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AND PLAYING ROOMS
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Virtual Balkans: Imagined Boundaries, Hyperreality and Playing Rooms

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1. Introduction: From hyperreality to VR

It is quite often remarked that the construction of ethnic or cultural boundaries is arbitrary. This arbitrariness is not open to debate. As a matter of fact, contemporary anthropologists regard the concept of a “nation” as something similar to the concept of “race” — namely, it is a concept with which some people do operate, but “in reality,” it has no “objective” meaning. This, of course, does not invalidate the fact that people do act based on their presuppositions and preconceptions which include ideas derived from this concept. Thus, even something that does not exist “in reality” can produce very serious and *real* consequences.¹

This positioning on either side of what some (or many) people regard as *real* is sometimes regarded by contemporary theorists as something that has to do with *hyperreality* (for example, see Eco 1986, Baudrillard 1995). Hyperreality is a reality constructed and artificial — but with the full awareness of the participants in this reality. It is a reality that *exists* while at the same time negating (or even denying) other realities, but the fact that the participants (and creators) are self-conscious of its artificiality opens numerous possibilities for paradoxes. Hyperreality is a place (or area, domain, field, etc.) where all the paradoxes meet and co-exist, side by side. The paradoxes are made obvious (apparent) through the media — and this is something

that clearly distinguishes the *hyperreal* from the end of the 20th century from the *surreal* or any similar concept. The media input enables people to see (and become aware of) themselves as others. The nature of contemporary technology (Netscape, film, TV, video) makes this imagery extremely widespread (especially in the “West”). It also makes all the paradoxes of the contemporary world more apparent.²

Both Virtual Reality (VR) and certain concepts (especially when it comes to boundaries, traditions, or *naming*) connected with Balkan politics present interesting examples of hyperreal constructions. VR is also known as “artificial reality,” “virtual worlds,” and is also taken to represent “a visual form of cyberspace.” According to Howard Rheingold (in *Virtual Reality*, 1991),

Virtual reality is the revolutionary technology that immerses you in a computer-generated world of your own making — a room, a city, an entire solar system, the interior of a human body. With the aid of computer gloves, a Star Wars helmet and some super-sophisticated software, you can now explore the uncharted territory of the human imagination with all your senses intact.

It is also seen as “a way for humans to visualize, manipulate and interact with computers and extremely complex data” (quoted in Isdale 1993³). It is my belief that *delineating places* in the Southeastern Europe can be related to this, insofar as it presents a way of visualizing, manipulating, and interacting with certain highly ritualized notions (such as “nation,” “history,” “tradition,” etc.) and extremely complex data. The trick is that these complex data are made to look simple and straightforward. To give three examples:

¹ Virilio (1997) argues that we are witnessing not the end of history, but the end of geography. VR has entered homes of millions of viewers of CBS, CNN, BBC and other major news networks with the latest NATO intervention in Yugoslavia.

² For the paradoxes related to space and time, see Virilio 1993.

³ This article also lists all the major books related to VR, so I will not attempt to list them here.

1.1. The Republic of Macedonia. For some quite extraordinary political reasons (some of which look as if they have been taken from Ionesco's "theater of the absurd"), Macedonia is faced with very specific problems: their neighbors claim that it doesn't exist. Albania claims (although unofficially) that the western part of the country (where the majority of ethnic Albanians live) should be given huge autonomy and probably eventually should be annexed to Albania itself. Serbia and Macedonia have some unresolved territorial disputes, and the majority of Serbs believe that Macedonians are just "Southern Serbs" (a term used during the Serbian occupation, between 1912 and 1941). Bulgaria claims that, while Macedonia as a country exists, Slav Macedonians do not, and that they are, basically, just Bulgarians who have not yet realized their "true" (that is to say, Bulgarian) identity. More recently, Bulgarian government has determined that there is actually a Bulgarian (and not Macedonian) ethnic minority in the northern Albania. Finally, Greece believes that Macedonia's close relations with Turkey⁴ pose a threat to Greece. This attitude is connected with the Greek denial of the existence of a Slav Macedonian minority⁵ in its northern province and the refusal to grant to this minority such basic rights as the use of its own (Macedonian) language.⁶

The Macedonian language is recognized as a distinctive South Slavic language by all the countries in the world *with the exception of its neighbors Greece and Bulgaria*. Because of Greek pressure (the northern Greek province is also called Macedonia), Macedonia was, in April 1993, admitted to the UN (and afterwards to other world organizations) only under a temporary (it is still in use now, in May 1999!) name: *Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*. It is still being referred to by this temporary name (or by the acronym FYROM) in official communications

⁴ Bulgaria and Turkey were the first two countries to recognize Macedonia under her constitutional name.

⁵ Helsinki Watch and other NGOs put the number of Slav Macedonians in this area between 15,000 and 50,000.

⁶ These issues are very much present in contemporary anthropology. A great controversy arose in 1996 when Cambridge University Press (at a very late stage and bypassing its own anthropology editorial board) refused to publish a book by Greek anthropologist Anastasia Karakasidou, dealing with the Slav Macedonian minority in northern Greece. Apparently, the publisher was afraid that this book might irate Greeks. (The book was eventually published by the University of Chicago Press.)

from the UN, EU, US, and other world organizations — but this term (and being referred to by it) almost all Macedonians find very offensive.

So, Macedonia is a new country that perhaps exists and it is inhabited by people claimed and at the same time denied by their neighbors. Macedonia not only provides some interesting examples for the concept of hyperreality — *it is hyperreal itself!*

1.2. The Republic of Slovenia. A sense of hyperreality exists for Slovenia as well, for it was throughout its history:

a country so thoroughly suspended between East and West, for so many centuries, that it actually disappeared. Or, to be more precise, it didn't appear at all — until the spring of 1991, that is. Slovenia's limbo within this East-West "twilight zone" — most recently, between the great Orwellian blocks of the century's second half — did nothing to lessen the struggles fought on her soil. (Hemingway's First World War novel *A Farewell to Arms*, which chronicles the carnage of the Socha Front, never once mentions Slovenia — despite being set almost entirely within the borders of the present-day republic.) Slovenia's obscurity on the global stage, the concomitant inconsequentiality of her fate, have made the Slovenes unconsciously attuned to historical and ideological pressure changes.

(Benson 1995: 83)

The attunement to changes has its limits. They become most obvious in the communication with their neighbors, on the political plane. Although most Slovenians would consider themselves as "civilized," this is not a view shared by their northern neighbors, in the Republic of Austria. Thus, as Slovenian cultural critic/ideologist/philosopher/psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek claimed in *The Guardian* in 1992, some European nations tend to regard their southern border as the border between "civilization" and "savagery." The southern border represents "the end of

the world as we know it” — it is where the “civilization” ends and where the “savagery” begins. This is the case with Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia.

Of course, no one denies that Slovenia *exists* (although there seem to be some problems with the *existence* of ethnic Slovenians in southwestern Austria), but it is quite interesting to see something (a country, a nation) arising out of nowhere. *Creatio ex nihilo* at its best.

1.3. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Another good example of hyperreality is the present state of FR Yugoslavia, which claims direct continuity with the (former) SFR Yugoslavia. The main problem of the present Yugoslavia is that it is founded on a constitution that was (on 27 April 1992) voted for by the Parliament representatives of the *former* Yugoslavia. They had no legal authority to vote for this Constitution, but they nevertheless did, and a strange new entity (a federation of Serbia and Montenegro) was born (Boskovic 1997b). By creating this new entity, Serb politicians (who dominate Yugoslavia) tried to establish a link with the mythical time of Serb history (when Serbia was great and respected by all – at least in their interpretation), while at the same time preserving what many people in Belgrade now remember as “the good old days” of communist Yugoslavia (jobs for everyone and enough money for survival).

The attitude of the international community towards this entity might be described as hyperreal as well – all the European countries established their embassies in Belgrade, but without formally recognizing this new state (which is not member of any of the international institutions – like the UN, IMF, World Bank, etc.). So maybe Yugoslavia exists, maybe not – it all depends on the circumstances.

2. VR in the Balkans

The software and specialized equipment for the VR (including Image generators, manipulation and control devices, Data Gloves and Head Mounted

Display [HMD]) helps create an environment where almost⁷ everything is possible. In the VR world, an individual is fully immersed into a world which he/she *feels and experiences as real or objective*. All the senses adjust to this. The feeling of “belonging” to a VR environment is complete. A user adjusts herself/himself to a different rate of motions (slower than “outside” the VR environment), since sudden moves can create a sense of nausea and great discomfort. However, there are some problems and possible health risks.

The *CyberEdge Journal* # 17 has published a summary of the findings of a study done at the University of Edinburgh (Department of Psychology, Edinburgh Virtual Environment Lab) on the eye strain effects of the use of the HMD.

The basic test was to put 20 young adults on stationary bicycle and let them cycle around a virtual rural road setting using a HMD (...) After 10 minutes of light exercise, the subjects were tested...

“The results were alarming: measures of distance vision, binocular fusion and convergence displayed clear signs of binocular stress in a significant number of the subjects. Over half of the subjects also reported symptoms of such stress, such as blurred vision.”

(Isdale 1993)

Some stress symptoms can also include falling on/tripping over real world objects, simulator sickness (disorientation due to conflicting motion signals from eyes and inner ear), eye strain, etc. (according to John Nagle in Isdale 1993). It seems that the adjustment to the VR is not very compatible with living in (and experiencing) the actual (or *physical* — a term used by Jaron Lanier [Heilbrun 1996]) reality.

I believe that this is an important point to be taken into consideration when discussing the matters of Southeastern European and Balkan politics. In their own

⁷ That is to say, it has to be programmed first.

particular ways, politicians and theorists⁸ from this part of Europe tend to construct their own VR environments, creating (and re-creating) their countries as *Virtual Places*. These Virtual Places exist in both time and space, and their presence can be fully experienced by their virtual citizens.

For example, some of the leading Serb historians regard the 13th century as the beginning of the Serb “statehood.” It is perfectly useless to try to explain to them that the notions of “state,” “nation,” or “statehood” (as they are used today) originate in the post-Renaissance Europe (from the 17th century onwards). For most Serbs, the battle of Kosovo in 1389 is seen as the act of defense of Europe against the Ottoman (or Muslim, Islamic, etc.) threat. The collapse of the Serb medieval state that followed (in mid-15th century) is seen as the ultimate price paid *for free (that is to say, Christian) Europe*.⁹ Thus, Europe owes to the Serbs its understanding, recognition, financial assistance, etc.

In another example of a Virtual Place positioned in time, Slav Macedonian nationalists claim their right to a Greater Macedonia, based on the conquests of Alexander the Great, approximately 1,000 years *before Slavs even came to the Balkans*. This strange construct would include what is today the Republic of Macedonia, as well as parts of Greece, Bulgaria, and Albania. As such, in the virtual space, it overlaps with other Greater constructs: Greater Serbia (which should, apart from Serbia and Montenegro, also include parts of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, and the whole of Republic of Macedonia), Greater Bulgaria (Bulgaria, Macedonia, parts of Greece and Albania), and Greater Albania (Albania, parts of Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia). As already noted above, the very existence of some countries (like the Republic of Macedonia) is incomprehensible for some others (in

⁸ I should add here that I do not regard politicians or theorists as acting by and for *themselves*, they come *from the people*, frequently have huge popular support for their actions, so it can also be said that they act *in the name of people*.

⁹ I would like to add that both the official representatives of the Balkan nation-states and most “ordinary people” see them being “at the crossroads of the East and the West” as the main cause of their troubles — both past and present. However, many other parts of Europe were at this crossroads at some points in their history, like Russia, Finland, or Spain. This is perhaps a remnant of the belief (quite often found in some “traditional cultures”) that a specific ethnic group is located in the center of the Universe, along the *axis mundi*, so that anything happening to an ethnic group affects the Universe as a whole.

various aspects, for Serbia or FR Yugoslavia, Greece, and Bulgaria). From the official Greek standpoint, for example, its northern neighbor is totally “virtual.”

While these constructs are logically incoherent, inconsistent and mutually incompatible, they function quite well in virtual space. They also feed each other and are in a sense dependent on each other. The problems of (possible) communication are solved in an elegant manner: there is no communication, chosen representatives of “the people” usually just repeat what they are told to say and what they always believed they should say: that *their* nation is the oldest, the best, and always right, and that they have suffered the most. Thus, they should be granted all the privileges for “their” version of these Virtual Places. They are supposed to blend with and eventually supersede *real* places.

3. Concluding remarks: Virtual Exits?

An important thing to be noted here is that any or all versions of these Virtual Places cannot be regarded as either true or false. They are all true — within their respective historical/cultural/ethnic/traditional premises. Within a VR reality, a Virtual environment simply *exists*. As put by the Critical Art Ensemble in their VIPER Lecture: “VR’s primary value to spectacle is not as technology at all, but as a myth.” It is put to (practical) use only when a user puts on Data Gloves, HMD, and turns on her/his computer. Hence, it is both impractical and impossible to argue with the proponents or creators of Virtual Places — they are always right, since they are forever locked in their own virtual environment.

In an example very much actual now (late May 1999), the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia is presented to the Western viewers as something purely *virtual* (Kroker and Kroker 1999) – it was the war that was not really a war, bombing to save the Albanians, although occasionally NATO planes hit and kill dozens of Albanian – but it was for their own good! The bombing was also not aimed at civilians, but most of the civilian infrastructure has been destroyed, hospitals, residential areas, buses and passenger trains hit – but, again, nothing personal, it was for the good and ultimate enjoyment of the people of Serbia. It was the war to end all Balkan wars.

In the Serb official discourse the bombing was a living proof that the whole world is and always has been against the Serbs, and that is just another reason why people should retreat to their virtual shelters, protected from any silly ideas like “democratization,” “freedom of thought,” or “freedom of expression.” When the survival of the nation is at stake, all its members must stand as one and bravely face up to the wreath of the world powers. Their death will be just re-enactment of the heroic Battle of Kosovo of 1389, another proof that even in death and destruction, the defeated ones tower over their oppressors. It is only fitting that in a strange twist of fate the people who once saved (Christian) Europe from the (Muslim) Turks should fall as victims of that very same Europe (in reality, just Britain – along with the US).

One of the most obvious effects of the prolonged use of VR is that a user feels a little dizzy afterwards and moves a little slower than “normal” — adjustment to a different environment takes some time (this is sometimes referred to as a “VR leg”). It would be unproductive (except, perhaps, to make fun of such a person) to ask a person who has just taken off his/her HMD to perform some strenuous physical task, to jump or run, etc. A “fundamental loss of orientation” occurs (as Virilio would say [1995]), a feeling of dizziness which, in case of ex-Yugoslav nations and Serbs in particular, prevents people from making any distinctions between the real and the imagined.

Following this, I do not see any point in expecting that ideologists, theorists, politicians or advocates of Virtual Places should act or behave in a manner more in tune with what is sometimes regarded as a “proper behavior” (that is to say, to use rational arguments, to be able to discuss points of views of other participants in a discussion, to accept that they can sometimes be wrong, etc.). One should always bear in mind the particular environment which they see and feel as theirs, in which they feel comfortable, and act accordingly. One way of coping with them would be to always include qualified psychologists and computer experts familiar with the VR in all the negotiating teams and intermediary missions dealing with the Southeastern Europe. I believe that this could greatly enhance mutual understanding and probably ensure much better communication. The other way should be quicker and more efficient, but perhaps too abrupt and not very diplomatic: just to switch off the

computer. Of course, there is also a possibility of introducing a virus – a virus of democratization, which has to be introduced from outside the region, since the local populations have neither strength nor will to try it (Boskovic 1997a, 1998). But then, are the countries who condone mass killing of civilians in order to stop mass killing of civilians morally capable of proposing it? Or is their ultimate answer just more violence to end violence?

Taking all of that into consideration, one might wonder about why should any of the Balkan nations exit their Virtual Worlds – there are the things, concepts, places, people and (most important for the national unity) *enemies* that they know so well, know how to deal with them and how to feel. There are even small NGOs that can function providing a simulation of democratization, while in effect nothing ever changes. Any change would just plunge them into chaos – which is the last thing that global policy-makers want in the Balkans. In the end, it seems that both peoples from this part of the world and their well-wishers, critics and occasional bombers will agree that some people should never leave their playing rooms, and should have their data gloves on. At least for now.

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