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## Nomadic capture of communicating spaces and the reconfiguration of territoriality in the essays of David Albahari and the performing art of Marina Abramovic

*Captura nômade de espaços de comunicação e da reconfiguração da territorialidade nos ensaios de David Albahari e a arte performática de Marina Abramovic*

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**ABSTRACT** The following text draws attention to the nomadic art of some Balkan, in particular Serbian, artists: Marina Abramovic (currently living in New York, USA) and David Albahari (currently living in Calgary, Canada) and their contingency to the passage, the space-in-motion, the border and the liminal spaces as vital segments of the nomadic. It comprises both socio-anthropological approaches to the political and cultural phenomena of exile, expatriation, migration and reconfiguration of borders..

**KEYWORDS** Nomadic art, shifting spaces, identity-in-migration, Balkans, liminal borders.

**RESUMO** O artigo chama a atenção para a arte nômade de alguns artistas balcânicos, e em particular, para os artistas sérvios Marina Abramovic (residente em Nova Iorque, E.U.A.) e David Albahari (residente em Calgary, Canadá) e a sua contingência à passagem, ao espaço em movimento, à fronteira e aos espaços liminares como segmentos vitais do nômade. Inclui abordagens sócio-antropológicas sobre o fenômeno político e cultural do exílio, da expatriação, da migração e da reconfiguração das fronteiras.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Arte nômade; espaços mutáveis; identidade-na-migração; Balcãs; fronteiras liminares.

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*Quand les Balkans se sont embrasés après l'effondrement de l'ex-Yougoslavie, Tom Nairn a résumé l'analyse dominante en attribuant ces événements à une force obscure, archaïque, irraisonnée et atavique une force que l'on croyait morte mais qui s'est réveillée pour « inciter les peuples à placer le sang au-dessus du progrès rationnel et des droits individuels » (2010 :77)*

When a border is broken, all existence is shifting identities and human condition. Many artistic productions witness the failure of the misused concept of the border and the conquest of new virtual territorialities. Also many artistic products are being created in shifting political systems and this engenders also a certain liquid morphology of the nomadic creation. The last Balkan war, or in particular the outbreak of the Yugoslavian wars in Europe, have produced a brand new creation of maps, reconfiguration of territorialities, new cultural meanings, political and social diseases and new borders. After this bloody event, the territory of Europe has reinvented spaces in continuous capture. The expatriation, the migrations and the so called *neo-nomadism* were at stake. Many ex-Yugoslavian artists and writers performed real, physical testimonials of the geopolitical background and migrated from the countries of origin. I shall focus on the following two: David Albahari, Serbian writer with Jewish origin, who, after the explosion of Yugoslavia, in 1994 moved from Belgrade, Serbia, to Calgary, Canada, with his wife and two children and they still live there and Marina Abramovic, Serbian performing artist, nomad, she has walked along the Chinese wall with her partner Ulay, and lived the nomadic life across the continents of the world. I will try to review in short some of their works relating to

the concept of migrations, diaspora, displacement and communication with spaces.

In the Balkans people say: "you never born and die in one same country". The border and by consequence the spatial definition is, for this part of Europe, a complex moving phenomenon and it has always given the transhumant shape of the complex cultures and human interpretations existing there. When Marina Abramovic was interviewed for the Observer, on 3 October 2010 she said: "When people ask me where I am from, I never say Serbia. I always say I come from a country that no longer exists" (2010). After the proliferation of meanings of her statement we feel that there has been a broken border, a trauma and so we start to think Marina Abramovic in this liquid state of mind. Her creative motion of being occurs throughout crossings of borders of politics and human theory and of boundaries of the flesh. What we face is the perpetual break or a notion of no destination, which witness in a nutshell the focus of my article, the pure deterritorialization. It is a shifting image, face, substance, identity of people that have launched themselves into space to disseminate meaning with their own nomadic bodies. Because the space delimited within certain borders was simply not enough. On the contrary: it expelled them in a certain way.

The Berlin Wall changed essential political concepts on the European continent. We witness the turbulences not only throughout the economic crisis, but on a global anthropological-cultural landscape; we perceive that the border is an element of utter importance nowadays in Europe and this is the reason why I would like to offer meanings which were, perhaps, until now neglected by Western contemporary thought. This is the reason why I am arguing all aspects of nomadic production within Balkan cultures because these experiences might give broaden perception of the contemporary



thought on migrations in Europe. We shall see, the concept of “nomadic” is present when dealing with cultural encounters within a large scale of expressions of borders and the possible perceptions of notions of nation, ethnicity and identity, as almost overused concepts when defining uncontrollable human changes. The transnational circulation offers new figures of nomad, rather modern nomads, and we no longer think the migrant as a political category but as a fracture of a space and a personal choice. This is why the theory of the nomadic has its vital revival: because it will help us understand in wider perspective these phenomena.

How long a migrant is a migrant?, asks David Albahari. In his essay *Immigrant* he claims that the immigrant state of mind is a continuous process-in-making and that “the immigrant always comes and never comes back” (2008:56). The loneliness of the immigrant implies a nomadic capture of shared social, cultural and psychological backgrounds and obligations of social integration. Nevertheless according to Albahari, being an immigrant implies being lonely and the worst is that this loneliness never goes away, even when the immigrant is fully integrated into the society of adoption, because there is one place that the immigrant can never own and that is the past, the common past with the people where he has been launched. He explores lives and meanings of immigrated Serbian diaspora in Canada and creates fiction but also documented testimonials of all kind. In doing so, the writer becomes at the same time: migrant, nomad, itinerant and transhumant. We are facing in his stories some confused figures, which have to deal with a series of loss, despair and identity detection: to find who they are, what have they done and why have they remained in silence. Migrants that often even cherish their political status of exiled or even find their comfort in the wandering logos-in-life is another category also elaborated by

Albahari in this book.

In Albahari’s stories and essays we perceive this perpetual, even painful, attachments to the culture of origin and the cultural transmutation of the presence. The absorbed diaspora cultures in the Canadian space and the anthropological segments of the immigrants are conducting the reader to a serious questioning on what it is a frontier, a border: where does it begin and where does it end? Is it a state of mind, geopolitics or virtual hegemony of the globalized world? Is it liquid or strict? However, what Albahari tackles is this liminal dimension of the experiences of the Balkan migrations and cultural sources from the following cities: Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Zagreb, Belgrade and Calgary. The haptic spaces of the border definition also might provoke inner burden, because it is very likely to produce cross-meanings between phenomena of migrants, exiled citizens, nomads and itinerants. Now, what is interesting for the topic I propose is to associate these often analogic entities into a broader reading of a border broken and created by force and for the sake of social utopias. In Bauman’s language, the new or “postmodern” world we are living in, offer an infinity of possibilities to build but also to destroy “mini Berlin walls” (2002:41) each and every day to separate but also to unify people’s life, habits, practices, languages and cultures in instant democracies. Yet, the geopolitics would therefore remain a very antiseptic discipline if it does not interfere with theories of anthropology and empiric cultures. In fact, negotiations of meaning are a main challenge when it comes to reading spaces, motion, circulating people, belongings and nomadic mobile territories.

The concepts of politics and power have inflicted a serious impact on the life of many artists. The Western social utopias such as “political correctness” and “multiculturalism” have been



more than irritating for these nomadic artists who have witnessed the concrete border tailoring. As Albahari says: if multiculturalism exists only to demonstrate the unchangeable element of many ethnic loneliness then it may turn into machinery of evil and explosions. In my view, when one cannot give a precise meaning to a social phenomenon, it often occurs the reference, not empirically but theoretically constructed, of multi- or trans-culture. To borrow the case and the discourse of Todorov, I would also say "these cultural entities are not easy to be grasped for the external observatory" (2000:260).

For Marina Abramovic, after cutting a five star Yugoslav national symbol with a blade-razor on her belly, she continued exploring symbiosis between body and space and alluding to gender, communism and Balkan geopolitics in virtual language, performing cyber visual arts and digital technologies, also in her Balkan Baroque performance. The latest performance *The Artist is Present* has brought her on a chair receiving guest, random people just looking at her, touching her or talking to her for a 736-hours and 30-minutes. The phenomenon of the passage made her an exhibited body of the modernity. The boundary of the body within the cyber-space for me relates to these special-temporal arrangements and parameters of the reconfiguration of the concept of migrating space.

In both artists' work I recognize the above discussed geopolitical categories of displaced subjects and of passages. The international border space has shaped abjectly conflicts, wars, refugees etc. but the human factor and the human condition, though, are main concepts in which Hannah Arendt considered some sides of humanity. These sides, the kind of space where Albahari and Abramovic art is dwelling, could be named, according to the Deleuzian terminology, as "striated space", whilst the human condition turns and moves into a "smooth

space". The rhizomatic roadmap embraces it all: the capture of territory, the exportation of humanitarian democracy, contemporary colonization practices and categorization of human migration condition in arbitrary fashion. This is the reason why when we think of nomads we shall not neglect territory, space, motion. Their territorial ethics is to be disseminated, themselves and their meanings, in the space where they are involved. They hold their space. They inhabit their inner space. They fill in the space with notorious sense of freedom and desire to be part of complex cultures which cannot be inflicted by territorial contamination.

Nomadic *per se*, Albahari's and Abramovic's thought dwells in a multi-linguistic discourse, in a brand new modernity but not as it was until now in dualistic, bipolar and sedentary manner: the wandering situation of mind produces multiple degrees of definitions of politics, nation and culture. We realize that confronting anthropology in times of war is a dangerous enterprise; that traits or traces of post-colonization occults multiple cultural perception of democratization and rule of law; that metamorphosis of a space produces wanderers; that vagrancy is something that we should extend our focus on, at least for a while, as it is supposed to be a precedent of the humanization. The migrant finds himself, at the end of the day, in a space that does not belong to no one and nowhere. The dwelling in a sea of languages and communication technologies for a migrant is, in a way, an issue to save himself from the threats of the acculturation. Their language is their link to their identity, for whatever identity may mean. The space becomes a spontaneous configuration of territories and positions. Now the question is posed by Marc Auge: why do "in one same place can co-exist different and unique elements, but we forbid ourselves to think about their relations not even about the shared identities contributed by the fact



that they share a common space” (1992:70).

The creation of the cherished concept of difference is passing through harsh border crossing, both political and ideological. Albahari is a writer who has been through these processes of continuum in displacement, because the wall crossing, the border crossing, the mountain crossing, the airport crossing produces meaning: all borders are invented as are the identities, says Albahari. Abramovic has nourished the self-chosen-exile as an initiation for many other writers who suddenly started to immigrate drifted by the new map of the ex-Yugoslavian space. The border is a tie, a web, a capital of meanings. The nomadic practice of crossing borders, walls, passages, without the notion of a cultural interference creates this cross-cultural dissemination and proliferation of power and will not disappear.

As underlined above, the outbreaks of the wars in the ex-Yugoslavian republic has created a large abyss in the proliferation of concepts like brotherhood and Fatherland and we have seen that many writers and artists have gone into nomadism and exile. In the case of Marina Abramovic, there is however none of that. Her natural belonging to this Balkan space-in-motion started years before the crash of the big Federation, when she moved to Amsterdam in 1976. From there she initiated the nomadic art with her Dutch nomadic partner, Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen), with whom she explored public and private spaces, performed naked in front of audiences, lived the nomadic life across Africa and with whom she did the last work together, *The Great Wall Walk* (1988), entailed each a 2,000 km walking along the Wall of China, departing at opposite ends of the wall and meeting at one point in the middle of the wall. We should admit this perfect nomadic passage is a perfect metaphor of what I argue: the walks, the passages, the spatial conquest, the itinerancy, the vagrancy of her ideas were never

seen as something sensational but concentrated on inner initiation, break-through, crashing against body impossibilities. The pain, the physical exposure of her art was somewhat extracted from this space-in-motion: the migrating moment, the transhumant action and the total detachment of a border were enacted in order to create a new artistically flagrant meaning and boundary contingent borderline. This is the reason why I would like to focus now more on her work *Balkan Baroque*, performed in 1997 at the Venice Biennale, for which she received the Golden Lion Award for Best Artist, and so to relate the spatial turbulence of the Balkan countries, in particular ex-Yugoslavian, to her work.

It must be said that her performances push the human boundary to final edge of cognition. The disjuncture and the scandal are cranking the machinery of the virtual in front of the eye of a spectator; but the spatial redefinition of the passage, both the physical projection into extreme condition (ice, fire, knife and so on) and the initiation that comes into life through these extreme practices, are at stake. I would also say that the human condition is the web, a tie of the liminal space of this Balkan Baroque. Even though she is an artist that in the past 30 years has blurred and disturbed our perceptions, and many things have been written on her, in my view, the spatial dimension of her work should be a further challenge. In *Balkan Baroque* she tells us inedited legends about her cultural cradle. She is a visual story-teller, translating into displacement every spasmodic discrepancy of our intimate life and primordial, primitive cultures.

She proved that being a nomad does not necessarily mean moving, yet it is a stable being within a motion. She holds that wandering space. She inhabits that inner space still. Let's just think of her recent performance "The artist is present" at the Moma museum. The message derives always from



somewhat spatial turbulences of the senses, the feelings and the perception. When we see what she does we are drifted and shifted into a shimmering space, into a liminal space of our body cells, fighting the sharp definition of a landscape where we are mathematically and gaining weight and power of travelling knowledge. Moving from inertia to itinerancy, we no longer belong to a fix meaning of a space, but we are changed. Not our eyes, but our sex reacts just like the skin cells hurt and regenerate after being burned. Her nomadic art continuously pushes us into these libidinal feelings. It is when we are excited because of her, that we actually move to a higher tension. This is the nomadic pulsation in her migrating art.

In the *Balkan Baroque* episodes, in the Balkan Erotic Epic she liaise flesh, carnality, open space and magic. In each episode we witness again and again the passage, the broken wall, the openness of the body to the halls of the earth, the mystic disclosure of rural beliefs. All these exhibited bodies show that there is a perfect communication of the idea that the space is a moving meaning. We know now the carnal, bloody, libidinal and irrational background of the Balkans. The outrageous and awkward performance of Balkan legends, myths, believes and superstitions used by the artist as an artifact is stroking for it is a passage, a layer, a capital of borderlines to be crossed in order to become fertile, to produce, to penetrate, to love and to give trace of our own spatial and cellular dwelling.

## Conclusion

Deleuze says: "The primary determination of the nomad is that he occupies and holds a smooth space: it is this aspect that determines him as nomad (essence)" (1986:101). The narrowing and designing of "global-scapes" (Appadurai) and the trajectory, the path, the motion per se, is what makes the

nomads "vectors of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari). However, the inner communication between this category is the repercussion of the new concepts in the geopolitics. Having said this, I tried to stress out the attachment that nomads have to a territory, to a boundary of a space and to an apolitical border, on one side, and on the other side their relation and dialogue with a homeland, with a "no man's land".

We shall think the nomadic artist as a person who refused to belong to one delimited space and the border does nothing else but oblige to belong to one space or another. Abramovic and Albahari are artists inhabiting the re-configuring and morphological borders, for the inhabitant of a border does not belong anywhere and at the same time he belongs everywhere. The a-semiotic (in Lotman definition) systems, the sedentary nomadism (in Braidotti), the Deleuze "nomadization" in one space in order to achieve the rupture of a code, and the non-lieu (in Augé) of the mind in space, where concepts such as ethnicity, nation and culture are built, created and extracted out of the complex meaning and corpus of cultures, draw the main focus on the work of these two artist.

"Everybody is walking in an invisible diving suit: the body exists in order not to become another body, the border exists in order not to be crossed, the loneliness is a fashion of life and not a form of rebellion" (2008:122). Shifted by this sentence, when I interviewed David Albahari in Zemun, near Belgrade, Serbia, on 29 November 2011, I asked him how he feels when crossing the borders and he said: "When I travel across Europe I feel the borders even if they don't exist. But when I cross the borders of the Ex-Yugoslavian countries even though the political borders exist I do not feel them". The spaces defined by the untouchable and sharp borders may not be communicating, but Abramovic



and Albahari, playing with this definition, have witnessed that the longing for a never reaching space is stronger than ever. In Albahari's essays and in Abramovic performances the removal or the displacement of subject out of their border, creates new boundaries, which transcend political border, are interstice in motion, nomadic displacement of dynamic culture-in-making, relative reference, expatriation at its minimalism, open talk, desire of exit, refusal of a globalization of a culture, will to perceive in phenomenological distance, continuous rupture of created fix meanings, acknowledging lived cultures, the control and supervision of the movement and circulation, reshaping the space of the boundary and the virtuous nostalgia of a space.

The Home is shifting and nothing is certain.

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The Lovers, The Great Wall Walk, 1988

Balkan Baroque, 1997

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