Fascism and Nazism? The question becomes particularly important when one considers the fact that the author has a degree in Sociology, and that his other works, especially those in prestigious Croatian newspapers, almost border with a kind of satirical and sociological reviews of different situations and phenomena in Croatian society and politics. Marinko Krmpotić of Croatian newspaper *Novi list* recognizes that the novel "has an obvious tendency to highlight the negative aspects of contemporary Croatian society".[40] Later in his review he delineates what he sees in the novel as a critique of today's Croatia:

> "The journalist Mile Gunjača is a symbol of all that is bad in journalism, the newly rich Željko Čikeš symbolizes all the numerous Croatian billionaires who emerged from economic transition and privatization, and the lawyer Kranjčević is a clear representation of the connection between crime and the justice system.
>
> Of course, the author turns to criticism not only through descriptions of these characters and their activities, but also through direct messages, so one can, for ex-

38 Sajam knjige (2021) 29'40"

39 Sajam knjige (2021) 49'

40 Krmpotić (2021)

> ample, read that the mentioned characters are 'morally at the bottom, but enjoy the reputation of exemplary citizens', that is, how we live 'in the country in which the Čikeš make up a large part of the social and business elite' or how 'No one has ever managed to build a career on measurable results, but on immeasurable obedience to some political authority'."[41]

Krmpotić succeeds at defining this representation of contemporary Croatia only partially, because he fails to recognize other layers that emerge from the analysis of the novel. Firstly, he criticizes the very existence of the Croatian language at different places in the book. In an inner monologue Nalis complains about another character, the lawyer Kranjčević, that used the standard Croatian language even as a child: "In their home, only the language that Nalis considered artificial was spoken, because he had never before heard a living person speak it." Immediately after that he emphasizes that "even today, he was not quite sure whether Croatian is really a living language or just a relatively useful social convention.".[42] This is in contrast with the current government's law on the Croatian language, a kind of law many other European countries already have, such as France, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Switzerland and Belgium.[43] This law, passed by the Croatian Parliament in early 2024, provides a legal framework for encouraging and raising the level of literacy and language expression, standardizing the quality of the use of the language by public institutions and in public space, and, among other things, a stronger institutional support for the descendants of Croatian emigrants who live abroad, and want to develop the culture they inherit. As the Prime Minister Andrej Plenković stated, "The aim of this law is to preserve the precious value of the language as a heritage through which the identity, history and culture of the people speak, and at the same time to ensure its development in line with the needs of the modern world, because the language is alive".[44] The Croatian language has gone through a particular ordeal in the last hundred years under the auspices of Yugoslav communities, pressured by oppressive Serbian political influences, and like the Croatian nation in general, it could not establish its cultural, intellectual and

41 Krmpotić (2021)

42 Ivanišević (2020) 60–61

43 Plenković (2023)

44 Plenković (2023)

political independence. In his critique of the draft of the new law, a renowned Croatian publisher, Ante Žužul, admits that "after the collapse of our national revival – the Croatian Spring – fierce repression of language and books began, and political decisions were made to burn books", obviously the books in Croatian language.[45] In parallel with the passing of the law on the Croatian language, the Croatian government declared the year 2024 as the year dedicated to Marko Marulić (in connection with the five hundredth anniversary of his death), considered in Croatia the father of Croatian literature, a great Croatian Renaissance humanist respected in high Renaissance cultural and intellectual circles throughout Europe, who wrote his works in the Croatian language (albeit in Latin and Italian) and was already translated into other major world languages in his own time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this inquiry, drawing on theories of Baudrillard and Debord and employing critical discourse analysis as its methodological backbone, revealed layers of complexity surrounding notions of historical authenticity, cultural commodification, and societal critique. The novel portrays Rome as a multifaceted symbol, embodying themes of historical fascination, economic commodification, and political resonance. The author's portrayal of Rome evokes a blend of nostalgia, romanticization, and critique, mirroring societal attitudes towards both ancient history and contemporary politics. The author's depiction of Rome often veers towards clichéd stereotypes and shallow commodification. Rome is depicted as a spectacle, commodified for market appeal, yet also imbued with layers of symbolic meaning, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics. The novel offers a critical lens on contemporary Croatian society, highlighting issues of nationalism, far-right politics, and societal values. However, this treatment of contemporary Croatian society, while ostensibly critical, often falls short of deeper analysis, resorting instead to superficial caricatures and polemical gestures. In its attempt to provoke introspection, the novel ultimately risks oversimplifying complex socio-political issues, offering little in the way of substantive critique or meaningful engagement with its subject matter.

45 Žužul (2023)

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