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Translating War: The Yugoslavian Conflicts as Represented in the Novels The Night Council by Dževad Karahasan and Frozen Times by Anna Kim

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The Yugoslavian Wars have shaken the belief that the genocides of World War II would not be repeated in Europe. Wide discussions of the position of Peter Handke and his travelogues to Serbia have obscured the view of several other writers thematizing this bellicose conflict in the Balkans. In my paper I will analyse two of the less discussed texts: *The Night Council* (2006) by Bosnian-born writer Dzevad Karahasan, and *Frozen Times* (2008/2010) by Korean-born Anna Kim. Both novels approach the wars from an individualist perspective and describe the threatening and uncanny atmosphere more than actual fighting. As both writers have a so-called migrant background, the main focus of the paper will deal with the concept of cultural translation and how the war is translated on the intradiagetic level as well as on the extradiagetic level.

My paper is based on the discussion on *cultural translation* as it has been raised by the journal *Translation Studies* in 2009. According to Boris Buden and Stefan Novotny, the idea of *cultural translation* "opens up the problem of its intrinsic political meaning[1]". Exposing and theorizing political referents and priorities as social constructs has been taken from Homi Bhabha's 1988 essay "The Commitment of Theory", where he

highlighted that there is no such thing like a “unitary or homogeneous political object” in “some primordial, naturalistic sense” and emphasized their “historical and philosophical tension or cross-reference with other objectives[2]”. We know that Bhabha’s idea is based on Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Translator’s Task” (1923), where he denied the existence of a pure language and stressed that the relation between the word and its meaning differs in every language. As a result of this, the meaning a word has in one language cannot be exactly transferred into another one.

But, let us return to the contemporary debate and its implications for my paper: In particular, I will adapt two thoughts from the concept of Cultural Translation: In the first place, the idea of cultural units seen as processes and spaces which are anti-essentialist entities. In the second place, the idea that translation is not only a linguistic matter, “but […] a concept including all those processes which, by means of de- and re-contextualization, make communication between varied groups – be they linguistically, religiously, socially, generationally, or otherwise defined – and different traditions of discourse possible[3]”. This corresponds with Doris Bachmann-Medick’s non-dichotomizing model of translation, which refers to the mutuality of the process of translation as well as to the conviction that translation is a constant process. Every translation is a translation of something that has been already translated. In this process without beginning or end, overlapping, and belonging to more than one cultural context at one and the same time hinder clear directions of translation[4].

I apply this idea of anti-essentialist cultural units and the idea of the translation of traditions and discourses in two novels published in Germany and Austria: Dzevad Karahasan’s *The Night Council (Der nächtliche Rat*, 2006) and Anna Kim’s *Frozen Time (Die gefrorene Zeit*, 2008/2010)[5]. Both novels can be seen as translations of the Yugoslavian Wars into the German speaking countries. They do not describe battles, but rather take a very individualist point of view and tell the story of the war from the perspective of a single character.

Karahasan is one of the most influential contemporary Bosnian writers and a scholar who has been teaching at the drama department of the University of Sarajevo for many years. During the battles of Sarajevo, he was trapped in the city before could finally escape to Germany and Austria. Since the war, he has been living in his hometown as well as in the city of Graz in Austria. Therefore, he fulfills the pivotal requirement on a translator, who should have profound knowledge of the cultures he is translating between.

In this novel, Bosnian-born Simon Michailovic has been living in Berlin, married to his German wife Barbara and having a grownup son. After 25 years, he returns to his hometown Foča in the Republica Srpska. It is late 1991, and his father's house and the whole city turn quickly hostile: Inside the house, the temperature is getting terribly cold – out in the city, the police suspect him of a series of murders which started the very day he arrived.

By setting his novel in this city of about 12,000 inhabitants, located on the river Drina, at the eve of the outbreak of the Bosnian war, Karahasan makes reference to the ferocious history of the city. Again and again, Bosniaks had been victims of ethnic violence: During World War II, anti-communist Serbian Chetniks killed thousands of Muslims; in May and June of 1943, the Yugoslavian Partisan Force under Josip Broz Tito successfully resisted the Axis forces in the battle of Sutjeska, which itself has been turned into a symbol of the liberation of Yugoslavia. During the Bosnian war from 1992 on, Foča turned into a symbol of crime against humanity committed by the Serbian army, police, and paramilitary units: mass murder, ethnic cleansing, mass rape, and the intended destruction of buildings[6].

In contrast with Karahasan, Korean born Anna Kim immigrated to Austria as a child and does not have personal experience in the Kosovo war. She did conduct serious research on the topic in order to write her novel. It tells the story of a young refugee from Kosovo living and working in Vienna. He searches for his wife abducted during the war and is getting help by a non-profit organization. Finally her human remains are found in a mass grave, identified by DNA-analysis. However, this is no release for the protagonist, but takes the meaning of his life away, and he commits suicide.

In my analysis, I'm primarily interested in how the writers reveal cultural translation in their narrations, and the functions of the protagonists in this context. In a broader frame, I have a keen interest in understanding how the texts translate the Yugoslavian Wars into the German speaking countries and how they activate cultural memory on wars more generally. In Karahasan's novel, these questions are raised in several ways: firstly, through the relationship between Simon Michalovic and his wife and son, secondly through the relationship between the protagonist and the inhabitants of his birthplace in Bosnia-Hercegovina; thirdly, the writer Dzevad Karahasan himself is an important transmitter between Muslim and Western European philosophy and fiction. A forth point of interest would be the actual translation, but due to my insufficient knowledge of the Bosnian language, this analysis has do be done by someone else.

By returning to his birthplace, Simon strengthens his connections with his deceased father as well as with his son who stayed in Germany. In a letter to his son, Simon draws this line from his ancestors to his heir:

> Einer meiner leidenschaftlichsten Träume war, einen Sommer mit Dir in Foča zu verbringen. Wie habe ich mich danach gesehnt, Dich in mein Haus zu führen und es Dir zu übergeben. (p. 321)
> (Transl.) One of my most fervent dreams was to spend a summer with you in Foča. How I longed to bring you into my house and hand it over to you.

It is noteworthy that this letter was never sent to the son, who therefore never learns about his father's emotions and intentions. The letter only provides the reader with this information. He reaches neither the son, nor does he call his wife, although he attempts to do that several times.

Quotations like these reveal Simon's struggle to liaise between the two worlds. Simon can be seen as wrestling with those parts of a translation that cannot be transposed into another language, as raised by Buden/Novotny, Bachmann-Medick and other scholars in the field. Because Simon is not capable of explaining his intentions to his son, he wants him to see the place with his own eyes. What he does not include in his reflection is the fact, that even if the son would visit to Foča, he would need an interpreter, because he has never in his life been to his father's country of origin.

The novel makes references to conformity and deep understanding between people. For example, the protagonist is very eager to be in close physical and emotional connection with his wife and other people. The moment the couple met for the first time is described in a very romantic way as a kind of destiny, as a specific recognition in a Platonic way, which culminates in the following quotation:

> Sein Körper spürte die Nähe des Körpers, der für ihn bestimmt war. (p. 11)

> (Transl.) His body felt the closeness of the body, which was predetermined for him.

We can also understand the intercultural relationship between Simon and his German wife as a form of cultural translation on a physical level. In the moment that Simon enters the underworld of his house, at the end of the novel, Barbara feels the connection with her husband very strongly. The relationship between them is becomes transcendent, and physical closeness is no longer necessary for experiencing physical sensations (p. 332).
This form of physical-erotic experience can be seen as a metaphor for cultural translation in a wider sense, in particular if we think of cultural translation as a translation of cultural codes. It is interesting that this physical experience is not caused by Simon's actions, but by his friend's visit in Berlin. In this context the translation is very problematic, as Simon fails to get in personal touch with his wife or friends.
In relation with his former friends in Foča, the translation fails: Immediately after his arrival, Simon has the impression that everybody welcomes him, but soon thereafter notices a strong and unusual cold streaming from the basement in his house (p. 22). He gets the impression that the house may come alive and revolt against him (p. 99). Even his neighbour Ibrahim, initially Simon's best buddy who cared for the house in his absence, later warns him to leave Foča:

> Es gibt hier keine Bleibe und keine Existenz für gute Menschen, es gibt keine Hoffnung. (p. 90)

> (Transl.) Here is no place and no existence of good people, there is no hope for good people; there is no hope.

The house and the city gradually become more uncanny and threatening. When we read in the novel “Here, he was strange and home-grown at the same time” (p. 109), this illustrates exactly Doris Bachmann-Medick’s non-dichotomic model of cultural translation. The difference between Simon and his old friends and acquaintances is created by their varied experiences: Simon addresses people and thinks with the same emotions and the same tone he has known from the time he left the city, failing to reflect the fact that 25 years have passed and everybody has changed during this time. This dissonance points towards the process of cultural translation and places the translator in a Third Space in the meaning of Homi Bhabha. Through his migration, Simon has left his place of origin. By birth, he is one of them, but at the same time, he is an outsider, a stranger. He experiences much the same in Berlin. Simon belongs to both societies, but at the very same time, he is always the outsider who comes from somewhere else.

It is not surprising, that he is suspected of committing the series of murders in the city. Although the novel describes the tensions on the eve of the Bosnian wars, these murders symbolize the crimes committed during the Yugoslavian Wars. Also the brutality of their description recalls the camera work of war correspondents. The unsettling atmosphere of the novel becomes more obvious in the panoptical description of the police office Simon is brought for an interrogation:

> Er wußte nicht, was sich hinter welcher Tür verbarg, und konnte es auch jetzt nicht herausfinden, weil man die Schildchen mit den Namen der Angestellten und den Bezeichnungen der Dienststellen an den Türen entfernt hatte. (p. 60)

> (Transl.) He did not know what was hidden behind the doors, and he could not figure it out now, because somebody had removed the signs with the names of the employees and the names of the units from the doors.

These examples show very clearly that the translation fails on the intradiegetic level; Simon is not able to translate the situation in Bosnia to his wife and son, nor is it possible for him to gain the trust of the population of Foča. However, the uncanny atmosphere of the text can be seen as a cultural translation reminding the German reader of the ferocity of the Yugoslavian wars.

In the novel *Frozen Time*, Anna Kim's protagonist is obsessed by the search for his wife. The vague hope of finding her some day becomes the only meaning of his life. As the memory of her fades away, he constructs his imagination of her. Pain continues from the loss of his wife, but the memory of her gets smaller and smaller. As a result of the process, time is frozen the day his wife disappeared. His brain is caught in an infinite loop, and he looses any interest in the future. (p. 32-33)

Kim's protagonist has given up interest in the future and in the present. He is lost in a memory which he can't control. [Existing in a lost world,] his memory vanishes gradually. The question arises: What will happen after the memory vanishes completely? (p. 33) His memory is already defective, and he lacks the idea of something never existed in reality:

> Zu sagen, sie existiere nur als Gedanke, ist untertrieben, sie ist mehrere Gedanken, mehrere Gefühle gleichzeitig, sie ist Erinnerung, Vorstellung, und doch mehr als nur Erinnerung, Vorstellung. (p. 55-56)

> (Transl.) It would be an understatement to say that she only exists as a thought, she is several thoughts, several emotions at the same time, she is remembrance, idea, and yet more than remembrance, idea.

He remembers his wife more as a result of emotions, sounds, and mute images than from cognitive memory. He lost his identity the moment his wife disappeared; since he knows that she was killed, he looses the goal of his life – to find her. Anna Kim thus emphasizes

the constructive character of culture and memory; according to her, memory can consists of the idea of something that never has happened in reality. The man no longer knows if he really loved his wife, as long she was alive or he thinks she might be alive after the kidnapping. This uncertainty hinders him to reconstruct his own identity.

On the intradiegetic level, the protagonist, addressed by the first person narrator as "you" in the second person, fails completely as a translator. Even more than Simon in Dzevad Karahasan's novel, he is not able to translate his emotions to the first person narrator, the last person he is in contact with.

The analysis of *The Night Council* by Dzevad Karahasan and *Frozen Time* by Anna Kim deals with the disappearance of units emphasizing their "historical and philosophical tension or cross-reference with other objectives[7]", as raised by Bhabha. The collective of a city is contains political, religious, gender, and other diversity, which can always only allow a partial translatability.

It was the goal of my analysis to explain, in the frame of the concept of Cultural Translation, that the cultures displayed in the two novels (Berlin – Sarajevo, Vienna – Kosovo) are highly hybrid, and so are the protagonists. Simon Michailovic was a well-integrated Yugoslavian immigrant to Berlin at the time he returned to his hometown Foca. There, he suddenly is confronted with his Serbian-Bosnian heritage – a cultural identity that has gained much more power while he had lived abroad. On the eve of the outbreak of the Bosnian War, he is forced to decide for a single identity. That's exactly his problem: He is not able to translate between his worlds, he gets lost in translation by not being able to connect with the community of his former friends.

In a similar way, the protagonist in Anna Kim's novel *Frozen Time* looses his identity and his will to live between the region of his origin and Vienna. He is an example of a migrant who looses connection to his place of origin and then cannot connect with the new society. Living in his basement apartment is a metaphor for his complete separation from all human beings. The only contact he retains is the one with the first person narrator, the person working for the NGO searching for people still missing from the Yugoslavian Wars. However, even this contact cannot prevent the suicide of the protagonist.

Both novels illustrate the theoretical frame of this paper. They show similar situations where the reference to a certain place has lost it's clarity. Whereas the protagonists fail as translators on the intradiagetic level, the novels themselves function as translators of

the uncanny and threatening atmosphere of the war.

1 .

Boris Buden, Stefan Nowotny: “Cultural translation. An introduction to the problem”. In: *Translation Studies* 2/2 (2009), p. 196-219, p. 196.

2 .

Homi K. Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge 1994, p. 26-27.

3 .

Michael Rössner, Federico Italiano: „Translatio/n: An Introduction“. In: Dies. (Hg.): *Translatio/n. Narration, Media and the Staging of Differences.* Bielefeld: transcript 2012, p. 9-16, p. 10-12

4 .

Doris Bachmann-Medick: *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*. Reinbek: Rowohlt 2006, p. 238-283, p. 238-239.

5 .

English version, Ariadne-Press 2010.

6 .

One can imagine the scope of this genocide in the changes of the population: In 1991, the population of Foča consisted of 52 % Muslims and 45 % Serbs. By 2007, the number of Serbs had risen to 86 %, whereas the Muslims had decreased to 13 %. During the war, the government of the Republika Srpska turned Foča’s hall of partisans into a camp

where hundreds of Muslims were raped.

7 .

Homi K. Bhabha: *op. cit.*, p. 26-27.