

TOMORROW WILL BE NOW

Analysing the Relationship between Slovenia's Nation-Building during the Nineties and the Youth in Contemporary Slovenian Literature

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This paper examines the relationship between nation-building in 1990s Slovenia and the construction of youth identity as represented in contemporary Slovenian literature. Focusing on three novels – Dino Bauk's *Konec. Znova*, Sebastijan Pregelj's *V Elvisovi sobi*, and Kazimir Kolar's *Glas noči* – the article explores how literary portrayals of youth critically reflect and reframe dominant narratives of Slovenia's transition from socialism to liberal democracy. Using a combined narratological and cultural memory framework, complemented by Marxist literary theory, the paper demonstrates how these works destabilize linear accounts of national progress through fragmented structures, nostalgic tropes, and representations of alienated subjectivities. The protagonists – marked by disorientation, loss, or silence – highlight generational tensions and unprocessed historical trauma, offering a counter-archive to official memory. Ultimately, the study argues that Slovenian youth literature functions not only as a cultural reflection of transition, but as a critical intervention into how post-socialist identity, memory, and belonging are reimagined in the literary field.

Keywords: identity, post-socialism, transition, Slovenian novel

Introduction

The disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Slovenia's swift path to independence in 1991 initiated not only a political rupture, but also a profound reconfiguration of cultural identity and generational belonging¹. As the newly independent state embarked on a project of rapid nation-building – rooted in economic liberalisation, Europeanisation, and a deliberate distancing from its Yugoslav and Balkan past – Slovenian youth found themselves at the centre of a turbulent process of ideological, social, and existential transition. While public discourse

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often celebrated Slovenia's departure from socialism as a success story, literature has offered a more ambivalent response – particularly in its portrayal of young people navigating the fractures of post-socialist society.

This article explores how contemporary Slovenian literature articulates the complex relationship between nation-building during the 1990s and youth identity formation. Focusing on three novels – Dino Bauk's *Konec. Znova* (2015), Sebastijan Pregelj's *V Elvisovi sobi* (2019), and Kazimir Kolar's *Glas noči* (2016) – the paper examines how literary representations of youth reflect, resist, and reframe the dominant narratives of Slovenian transition. Each of these texts features protagonists marked by disorientation, disillusionment, and marginalisation – suggesting that the costs of independence and capitalist reform were unevenly distributed, particularly among those coming of age in a society eager to forget its Yugoslav foundations. The novels of Bauk, Pregelj, and Kolar have been selected over other thematically comparable works not only because they represent some of the most recent significant examples of a renewed literary engagement with the 1990s in contemporary Slovenian prose, but also because their narrative strategies, while maintaining a degree of introspective and intimate tone – characteristic of Slovenian transitional literature (Latković 2023: 181) – address the specific socio-cultural issues of the decade from a predominantly Slovenian perspective. This stands in contrast to well-known authors such as Goran Vojnović, whose works adopt a broader, transnational or “Balkan”² lens. Moreover, the three novels are characterised by a strong nostalgic component or by a specific way to elaborate the past (either Yugoslav or post-Yugoslav), as Bauk and Pregelj re-elaborate it through the lens of (Yugo) nostalgia (Cf. Spaskovska 2008),³ while Kolar's work encompasses reflections not only on the nineties, but also on the Second World War and everyday life during socialism.

This article employs a dual analytical framework, integrating narratological theory with cultural memory studies to examine contemporary Slovenian youth literature set in the 1990s. The narratological approach, based on the structuralist tradition (e.g. Genette 1980), examines how narrative techniques – such as focalization, temporal structure, and narrative voice – shape representations of youth subjectivity, also in a post-socialist context. As Mieke Bal articulates, “A narrative text is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee a story in a particular medium... A story is the content of that text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and ‘colouring’ of a fabula” (Bal 1997: 5). This tripartite model (text – story – fabula) provides a robust analytical lens for exploring how narrative form mediates the tensions and ambiguities of transitional youth experiences.

² Ljubica Spaskovska partly deals with the Balkan component of the Slovenian identity in her article “Recommunisation: On the Phenomenon of Communist Nostalgia in Slovenia and Poland” (2008).

³ Spaskovska states that, especially in Slovenia, post-socialist nostalgia – Yugonostalgia, in this case – has been particularly popular amongst those generations who were born after the breakup of SFRY, i.e. the contemporary Slovenian youth.

Complementing this, the cultural memory perspective draws on Jan Assmann's notion of memory as a socially mediated process across generations (2011), with literature functioning as a site for the transmission, contestation, and reconfiguration of collective remembrance. Astrid Erll further emphasizes that literature is not only a medium of cultural memory – it actively shapes and transforms it (Erll 2011: 148), positioning youth novels as agents in renegotiating dominant historical narratives and amplifying marginalized generational voices.

This article argues that Bauk's *Konec. Znova*, Pregelj's *V Elvisovi sobi*, and Kolar's *Glas noči* expose the celebratory narrative of Slovenia's "successful transition" as a generational myth by staging youth subjectivities whose fractured memories disrupt the state's linear story of progress, thereby foregrounding the role of generational memory as a counter-archive in post-socialist nation-building.

The novel about the transition and disintegration of Yugoslavia in contemporary Slovenian prose: issues, challenges, methodology

In contemporary Slovenian prose, the disintegration of Yugoslavia and, more broadly, the process of transition have served as a common thread in numerous novels. Goran Vojnovič's *Jugoslavija, moja dežela* (2013) is set in post-war Slovenia, as are *Zadnja Sergijeva skušnjava* (1996) by Jani Virk, Mazzini's *Izbrisana* (2014), Polona Glavan's *Kakorkoli* (2014), Bauk's *Konec. Znova* (2015), Kolar's *Glas noči* (2016), Bronja Žakelj's *Belo se pere na devedeset* (2018), *V Elvisovi sobi* (2019) by Sebastijan Pregelj, and *Trg Osvoboditve* (2021) by Andrej Blatnik. In these novels, the events preceding the collapse of Yugoslavia, and those that characterised it, play a pivotal role in the plot and in shaping the protagonists' identities. These texts reveal a clear and active engagement with the historical realities of the former SFRY, whose legacy is central not only to the narratives, but also to the everyday lives of the characters.

Other novels reference these historical phenomena, signalling their relevance to the protagonists' daily realities, yet they do not occupy a central place in the narrative, or, while still having a pivotal role in the protagonist's interiority, are mentioned only occasionally. Such is the case with *Šolen z brega* by Zoran Hočevar (1997) and *Glas noči* by Kazimir Kolar (2016). In *Šolen z brega*, the breakup of the SFRY is mentioned several times through the protagonist's newspaper readings and expressions of concern, yet it has no direct narrative impact. In Kolar's novel, set between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the wars and transition are evoked in the protagonist's delirious night thoughts – an indication that he has not yet fully processed what occurred in Yugoslavia and Slovenia during the 1990s.

Notable as well are *Neizstreljeni naboj za Slovenijo* by Damijan Šinigoj (1994) and *Vojna iz ljubezni* by Marija Vogrič (1994), both of which focus on the Slovenian War of Independence from the perspective of those who participated in it. Šinigoj's

novel is often regarded as the only major literary work devoted to Slovenia's war for independence.

As is likely evident, the approaches to the topic are diverse and somewhat polarised. On the one hand, the transition and the breakup of Yugoslavia are central to the plot; on the other, they serve merely as a background. In the former case, multiple narrative strategies emerge. *Konec. Znova* and *V Elvisovi sobi* are characterised by strong nostalgia for lost youth and a carefree life. Yugoslavia – especially one's childhood and coming-of-age within the former country – is portrayed as a lost paradise, while the transition is depicted as a failure. The protagonists watch in horror as the situation in Yugoslavia deteriorates, positioning themselves in opposition to their parents and other adults, who largely remain unaffected by the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. In Žakelj's novel, there is a distinct form of Yugonostalgia, for example, when the protagonist recalls her fondness for the song *Jugoslavijo* by the group Ladarice and asserts that Yugoslavia was "hers":

When we're seceding from Yugoslavia, it's a Wednesday. I have a strange feeling; I don't want to leave things behind. And Yugoslavia is my thing. Because you were in it, we were in it, and so was Vojko Street. (Žakelj 2018: 216)

The emergence of the "new" Slovenia is viewed with scepticism. In Vojnović's novel, the disintegration of Yugoslavia signifies two things: the end of a carefree childhood and the fragmentation of the protagonist's family. His mother is Slovenian, while his father is a Serbian military officer of the Yugoslav People's Army who, at the onset of the Bosnian war, joins the Army of Republika Srpska and becomes a war criminal – resulting in a profound inner conflict for the protagonist. These novels thus employ a Yugo-nostalgic perspective, often highly critical of the new (capitalist) system and Slovenian society.

In *Kakorkoli* and *Izbrisana*, the plot revolves around the case of the "Erased" (*izbrisani*) – Slovenian residents born in other Yugoslav republics who, in a single night, lost their citizenship and legal residency rights (Zorn 2004: 2). Unlike Hočevar's and Kolar's novels, this historical event plays a crucial, even central, role in the narrative structure.

Blatnik's novel deals with Slovenian transition and contemporary era with even more historical accuracy than the aforementioned novels. While it follows the story of a student from Ljubljana from the late eighties until the 2010s with a coming-of-age approach, the narration is enriched, especially at the beginning of the novel, with numerous historical references and excursions. The process that led to Slovenian independence is meticulously described both through the author's and protagonist's words. Blatnik uses an almost historiographic approach, making *Trg Osvoboditve* not only a coming-of-age novel, but also a historical novel.

The principal issue with the themes of transition and/or the dissolution of the SFRY in contemporary Slovenian prose lies in the notable absence of significant literary production on the topic from the 1990s to the early 2010s (with the exception of Šinigoj's novel), as well as the virtual lack of critical engagement with it in literary

scholarship. In issue 29 of the symposium journal *Obdobja* (2010), only two novels are mentioned – Hočevar's *Šolen z brega* and Goran Vojnović's *Čefurji raus!* (which focuses on the lives of “Balkan”⁴ immigrants in Ljubljana's suburbs) – and even then, in discussions unrelated to transition or the Yugoslav wars. The theme of post-socialism and transition is briefly addressed in articles such as “Postsocialistični in tranzicijski smeh – Slovenska komedija po letu 1991, izbrani primeri” [*Post-socialist and Transitional Laughter – Slovenian Comedy after 1991, Select Examples*] by Nataša Gaši and Denis Poniž, and “The Subject and National Ideological Paradigms within the Post-Communist Context (in Möderndorfer's Novel *Predmestje*)” by Tomislav Zagoda. The former examines theatre production during the transitional period; the latter analyses Vinko Möderndorfer's *Predmestje* (2002), a novel about everyday life in Ljubljana's suburbs and the coexistence of Slovenes and non-Slovenes.

In the article “Sodobni slovenski zgodovinski roman: visoko (elitno) in (množično) trivialno” [*Contemporary Slovenian Historical Novel: High (Elite) and (Mass) Trivial*] by Nadežda Starikova, no works dealing with the 1991 war or transition are mentioned – despite the known existence of such texts. Yet, one intriguing sentence stands out:

In the first years following independence, Slovenian literature expressed the need to re-establish the national status, for which the historical novel⁵ proved to be an appropriate genre. There was marked interest in biographical material that offered an image of Slovenes as bearers of a high national, and at times even European, mission. (Starikova 2010: 306)

Starikova's words suggest that themes such as transition were not in line with the dominant literary trends or with the ideological framework of Slovenian nation building during the 1990s. What was required was a rediscovery of Slovenian historical figures from the pre-Yugoslav past and a forgetting of the Yugoslav experience and all things “Balkan.” After gaining independence, Slovenia sought to distance itself from the other former Yugoslav republics and to align itself more closely with Europe – portraying itself, in some narratives, as even morally superior to (Western) Europe (Lindstrom 2003: 317). A similar phenomenon could be seen in nineties' Croatia. As Orlanda Obad and Petar Bagarić assert, Croatian politicians insisted on the notion of Croatia as a bulwark defending Christianity and Western Europe from the East (2024: 333). Similarly to Slovenia, the idea of Croatia as “more advanced and adjusted to the ‘Western culture and civilization’ than its South-Eastern neighbors” was (and still is) present (ibid.: 335). However, going back to Slovenia, a shift in critical discourse has become increasingly evident in recent years (2021–2023), as a growing number of literary scholars have undertaken more systematic and

⁴ The story takes place in the working-class neighbourhood of Fužine, Ljubljana, where most inhabitants come from former Yugoslav republics such as Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Macedonia. The protagonist himself is of Bosnian-Serb descent (as is the author of the novel).

⁵ Some examples of Slovenian historical novels during the nineties are, as Starikova says, *Jutro ob kresu. Povest o Adamu Ravbarju, slovenskem vitezu* (Ivan Sivec, 1993), *Maranatha ali leto 999* (Alojz Rebula, 1996) or *Zvenenje v glavi* (Drago Jančar, 1998) (Starikova 2010: 306).

nuanced examinations of the topic. These contributions have not only deepened the analytical engagement with transitional literature but have also introduced comparative perspectives that situate Slovenian prose within broader regional and transnational literary frameworks.

Speaking about *Obdobja*, in the 42nd issue (2023), Ivana Latković's article "Roman v tranziciji, tranzicija v romanu" examines how the social conditions of post-socialist transition have reshaped both the status of the novel and the ways Slovenian and Croatian prose written after 2000 deals with that very transformation. Following a reconstruction of the conceptual and semantic ambiguities inherent in the term transition,⁶ Latković proceeds to trace the novel's transformation from a privileged site of modernist cultural production into a fully commodified literary form. This shift is situated against the backdrop of post-socialist contradictions, in which the rhetoric of modernisation is starkly juxtaposed with processes of peripheralisation, socio-economic precarisation, and the resurgence of ethno-nationalist paradigms. The ensuing commercialisation opens the field to popular sub-genres such as crime and romance, whose mimetic impulse delivers "communicative and accessible" stories that both reflect and co-produce transition narratives (Latković 2023: 180). Latković's analysis identifies two distinct narrative tendencies: while contemporary Croatian novels tend to foreground themes such as scandal, corruption, and systemic violence, Slovenian prose more frequently situates the experience of transition within the framework of intimate, personal narratives. This divergence – already observed in the article – underscores the varying degrees to which national literatures engage with the socio-political realities of the post-socialist condition. The Croatian context, in this case, becomes an important element of comparison, as it can provide interesting interpretations, points of view and approaches that are lacking in the Slovenian one, as the two countries are characterised by geographical proximity, a common Yugoslav past and similar discourses used both in politics and in everyday life.

In her article, Latković quoted an important monography written in 2021 by Tomo Virk, *Pod Prešernovo glavo*. Virk extensively analyses the relationship between literature and societal changes – especially after the post-socialist transition – in Slovenia, underlining the fact that throughout history the Slovenian literary system was not only subordinated to the demands of aesthetic or artistic excellence, but was also committed to the nation-preservation, nation-constitutive and national-defence function (Virk 2021: 48). While this may appear to stand in contrast to the more recent narrative tendencies observed in the works of Bauk, Pregelj, and Kolar, it is important to note – as Virk aptly observes, thereby corroborating claims already

⁶ "Že samo poimenovanje tega obdobja kot tranzicijskega, postsocialističnega, poosamosvojitvenega ipd. ne kaže le na nelagodno položaj sočasnosti nastajajočega in njegovega znanstvenega opisa, temveč tudi omahljivost pri aranžiranju raziskovalnih predpostavk in razumevanju tistega, kar zajemajo. Tako je npr. neredko poudarjeno, da je sam pojem tranzicija preveč fluiden in neprecizen, saj se po eni strani nanaša na "nenaden pojav",¹ ki "sproti ustvarja svojo zgodbo" (Prca 2010: 485); 2 po drugi strani pa tudi v praktičnem smislu kaže na svoja inherentna protislovja, ki izhajajo iz "gesla 'modernizacije', 'stabilizacije', 'normalizacije' in 'liberalizacije'", hkrati pa "smo pričla gospodarski periferizaciji, družbeni fragmentaciji, pavperizaciji, vzponu etnonacionalizma, klerikalizacije in retradicionalizacije" (Veselinović, Atanacković, Klarić 2011: 2) (Latković 2023: 178).

articulated in this paper – that the literary developments in Slovenia following independence remain insufficiently theorised and critically systematised. This lack of comprehensive scholarly engagement significantly complicates any attempt to delineate clear literary-historical trajectories or to assess the broader cultural implications of post-independence narrative production.

Koroman (2020) states that, as historical events such as the transitional process in former Yugoslav countries lead to (societal and political) disagreements, “it is therefore very challenging for literary historians to approach their basic material – texts that produce an image of the nineties period, or rather the representation of the nineties in fictional universes with a mimetic impulse” (Koroman 2020: 197). Although Koroman’s analysis is situated within the Croatian context,⁷ its insights are clearly transferable to the Slovenian case, where comparable dynamics can be observed in the treatment of post-socialist transition and its narrative representations, and where there has been an open distancing to the Yugoslav past (Razsa and Lindstrom 2004), as well as to topics such as the “Erased” (Virk 2021),⁸ as mentioned before.

A pertinent methodological question arises regarding how to approach a literary phenomenon that has been addressed in ways that are both thematically polarised and narratively partially inconsistent. As outlined in the introduction to this paper, a combined narratological and cultural memory framework will be employed to examine the selected novels. While this dual approach proves productive in analysing the works of Bauk and Pregelj, it appears less adequate for Kolar’s *Glas noči*, which necessitates a distinct analytical lens. Specifically, a Marxist theoretical framework informed by the Lukácsian and Morettian conceptualisations of the novelistic hero proves more appropriate. In this view, the protagonist is understood as an alienated individual, estranged from the social totality yet engaged in a search for meaning within it (Lukács 1999 [1914]). Simultaneously, as Moretti (1987; 2013) argues, the hero’s trajectory may gesture toward compromise and eventual integration into society, thereby reproducing the bourgeois ideal of social reconciliation. This theoretical model, while particularly pertinent to Kolar’s text, can also be fruitfully extended to Bauk’s *Konec. Znova*, enriching the interpretive scope of the analysis as a whole.

Before analysing the novels, it is essential to contextualise them within the historical, political, cultural, and societal framework they engage with – a task to which the following section is devoted.

⁷ Croatian literature has extensively addressed the theme of transition, as have Croatian literary historians (see for example Koroman 2018, Gajin 2020, Kolanović 2008 and Kolanović 2011).

⁸ Tomo Virk observes that the literary and scholarly engagement with the issue of the “Erased” emerged relatively late within Slovenian literature and criticism, largely mirroring the broader societal delay in confronting this topic. As he notes, both writers and literary historians were initially preoccupied with the broader challenges of the post-socialist transition, which tended to overshadow more contentious or marginalised questions of civil and human rights (Virk 2021: 156).

“Janez wants self-affirmation”: Slovenia between independence and transition

Pankrti, without any doubt the most successful Slovenian punk-rock band, in their 1980 album *Dolgcajt* (“Boredom”), more precisely in the song *Totalna revolucija* (“Total Revolution”), sing: “Totalna revolucija za njega ni rešitev, Janez kurbin sin hoče samopotrditev” (“The total revolution for him is not a solution, Janez the motherfucker wants self-affirmation”). Functioning as a conceptual through-line in studies of the Slovenian 1980s and 1990s, the sentence also serves as a pointed reflection of the declining faith in Yugoslav unity and socialism during Slovenia’s late-socialist and pre-independence years (Ošlak-Gerasimov 2014: 76, 126).

The death of Tito set in motion a series of events that severely threatened the stability of the Yugoslav state. The lavish lifestyle of the late Head of State, along with massive investments in infrastructure, industry, and the military – made possible through loans from foreign banking institutions – further entrenched Yugoslavia in the vicious cycle of an economic crisis that showed no signs of abating (Pirjevec 1993: 466). Between March and April 1981, violent student protests erupted in Kosovo, soon escalating into widespread unrest demanding that Kosovo be recognized as a republic (at the time, Kosovo held only the status of an autonomous province within the Socialist Republic of Serbia). The government responded with military force, deploying the army to suppress the uprisings (ibid.: 470). In 1983, the relentless crisis compelled Prime Minister Milka Planinc to implement an economic stabilisation plan, which introduced strict austerity measures, including the rationing of food, electricity, and petrol.

This clearly led to a widespread dissatisfaction with the economic and political situation in Slovenia, the richest and most developed republic in the Yugoslav framework. One of the earliest and most well-known signs of the Slovenian desire for a split was, in fact, a tourist advertisement from the 1980s. Green, sunlit meadows, picturesque mountain roads, smiling farmers in Alpine attire, and a large sign reading, in several languages, “Welcome – Slovenia.” *Slovenija, moja dežela* (“Slovenia, my land”) was the title of this renowned tourism campaign which, from 1983 until the end of the decade, sparked a sense of pride among Slovenes. Through it, these Alpine Slavs expressed a growing disinterest in the Yugoslav unitarist discourse (Starč 2006: 279).

The Slovenian path to independence was marked by escalating political tensions with the federal centre in Belgrade, followed by the events of the 14th Extraordinary Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (SKJ) in 1990, held at the Sava Centre in Belgrade, where the Slovenian delegation of the League of Communists of Slovenia (SKS) walked out of the congress. Soon after, the paramilitary Manoeuvr Structure of National Protection (Manevrska struktura narodne zaščite in Slovene) was established – the embryonic form of what would later become the Slovenian Armed Forces.

Between June and July 1991, this process culminated in a brief conflict known as the Ten-Day War, during which the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) suffered a

humiliating defeat. In the aftermath of the war, the so-called “Erased” (*izbrisani*) emerged as a significant issue: approximately 200,000 residents of Slovenia born in other Yugoslav republics were required to formally apply for Slovenian citizenship. However, due to a deliberate lack of adequate information, just over 18,000 individuals lost their citizenship and their legal right to reside in Slovenia (Zorn 2004: 2). The “Erased” have come to be regarded as one of the most egregious examples of ethnic discrimination against so-called “Balkan people” in Slovenia.

One of the principal goals in Slovenia was to distance itself from the Balkans, perceived as a primitive, intolerant, and uncultured space. Nevertheless, following the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995, Slovenian foreign policy increasingly focused on the Balkans as a zone for economic expansion (Lindstrom 2003: 320–322). There is, however, little doubt that Slovenia remains the most successful (economically speaking) post-Yugoslav state.

Slovenia’s transition was, in fact, a swift and almost immediate phenomenon. Slovenians, who had long yearned throughout the 1980s for a state of their own, finally achieved their goal following a short military conflict – and simply moved on.

While Slovenia was transitioning to a system diametrically opposed to the Yugoslav socialist model – embracing capitalist and pro-European ideals that, among other objectives, sought to promote the image of Slovenia as a kind of “little Switzerland,”⁹ a paradise at the foot of the Alps – a considerable portion of the younger population was simultaneously experiencing the consequences of such abrupt changes.

In their study “Growing-up Slovenia in the Nineties”, Mirjana Ule and Tanja Renner highlight several outcomes of Slovenia’s adaptation to liberal capitalism. Firstly, for young people, this transition entailed the disappearance of alternative subcultures as collectivist phenomena (Ule and Renner 2000: 187). Secondly, it marked the first time that youth were confronted with the social challenges of capitalism and with the emergence of two distinct categories: “winners” and “losers” (*ibid.*: 181).

The extent to which the already mentioned historical and sociological developments have shaped contemporary Slovenian youth literature will be examined in the following section, which offers a focused analysis of the novels by Bauk, Pregelj, and Kolar.

“Is it beautiful to be young in our country?”: nation building in Slovenian literature

In the previous paragraph, reference was made to the Ljubljana-based punk band Pankrti and their song *Totalna revolucija*. Within the Yugoslav context, Slovenia was arguably the most advanced republic, both economically and culturally. It is the latter dimension that is of particular relevance to the present analysis. In the second

⁹ This term was used by Riccardo Illy, the president of the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia during a 2004 speech (Velikonja 2005: 28).

half of the 1970s, Slovenia emerged as the primary locus of the Yugoslav punk movement. Although the Rijeka-based band Paraf was formed as early as 1975, the first officially recognized punk act in Yugoslavia took place in Ljubljana the following year with the founding of the aforementioned Pankrti.

Punk in Slovenia emerged as both a prolific and influential cultural movement, with dynamic scenes developing not only in major urban centres, but also in smaller towns, some of which gained visibility at the republic-wide level. Slovenian punk collectives were arguably among the most radical and confrontational within the broader Yugoslav punk milieu. Benefiting from a relatively permissive sociopolitical environment – at least in comparison to other Yugoslav republics – Slovenian punks engaged in explicit critiques of state institutions and ideologies, systematically subverting and provoking the normative frameworks of socialist everyday life.

In 1982, a must-have for the Yugoslav punk lovers was published by the TV Ljubljana record label ZKP RTVL – the compilation *Lepo je... v naši domovini biti mlad*. This project brought together various smaller punk bands, primarily from the Ljubljana underground scene and smaller towns such as Idrija and Metlika. The compilation's title references a well-known song once sung by Tito's Pioneers in Slovenia: *Lepo je v naši domovini biti mlad* ("It's beautiful to be young in our homeland"). This ironic invocation functions as a clear provocation, especially considering that the album's tracks address themes such as police violence, ideological indoctrination, alcoholism, and hostile working conditions – issues sharply contrasting the official narrative of socialist youth idealism.

While individual experiences of youth in 1980s Yugoslavia vary with regard to whether it was 'beautiful' to be young in one's homeland, it is indisputable that Slovenia fostered a vibrant youth subcultural scene. Initially perceived as a threat to the ideals of Yugoslav socialist self-management, these subcultures gradually gained substantial support from the Slovenian Communist Party and the Slovenian League of Socialist Youth during the 1980s (Tomc 2020: 187; Pirjevec 2020: 200). Moreover, the Slovenian punk and alternative scenes were among the protagonists of the protests against the Yugoslav government during the late eighties, which led directly to Slovenian independence in 1991 (Spaskovska 2017: 149).

It is equally evident that during the 1990s, as noted earlier in this paper, the youth subculture scene experienced a significant decline, confronting new challenges including economic and social uncertainty, alongside increased hostility from the emerging political establishment (Ule and Renner 2000). Moreover, the young Slovenes' (including those that were not a part of a specific subculture movement) positive expectations during the late eighties regarding the upcoming nineties were met not only with unreadiness (Ule and Mihelj 1995), but also with broken promises. The mentioned "Slovenia = little Switzerland" rhetoric did not lead to concrete results. The only, actual result of Slovenia distancing itself from its former Yugoslav cousins was the "Erased" affair.

Interestingly, such tendencies have seen a change of direction. As Spaskovska notes, the Balkan/Yugoslav stigmatization has been abandoned in Slovenia, which

has led not only to positive reinterpretations of the Yugoslav past, but also to an openly expressed Yugo-nostalgia (Cf. Spaskovska 2017). This applies especially to that part of Slovenian youth that was born after the breakup of Yugoslavia¹⁰ and that has been exposed to pop-culture products and iconography of the former country (ibid.: 143–144). Older generations, born in socialist Yugoslavia, might not be as Yugo-nostalgic as their younger counterparts, but are critical of the present (ibid.: 144–145). For the latter case, it could be possible to state that Yugoslavia and Yugo-nostalgia have become a way to criticize the mistakes which have been made during the nineties.

The phenomena outlined above are particularly evident in three novels mentioned earlier: *Konec. Znova* by Dino Bauk, *V Elvisovi sobi* by Sebastijan Pregelj, and *Glas noči* by Kazimir Kolar, which will be the focus of the following analysis.

“There’s no such thing as a rock nation”: *Konec. Znova* by Dino Bauk

Bauk’s *Konec. Znova* articulates a distinctly generational critique of Slovenian transition by foregrounding the fragmentation of youth solidarity under post-socialist conditions. The novel’s epistolary structure enables a retrospective reassembly of lives dislocated by both systemic violence – most notably the “Erased” – and the ideological recoding of collectivity as liability. Denis, a Serbian-born youth and one of the “Erased”, functions as a mnemonic figure whose physical removal from Slovenia coincides with the expulsion of Yugoslav memory from the emergent national imaginary. Denis’s case leads to various, interesting elements that need to be analysed in detail.

Firstly, although Virk has criticised Bauk’s treatment of the “Erased” issue – arguing that, despite the author’s attempt to “exploit the positive ethical potential of literature” (Virk 2021: 159), the representation remains “superficial” and “too simplified and moralising” (ibid.) – the character of Denis nonetheless introduces a compelling dimension to the narrative, particularly with regard to the function and mobilisation of memory. When saying that “rock’n’roll has failed” and that “there’s no such a thing as a rock nation that could remain neutral” (Bauk 2015: 190), suggesting that rock has lost its battle against a world of divisions and war, Denis directly contrasts the edulcorated narrative about Yugoslav New wave/rock subcultures.¹¹ Taking into account Assmann, Denis’s character encompasses the contrast between the concept of communicative and cultural memory (Cf. Assmann 2011), in this case related to the Yugo-nostalgic feelings of his friends and the violence of the nineties’ transition. While Mary, for example, Denis’s love interest from the United States, expresses nostalgia for Yugoslavia, claiming that its youth were happier than their Western counterparts – a reversal of dominant Cold War narratives and an implicit challenge to

¹⁰ More precisely, when talking about post-Yugoslav Yugo-nostalgic youth, Spaskovska uses the term “armchair nostalgia,” defined as “a type of nostalgic drive that exists without any lived experience of the yearned-for time” (Spaskovska 2017: 142).

¹¹ Tomo Virk stated that the Yugo-nostalgic element and the references to the Yugoslav music scene in the eighties has led to positive reviews from the critics and public (Virk 2021: 159).

Western exceptionalism (Cf. Spaskovska 2008) – Denis’s final letter functions as a counter-discursive act, because, as stated before, rock’n’roll failed to gather the youth against the war and the youth let itself be included in the wartime machinery. Thus, through Denis’s (and Mary’s) words it is possible to confirm the fact that literature is a medium that reshapes cultural memory (Erl 2011: 148). Moreover, Denis’s letter clearly contrasts with Slovenia’s linear narrative of democratic progress.

The other two protagonists, Peter and Goran, encompass respectively the Lukácsian and the Morettian hero, who, as opposed to Denis, but not to Mary, claim to feel nostalgic for the lost youth in Yugoslavia. Peter, now a civil servant, criticizes the “Alpine paradise” (Bauk 2015: 161) dream of Slovenian independence as a neoliberal farce bought at the cost of human dignity. Peter is completely alienated in the transitional bourgeois Slovenia, having lost his rocker and Yugoslav identity, but he is still able to confront his condition and the one of his friend Goran, which is in accordance with the Lukácsian concept of the novel as “virile maturity” (Lukács 1999 [1914]: 63). Goran, portrayed as a self-made man, initially celebrates his personal and economic success; however, he ultimately reveals a profound sense of loneliness and a nostalgic attachment to the past. He can be interpreted as a Morettian protagonist who, having undergone a process of self-formation and social negotiation, arrives at a position of uneasy and less successful compromise (Moretti 1987: 9) with bourgeois, capitalist society.¹²

Through these interwoven voices, Bauk stages youth subjectivity as a site where memory, ideology, and social structure collide. The narrative form – structured through personal letters and retrospective focalisation – corresponds to Bal’s narratological model, where the interplay between *fabula*, *story*, and *text* produces meaning beyond plot (Bal 1997). The novel’s intimate tone and perspectival shifts mediate the unprocessed trauma of the “Erased” and the ideological emptiness of post-socialist capitalism.

“Now I know what I feared when I was in Macedonia”: *V Elvisovi sobi*
by Sebastijan Pregelj

In *V Elvisovi sobi* (“In Elvis’s Room”) by Sebastijan Pregelj, the narrative approach to themes such as socio-political transition and nation-building in Slovenia – particularly from a youth perspective – differs markedly from that found in Bauk’s *Konec. Znova*. While *Konec. Znova* engages with multiple, often non-linear recollections and elaborations of the past, presenting a structurally complex but clearly delineated narrative of memory, Pregelj’s depiction of coming of age, embodied in the character of Jan, adopts a more introspective and evolving trajectory. As Ana Rakovec notes, Jan’s memories are initially conveyed from a child’s viewpoint and gradually become more fragmented as the narrative progresses, while he

¹² Though in this case *bourgeois* and *capitalist* are to be identified as a single, equal term due to the context that is being analysed, Moretti clearly states that: “there is no necessary identification of *bourgeois*...with *capitalist*” (Moretti 2013: 2).

matures during the final years of socialist Yugoslavia. This narrative shift reflects a broader transition from individual to collective memory (Rakovec 2024: 117). The novel follows Jan's coming of age in Ljubljana from the 1980s through the 1990s, charting the collapse of an idealised Yugoslav childhood and the disintegration of a shared political imaginary. His brief involvement in the Ten-Day War and the death of his Muslim friend Elvis – who joins jihadist forces in Bosnia fighting alongside the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina – mark the personal toll of geopolitical rupture and the generational disillusionment wrought by the collapse of Yugoslavia.

Aljoša Harlamov says in the postface¹³ to *V Elvisovi sobi* that “There was youth and there was a Country that are no more – but the novel talks about them” (Pregelj 2019: 301). Pregelj's narrative is deeply rooted in a recollective mode that foregrounds the experience of growing up in socialist Yugoslavia. Jan's memories are saturated with references not only to the ideological and institutional frameworks of the socialist system,¹⁴ but also to its distinctive pop-cultural landscape. Despite that, Pregelj's recalling of the pop-cultural element, while causing nostalgic feelings in Jan, it is not comparable, for example, to Bauk's narration. Pregelj's eighties are not conceived as a medium to convey nostalgia, but, as Harlamov underlines, as a symbolic representation of the last years of Yugoslavia as a socialist federation (ibid.: 296), as does the death of Jan's friend Elvis.

The novel also differs from Bauk's *Konec. Znova* in the narrative choices and in the elaboration of the past. Pregelj's protagonist is partly an autodiegetic narrator, being both the subject and the voice of the described facts (Genette 1980: 245), but without a fixed narrating perspective across the novel, thus being also – and mostly – homodiegetic (ibid.: 244–245). Throughout the novel, his perspective is the only one that is taken into account. Moreover, the narration is synchronous with the age and consciousness of the protagonist, which results in a lack of elaboration of the past from, for example, an adult perspective.

Pregelj's partly intimate approach to Slovenian transition (Cf. Latković 2023) is accompanied by more specific (in contrast to Bauk) recalling and mentioning of the most important facts that characterised the breakup of Yugoslavia. Particularly important is the scene where Jan – while serving the Yugoslav People's Army in Macedonia between 1989 and 1990 amidst the political tensions between Ljubljana and Belgrade – is discriminated by an officer due to his nationality, along with a Croat serving with him, as they are considered possible traitors. When the officer says “For six months you have been trained by the best officers of the Yugoslav army. I wonder what we will get from that. Maybe in a few months we will look at each other from

13 While Harlamov's postface doesn't change in the original Slovenian version of the novel, the version quoted (and translated) here refers to the Italian edition of *V Elvisovi sobi*.

14 Pregelj included scenes regarding political indoctrination, such as the one where the protagonist says that “Tito's watching us” (Pregelj 2019: 53) or the one where, after Tito's death, the protagonist says: “*Our Tito has died*, it's written on the blackboard when, on Monday morning, I enter the classroom. I already know everything. Mom and dad told me. They told me so that I would understand, but then I had to repeat some things with them. ‘So that you can remember’ said dad, ‘and so that you don't let some idiocy slip out’” (ibid.: 49).

opposite sides”, Jan’s response is simply “I do not understand” (Pregelj 2019: 238), suggesting that Jan is still mostly unaware of the reasons behind the ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia. When Jan is eventually called upon to fight for Slovenia, the ensuing armed conflict – the Ten-Day War – is portrayed in starkly anti-heroic terms. Rather than engaging in dramatic or valorised combat, Jan’s experience is marked by monotonous marches through the Slovenian countryside and passive sieges of Yugoslav Army barracks. The war is thus stripped of any romantic or nationalistic glorification, and instead presented as a disillusioning episode, reflective of the broader ambivalence surrounding the formation of the new nation-state. With the conclusion of the war, Jan is overcome by a profound sense of disorientation and inner conflict. The disintegration of Yugoslavia has resulted not only in the loss of a shared state but also in the fragmentation of personal relationships – most poignantly exemplified by the death of his friend Elvis, who came from another Yugoslav republic. Jan’s emotional turmoil reflects a broader crisis of postwar subjectivity: while the newly independent Slovenia seeks to distance itself from the violence and fragmentation that marked the Yugoslav wars, Jan finds himself unable to suppress the memory of those traumas. His individual mourning stands in stark contrast to the emergent national narrative, which appears intent on silencing or marginalising the broader Yugoslav tragedy in the process of constructing a coherent, forward-looking Slovenian identity.

While Jan is unable to properly elaborate the national trauma of the war and of the post-socialist transition, as he seeks refuge in memories to forget the uncertainty of present times (ibid.: 286–291), it is clear that this recollection contrasts with Slovenian cultural memory about its independence from Yugoslavia. Slovenian cultural memory – intended as an institutionalised and canonised memory (Assmann 2011) – as in other contexts (such as the Croatian one), tends to insist on the heroic and successful character of Slovenia’s transition to democracy, but Pregelj’s narration, as remarked before, gives a different perspective of it, showing not only unheroic scenes, but also the presence of a considerable lack of confidence regarding the future and identity. Remembering the youth in socialist Yugoslavia, as Spaskovska underlines, is a retrospective projection of the “good old times” before the breakup (Spaskovska 2008: 143).

In relation to the aforementioned Lukácsian and Morettian frameworks, these interpretative lenses partially overlap throughout the narrative. While the protagonist initially appears to secure a position within the emergent democratic and capitalist order – consistent with Moretti’s model of social integration – it remains significant to note that, by the novel’s conclusion, he persists in his existential displacement, reflecting Lukács’s notion of enduring alienation.

Overall, akin to Bauk, Pregelj engages in the reconstruction of cultural memory, albeit through a more nuanced and critically reflective lens, thereby contesting the dominant narratives promulgated by Slovenian political and military institutions.

“This is a country of barbarians”: *Glas noči* by Kazimir Kolar

Kazimir Kolar’s *Glas noči* (“The Voice of the Night”) presents a markedly distinct narrative approach to post-socialist Slovenian society. *Glas noči* unfolds as a fractured, stream-of-consciousness monologue in which the unnamed narrator’s descent into insomnia, paranoia, and delirium becomes a structural embodiment of post-socialist disorientation. The novel resists conventional narrative development, offering instead a claustrophobic account of interior collapse, where references to the Yugoslav wars, the Slovenian transition, and socialism surface only as spectral traces – unprocessed, deferred, or distorted.

Kolar’s autodiegetic protagonist, in contrast to those of Bauk and Pregelj, represents a distinctly post-transitional figure, as his narrative unfolds well after Slovenia’s independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. As a result, references to the Yugoslav past and the 1990s appear in a fragmented and mediated manner, predominantly through the recollections and perspectives of others. Nevertheless, these retrospective glimpses continue to shape the sociocultural and affective landscape of the present.

When confronted by the school principal following an incident in his classroom, the depressed protagonist Kazimir is reminded by the same principal that, although the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent loss of employment had a profound and lasting impact on his life (Kolar 2016: 70), he ultimately managed to persevere. The principal asserts that “pain makes you strong” (*ibid.*), and that Kazimir himself must resist and react.

This episode resonates with Ule and Renner’s (2000) analysis of transitional adolescence in Slovenia, wherein young people were compelled to navigate a rapidly changing social landscape structured around binary distinctions between “winners” and “losers”. Adolescent and almost-adult Kazimir (during the narration he is in his late twenties) clearly struggles to find a way to adapt in post-socialist society, stuck between the European and capitalist-oriented Slovenian society and the past collective traumas of his fellow nationals.

Moreover, Kazimir is not only estranged from collective identity, historical consciousness, or ideological community – he is estranged from language itself, trapped in a recursive interiority marked by compulsive thought and broken syntax. This is not merely the depiction of a fractured world but a world without form, where narration becomes the stage for the subject’s failure to mediate between self and history. Kolar’s protagonist embodies the Lukácsian figure of the “homeless” hero (*cf.* Lukács 1999 [1914]), a subject estranged from a coherent social totality and disoriented in his search for belonging. Kazimir’s trajectory, however, also gestures toward the Morettian model of the modern protagonist, as he attempts to integrate into the social fabric through successive forms of employment. Yet each effort ends in failure, underscoring his persistent inability to situate himself meaningfully within the structures of the falsely perfectly working Slovenian post-transitional society.

Through Kolar’s depiction of Kazimir’s psychosis, Slovenia is portrayed not as the success story often cited in Western narratives of transition, but as a fractured society in which younger generations are left disoriented, unsupported by institu-

tions, and prone to despair. In this light, the novel becomes a critique of the post-independence social order, foregrounding the psychological toll of a society that fails to offer its citizens meaningful avenues for inclusion, purpose, or hope.

Conclusions

The novels analysed in this paper – *Konec. Znova* by Dino Bauk, *V Elvisovi sobi* by Sebastijan Pregelj, and *Glas noči* by Kazimir Kolar – demonstrate that contemporary Slovenian literature has developed narrative strategies capable of critically engaging with the ambivalences and contradictions of the country's transition from socialism to liberal democracy. Far from reinforcing dominant national myths, these works expose the disjunction between official narratives of success and the lived experiences of a generation shaped by ideological rupture, marginalisation, and post-socialist disillusionment.

The application of a dual theoretical framework – integrating narratology and cultural memory studies, with additional recourse to Marxist literary theory – has revealed how these texts formalise the crises of identity and meaning that accompanied the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation. Using autodiegetic and homodiegetic narration, retrospective focalisation, and fragmentary structures, the novels articulate youth subjectivities that remain in tension with Slovenia's canonical memory regime. The paper has shown that cultural memory in these texts is not simply preserved or reproduced, but critically reframed: Denis's letter in *Konec. Znova*, Jan's unresolved mourning in *V Elvisovi sobi*, and Kazimir's psychological implosion in *Glas noči* all challenge linear and celebratory narratives of national progress.

At the same time, the theoretical insights of Lukács and Moretti have illuminated the complex positioning of the protagonists within post-socialist Slovenian society. If Lukács's "homeless" hero and Moretti's socially integrated Bildungsroman figure appear in fragmented or incomplete forms, this reflects the novels' refusal to offer ideological reconciliation or a stabilised subject position. Instead, the protagonists' alienation, nostalgia, or paralysis signify a broader cultural condition in which meaning remains contested and historical memory unresolved.

Taken together, these texts attest to the capacity of literature to function as both a repository and a critique of transitional memory. They neither fully reject nor simply revive the Yugoslav past, but rather interrogate its spectral persistence in the lives of those who came of age during and after its collapse. In doing so, they offer not closure, but confrontation – with erasure, with loss, and with the burdens of a present haunted by unprocessed histories.

In this sense, Slovenian youth literature of the post-socialist period does more than portray generational trauma: it insists on the necessity of rethinking identity, community, and belonging beyond the limits imposed by national ideology. Its aesthetic interventions thus resonate beyond the Slovenian context, situating these texts within broader debates on memory, transition, and post-socialist subjectivity in East-Central Europe and the post-Yugoslav space.

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Sutra će biti sada. Analiza odnosa između izgradnje slovenske nacije devedesetih i mladih u suvremenoj slovenskoj književnosti

Ovaj rad analizira odnos između izgradnje nacije u Sloveniji tijekom 1990-ih i konstrukcije identiteta mladih kako su prikazani u suvremenoj slovenskoj književnosti. Usredotočujući se na tri romana – *Konec*. *Znova* Dina Bauka, *V Elvisovi sobi* Sebastijana Pregelja i *Glas noći* Kazimira Kolar – studija istražuje kako književni prikazi mladih kritički odražavaju i preoblikuju dominantne narative slovenskog prijelaza iz socijalizma u liberalnu demokraciju. Kombinirajući naratološki pristup i studije kulturnog pamćenja, uz potporu marksističke književne teorije, rad pokazuje kako ova djela destabiliziraju linearne prikaze nacionalnog napretka kroz fragmentiranu strukturu, nostalgične motive i prikaze otuđenih subjektivnosti. Protagonisti – obilježeni dezorijentiranošću, gubitkom ili šutnjom – naglašavaju generacijske napetosti i neobrađenu povijesnu traumu, nudeći protuarhiv službenom pamćenju. Na kraju, rad tvrdi da slovenska književnost za mlade ne djeluje samo kao kulturni odraz tranzicije nego i kao kritička intervencija u način na koji se postsocijalistički identitet, pamćenje i pripadnost iznova zamišljaju u književnom polju.

Ključne riječi: identitet, postsocijalizam, tranzicija, slovenski roman