

Re-enacting the Trauma: Ritualising Turbo-Folk in Vienna

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Abstract

Turbo-folk, a popular music genre originating in 1990s' Serbia, still enjoys an immense popularity among Viennese residents with origins in the former Yugoslavia. The project outlined here attempted to determine why a nearly 30-year-old repertoire of songs is of such central importance to many listeners in the Austrian capital. As the research showed, informants view the interaction with turbo-folk as an experience outside their everyday lives requiring a particular time and space in order to unfold. Actors channel and express the strong emotions elicited by turbo-folk in various ways, one of which is singing along to the music. This practice is interpreted here as a ritual aiming to process the collective trauma constituted by a double loss of home. This ritual results in the construction of a collective "Yugo" identity that at the same time enables and ensues the process in a circular manner.

KEYWORDS: Turbo-Folk, Collective Trauma, Ritual, National Identity

"And I think with us 'Yugos', it's just default that we scream (...). I mean, it happens very, very rarely that no one sings along. I haven't experienced that so far" (Interviewee 03, 2021).

Introduction

The narrow premise is crammed with cheerful young partygoers. In front of the bandstand, around the tables and along the aisle, dressed-up folks in their early 20s rise to their feet and move their bodies to the beat. The singer leaves his place amidst his band colleagues in order to steer through the crowd, embrace audience

members and kiss them on their cheeks. As soon as they recognize the first notes of a song, everybody joins in to sing along to the Serbo-Croatian lyrics at the top of their lungs. In the early hours of the morning, the ardent dancing gradually gives way to another movement pattern: people stand, slightly swaying to the increasingly soulful tunes. Their arms are raised towards the ceiling in a welcoming gesture, while on the record put on by the DJ, a hoarse female voice rings out full-throatedly until it cracks, faithfully accompanied by the roars of the crowd. Some cry.

The scene, to be observed on a regular weekend night in one of the popular clubs spread between the 16th and 17th districts of Vienna, centres around a style of music called 'turbo-folk' (1), originating in the collapsing Yugoslavia of the early 1990s. Even today, its popularity remains unabated, expanding not solely to all successor states of the bygone multi-ethnic entity, but to emigrants and their offspring around the globe (Čvoro 2012). With its mixture of Balkan and Middle-Eastern tunes—in particular, *Sevdalinka*- or *Kolo*-style trills and *appoggiaturas* and elements from *Arabesk* or *Rai* music (Vogel 2017: 48)—grafted on an electronic pop beat, it superseded the “newly-composed folk music” previously popular amongst the rural populations and “peasant urbanities” (Gordy 1999: 107; see also: Vidić Rasmussen 2002) of Yugoslavia, becoming the epitome of mainstream music in the disintegrating country. Turbo-folk was widely commented on by post-Yugoslav intellectuals as well as by international scholars as the soundtrack of war, the cultural expression of Serbian nationalism and Milošević’s murderous regime (Gordy 1999). As the popularity of turbo-folk did not wane once the redrawn geography of the Balkans consolidated with the advent of the new millennium, alternative interpretations were offered, no longer portraying it as a symbol of nationalism, but as the “vanishing mediator” (Čvoro 2012: 121) of neoliberal globalization or as self-exoticising resistance to global capitalism (Archer: 2009).

Regarding today’s Viennese youth partying to the sounds of turbo-folk, it soon becomes apparent that their origins lie in all parts of the former Yugoslavia (2). As conversations with listeners indicate, distinctions between Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks are but of marginal importance. More than two decades after the end of the Yugoslav Wars, it is obvious that the meaning this music assumes for its Viennese listeners has nothing to do with inflaming the public for the cause of war or justifying a regime that has long since ceased to exist. How, then, can the unbroken popularity of this music among listeners with ex-Yugoslav background in Vienna be explained? Why is it still considered number one by people of all ages and ex-Yugoslav nationalities, as was repeatedly stressed by my interlocutors? (Interviewee 02, 25 October 2021; Interviewee 04, 13 November 2021). Why are teenagers going crazy over songs dating back a quarter-century and further? The objective of this article is to provide these questions with a tentative answer.

The study presented here constitutes the pilot phase of a more extensive project focusing on the relative attributions of meaning to turbo-folk in Belgrade and Vienna. The present study’s focal point is restricted to Vienna in order to test relevant questions, problems, and methods in a delimited area. Due to the relatively small sample and short research period, the conclusions drawn in this article can only be of a preliminary nature.

The following considerations start with a review of the previous research on turbo-folk with particular regard to its reception in Vienna, allocating room for the chosen approach within the existing discussion of the phenomenon. The

explanation of the methodological foundations is followed by a brief discussion of the sample, research design and my personal positioning within the field. Subsequently, the phenomenon of “being moved by turbo-folk” is expounded which, as I argue, goes hand in hand with the construction of a collective ‘Yugo’ identity. Interactions with turbo-folk in Vienna can be interpreted as a ritual aiming to process the collective trauma caused by emigration and the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia.

Turbo-Folk and Vienna in the Reflection of Cultural Studies, Historiography, and (Ethno-)Musicology

The scholarly attention turbo-folk has attracted right from the outset is largely due to its apparent connection with Serbian nationalism and the Milošević regime, epitomised by the marriage of turbo-folk star Svetlana ‘Ceca’ Veličković and war criminal Željko Ražnatović, called ‘Arkan’, in 1995 (3). The often fervent debates about the political meaning of the genre and its role in the mobilisation of Serbian youth are reflected in scholarly writing which, due to the charged nature of the topic, often assumed the character of polemics rather than that of clear-headed analysis. With the end of the Yugoslav Wars in 1999, these often partial interpretations became themselves the subject of reflexive analysis (Archer 2012; Atanasovski 2012; Đurković 2001, 2004; Tomić 2014). Scholars criticised the early verdict on turbo-folk for its tacit classism (Archer 2009; Tomić 2014; Volčič and Erjavec 2010), while attempting a more nuanced depiction of its meanings with the tools of popular music studies and gender studies (Grujić 2009; Jelača 2015; Tomić 2014; Volčič and Erjavec 2010). With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, attention was drawn to the significance of turbo-folk within all former warring parties, despite its alleged connection with Serbian nationalism (Baker 2010; Đorđević 2010; Vidić Rasmussen 2007). The concept of transnationalism has been applied to capture the exchange of music, musicians, and money within a market all of a sudden intersected by national boundaries (Baker 2006).

However, the popularity of turbo-folk is not confined to the Balkan peninsula: thanks to the endeavours of private television channels directed towards a transnational audience, from its beginnings, the advent of turbo-folk had been keenly followed and actively promoted by emigrants all over the world. This development is mirrored by research focusing on turbo-folk at destinations favoured by emigrants from the former Yugoslavia. Apart from Australia (Čvoro 2014), the bulk of the attention has been directed to Vienna, home to one of the largest populations with origins in the former Yugoslavia worldwide (Mijić 2020; Stadt Wien – Integration und Diversität 2020). While Brunner et al. (2014) have mapped the various musical practices of Viennese migrants from the area, Dika and Jeitler (2016) have highlighted the significance of Ottakringer Straße, a business street in an immigrant neighbourhood, for the musical practices centred on turbo-folk.

The most substantial body of research thus far has been provided by ethnomusicologists, namely by a group of researchers from the University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna under the auspices of Ursula Hemetek, who have studied musical cultures of ethnic minorities in Austria over the past 30 years (4). Part of this body of writing are Bajrektarević’s (2007, 2017) investigations of Serbian

wedding customs in Vienna, where the author acknowledges the occurrence of turbo-folk, among other genres. While basing the following considerations on this research, I wish to incorporate the critique of the category of identity put into play in the last two decades by social scientists such as Brubaker and Cooper (2000). Specifically, I seek to address three problems regarding the presupposition of ethnic groups as a basic assumption underlying musicological research. Firstly, the multifaceted and often ambiguous character of personal belonging makes it impossible to clearly allocate an individual to a presumed ethnic group. For example, a person whose grandparents have immigrated to Austria from Yugoslavia might simultaneously see themselves as Austrian, Serbian, and 'Post-Yugoslav'. The Balkans in particular are rich in biographies in which the belonging of a given individual to a particular ethnic group is ambiguous and often contested.

The second problem regards the presumption of ethnic groups as discrete and coherent collective identities. Even if such groups are formally acknowledged as constructs, the risk of reification cannot be completely evaded (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 6). Thirdly, the presupposition of ethnic groups leads us to believe that group membership significantly affects the musical choices of an individual – that is, that we can speak of a 'Serbian', 'Croatian', or 'Post-Yugoslav' musical practice in Vienna. However, as Brubaker states regarding the substantialisation of ethnic groups, "groupness may not happen" (Brubaker 2002: 168), which is to say: the connection between an individual's ethnic belonging and their musical practice is not a given, but a question to be put under scrutiny by empirical research. In light of these considerations, I treat ethnic identities not as substantive entities preceding the analysis, but rather as sensitizing concepts, the relevance of which is to be evinced based on the data material. I also wish to incorporate the "post-migrant" critique developed by such scholars as Yıldız (2017) or Foroutan (2019) who have challenged the primary categorisation of people as migrants in order to discern hidden societal conflicts over recognition and participation (Foroutan 2019, 17; Römhild 2015, 38–39). In a text from 2005, Fischer criticises the dominant depiction of former-Yugoslav musical life in Vienna, questioning the attribution of individuals to fixed identities as well as a tendency to neglect musical practices that do not fit the picture of (genuine) folk music.

Proceeding from a similar position, I aim to ground my analysis in the empirical investigation of specific musical practices observed in urban space. This leads to a Grounded Theory approach seeking to draw its categories from the data itself, thereby aiming to suspend preconceptions and remain open to unexpected results. Accordingly, research is viewed as a fundamentally open-ended process consisting of recurring cycles of data collection, analysis, and renewed sampling. This approach compels the researcher to suspend their presuppositions—regarding, for example, social entities, such as ethnic groups, nationalities, or scenes (Flick 2018: 71). It also accommodates the understanding of meaning as being attributed to music by specific actors (Bryant and Charmaz 2007: 21). As I investigate the reasons for the ongoing popularity of turbo-folk in Vienna, I seek to access the process of meaning-making in everyday cultural practice, thus locating it in specific interactive contexts of day-to-day social life (DeNora 2000). Given that meaning manifests itself in practices accessible only through observation, I choose an ethnographic approach that combines fieldwork with interviews within and outside the field.

Approaching the Field of Turbo-Folk

Several scholars have pleaded for ‘turbo-folk’ not to be used to denominate a particular musical genre, but as a conceptual category, given the strong evaluative connotations of the term (Archer 2009: 19; Blagojević 2012: 158). However, since such a vast definition bears the risk of losing sight of the object in question, I base my understanding on the musical criteria mentioned most often as requisite components of turbo-folk: a mode of singing characterised by micro-melodic ornaments, emically termed *s trilerima* (“with trillers”; Đurković 2002: 279); melodic elements of Southern Slav and Middle Eastern origin; the employment of drum machines producing a prevalent pop beat; and the incorporation of elements of Eurodance and hip-hop (Čvoro 2012: 122; Grujić 2009: 158; Nenić 2020: 140; Vidić Rasmussen 2007: 70). This definition serves as a basis to delimit the research on turbo-folk from neighbouring styles such as its predecessor *novokomponovana narodna muzika* (“newly-composed folk music”) or its successors pop-folk (in the 2000s) and *trepfolk* (“trap folk”), an electronically produced style that emerged in the 2010s from the fusion of trap-style singing in Serbo-Croatian with interpolations of ‘classical’ turbo folk, characterised by the generous use of autotune (Dumnić Vilotijević 2020: 4–5). In the latter, the ‘folk’ part has been reduced to allusions to ‘oriental’ melodics and sampled ‘Balkan beats’ brass arrangements (Dumnić Vilotijević 2020: 2). While all these styles are played alongside in the same clubs in Vienna, this article focuses on turbo-folk songs originating in the 1990s.

The primary field site was constituted by venues along Ottakringer Straße, a street termed *Balkanmeile* (“the Balkan mile”) by Austrian media due to the origin of its various shops’, cafés’, and clubs’ main clientele (Wallisch 2020). Participant observations were conducted between September and November 2021. The relative anonymity in these venues meant that although my position as an observer was not publicly announced, my appearance as well as my taking notes often betrayed my outsider position, occasionally provoking questions and, thus, conversations. Whenever one-on-one interactions occurred, I made my position and the goal of the research transparent to my interlocutors.

In order to investigate the reasons for the ongoing popularity of turbo-folk in Vienna, I conducted five ethnographies and an online ethnography. To increase variation within the sample, I additionally conducted interviews with regular turbo-folk listeners living in Vienna. The interviews, which were based on the problem-centred interview type based on Grounded Theory (Scheibelhofer 2008), were conducted in either Serbo-Croatian or German, according to the preferences of the interviewees. As a native German-speaking Austrian citizen, my ethnic privilege marks me as an outsider to my field of research. At the same time, my father’s Yugoslav origin and my (albeit flawed) knowledge of Serbo-Croatian places me at a liminal position with the related benefits of partial membership (Almeida 2015: 90–99). It would have been understandable for my interlocutors to be suspicious of an outsider—or even intruder—like me, who could be seen as representing the same institutions from which they are frequently excluded. Bearing that in mind, I was moved and humbled by the openness and trust I was afforded. To protect my informants’ personal data, their identities remain concealed in this text.

Transcripts and observation as well as interview protocols were coded according to Grounded Theory method. To help structure the output, the coding paradigm developed by Strauss and Corbin was applied, organising the resulting codes within the framework of causal conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, strategies and consequences (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 99).

An Experience outside everyday Life

In the coding process, the phenomenon of “being moved by turbo-folk” was established as core category, since it displayed the densest web of connections with other categories. It became apparent that for Viennese listeners, their interactions with turbo-folk stand out due to the strong emotional response elicited by the music—a response not evoked by other situations or music genres. Another striking observation concerned the connection between this experience and the experience of a collective identity shared by Viennese listeners of turbo-folk. Furthermore, listeners often connected their experience of turbo-folk to a past event of particular importance to them. However, the accounts had more in common, such as the reference to specific practices apt to channel the extraordinary commotion triggered by turbo-folk. How does the connection with the past relate to the intense emotional response, the strategies of processing and the construction of a collective identity? The following paragraphs attempt to provide a tentative answer to these questions.

The strong emotional response evoked by the contact with turbo-folk constitutes an experience outside everyday life requiring a particular time and space in order to unfold. Informants would often mention that the music they call “real” or “heavy” turbo-folk cannot be played at the beginning of a party night. In the words of Interviewee 03, a 26-year-old female club attendee: “You can’t just come and say, okay, it’s 10 pm, let’s listen to those real, actual turbo-folk songs, nobody is going to go nuts to them” (3 November 2021). Interviewee 02, a 30-year-old man who runs a club on Ottakringer Straße, confirmed: “As the evening starts, you’d rather play slower songs or some kind of pop for instance. When you enter those late hours, after two or so, then you start with that kind of turbo-folk (...). So that style always arrives in the late hours, this is like some kind of unwritten rule” (25 October 2021). Commencing the evening with ‘English music’ (i.e. English-language popular music styles, such as hip-hop or R&B) is also seen as mandatory in order to create a contrast with the turbo-folk presented by live musicians or, later on, by the DJs themselves. Similarly, when listening to music at home, Interviewee 03 reserves “heavy” turbo-folk for particular occasions, like late at night or before going out, since it might otherwise prompt a reaction that interferes with her plans:

If, for example, we went out last night and we want to go out tomorrow as well, we watch what we listen to, because ... it just affects you (...) in a way, that you’re like, oh damn! Now I have to go out at all costs! So if you play four, five, six, ten songs like that in a row, after the tenth song, I’m already out of the door.

Apparently, turbo-folk both requires as well as affords an extraordinary emotional state that can be disruptive when triggered at the wrong moment, but that also constitutes the desired end point of each party night. The emotional state necessary for dealing properly with turbo-folk is distinguished by openness and vulnerability.

With “being moved by turbo-folk” constituting the core category, several strategies are applied in order for that state to be reached. An indispensable ingredient for achieving the receptiveness to turbo-folk is unanimously the consumption of alcohol, as Interviewee 03 affirms: “Of course you need a bit of time, you also have to drink something as, you know, the songs are very heavy.” The consumption of substantial amounts of alcohol, the experience of partying in the company of peers with shared roots in the former Yugoslavia, the staging of luxury and elegance, and the more and more vigorous dancing all work together to prepare the individuals for the final act: a state of intoxication making them susceptible to the impact of turbo-folk.

The strong emotional reactions elicited by the interaction with turbo-folk were described by Interviewee 03 as follows:

That’s the reason for people to actually ... go nuts to these songs when they are a little drunk, and then you see their hands in the air, and it’s like ... oh my god! Many of them also cry, it has happened to me from time to time, that I said, oh my god, this song touched me so much that a few tears were shed. And I think that’s important.

These intense emotions demand expression. This once more requires the application of a set of strategies, as the informant explains:

Then, different emotions can come out, it depends, for instance: me, I like partying, I sing along, and I love dancing. With other people, they’d rather sit down and, depending on the situation, they’d cry. Still others want to smash something, so it always depends on what kind of person you are. (Interviewee 03 2021).

In this context, alcohol serves a double function: while it is employed at first to prepare the actors for the exposure to turbo-folk, it is further used to catalyse, channel, and process the emotion triggered by that experience. The same holds true for other strategies involved, such as dancing, swaying with one’s arms raised towards the ceiling and, above all, singing along.

Singing along, Canon, and the Construction of Identity

Singing along to the music, to be encountered at all observed venues at almost any time, struck me as one of the most remarkable practices in social interactions with turbo-folk. The later the hour and the more exuberant the atmosphere, the more people raise their voices to sing along to almost every song delivered by the DJs or the live singers. Singing along, often coupled with the gesture of swinging one’s raised hand, is usually accompanied by an aura of exaltation and fun, with a hint of irony (5). Interviewee 03 explains the meaning of this practice within the interaction with turbo-folk by contrasting the latter with American pop music:

If someone like Rihanna was to sing about something in her life, like, I don't know, he hurt me, blah blah blah, using some kind of melody where you shake your butt, dance, jump, it's still something different than standing right here, with him (the singer, author) singing live, and ... it hits you. And then you have no choice, you have to sing along, there's no help for it. And I think with us 'Yugos', it's just default that we scream, when we sing. I mean, it happens very, very rarely that no one sings along. I haven't experienced that so far.

The specificity of the live experience is an important factor within the experience of turbo-folk – a factor reflected in the inclusion of live singing in almost every club night. As the practice of singing along presupposes that (most of) the actors present know (most of) the songs, it is indicative of the existence of a body of music constituting the object of shared cultural knowledge, and thus, of a canon (Appen et al. 2008). The reason for the songs to be so well known lies in the fact that they are always the same songs: turbo-folk songs outlast the brief lifespan of musical nine-day wonders. The later the hour, the more the repertoire narrows to an essentially closed canon of songs originating in the 1990s. Since a canon stabilises cultural meaning through the invocation of collective memory, it requires a collective, namely: a group of people sharing certain experiences, memories, and traditions. In the practice of singing along, we encounter therefore an expression of belonging, contributing to the construction and stabilisation of a shared identity (Jones and Krzyżanowski 2011). Building upon the critical remarks by such authors as Assmann (1997) or Brubaker and Cooper (2000), collective identity cannot be presupposed as a 'thing' preceding the act of its invocation, but rather as emerging from social action itself. However, as we will see, the idea of a shared identity predates the act of singing along to turbo-folk at least in the imagination of the actors themselves.

How is this identity defined? Apparently not along divisions between the ethnic groups of the former Yugoslavia – on the contrary, the cohesion between these groups is usually stressed by Viennese listeners of turbo-folk. While this identity is often taken for granted or merely alluded to in phrases such as *naši ljudi* ("our people") or *wir Jugos* ("us Yugos"), some of the informants also make it explicit, such as Interviewee 04, an 38-year-old waiter at an event venue: "No, there is no difference (between ethnicities, author) because this is all one and the same language. (...) That means that on the Balkans, people understand each other" (13 November 2021).

However, the assumption that a collective identity is constituted through the act of singing along to turbo-folk only conveys an incomplete picture of that identity's role, as for the actors themselves, that identity is a necessary prerequisite for the practices in which they engage. In their eyes, it precedes the interaction with turbo-folk which can only happen within a group of people sharing certain experiences and preferences. A collective 'Yugo' identity is a requirement for the interaction with turbo-folk in yet another sense, manifest in the semantic content of the music itself: by referring to the history of Yugoslav/Serbian society in the 1990s, turbo-folk presupposes a common identity of its protagonists and recipients, a history continuously revived through the acts of listening and singing along. Accordingly, the DJ in one of the researched venues welcomes his audience by enumerating each ethnic group descending from the former Yugoslav region, invoking them as

“Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Montenegrins, Macedonians”. Each invocation is greeted with cheers. A bit later, when the 1989 hit “Jugoslovenka” by folk music star Lepa Brena is played, the crowd enthusiastically sings along to the chorus line “Ja sam jugoslovenka” (“I’m a Yugoslav woman”), thus expressing the sentiment of ‘Yugonostalgia’ which has recently been applied to the phenomenon of Brena by Petrov (2021).

This is not to say that divisions along ethnic lines that preclude or outweigh a possible affiliation with a “Yugoslav” identity do not matter among people emigrated to Vienna from the former Yugoslav region. However, I have not encountered them within my sample, which in no way pretends to represent the group of former-Yugoslav émigrés as a whole.

The collective Memory of Loss

What does turbo-folk represent to its Viennese listeners? What qualifies it to become a common denominator, a signifier around which identity is constructed? What is it that makes turbo-folk a powerful trigger of deeply felt, overwhelming emotions? To most of my interlocutors, turbo-folk is connected to some important and often disturbing event in the past. Those experiences can be profoundly individual, as in the case of Interviewee 01, who associated turbo-folk with her childhood spent with her grandparents in Serbia. More often than not, the memory would be tragic, as in the case of Interviewee 03, to whom the song “Kukavica” (“Coward”; Svetlana Ceca Raznatovic 1993) evoked a heartbreak she had suffered years ago:

That’s that song of mine, where I say, okay, I had a situation in my life, when I partially identified this song with myself, and it has remained my song ever since and by that I stand (laughs). It’s very, very rare that a song can surpass this.

Apart from individual memories, turbo-folk can also awaken collective ones. The nature of those memories is revealed by a closer examination of the turbo-folk canon largely consisting of songs dating back to the 1990s. In these regards, it may be elucidating to consider a major event for Viennese turbo-folk fans in 2021, namely the concert of Ceca. With more than 10 million records sold, Ceca is the number one celebrity not only of turbo-folk, but of popular music from the Balkans in general. While Čvoro (2012) remarks that “Ceca’s musical popularity has been rivaled only by her political notoriety” (124), it could be argued that it was precisely Ceca’s marriage with businessman and war criminal Arkan and her endorsement of Serbian nationalism that endowed her with the economic and social capital crucial for her success.

Ceca’s performance in the outskirts of Vienna resulted in the audience faithfully singing along to almost every song, enabled by the show consisting mainly of ‘classics’ from the 1990s or early 2000s, known inside out by the vast majority of the attendees—such as “Beograd” (“Belgrade”), “Idi dok si mlad” (“Go while you are young”; both: Svetlana Ceca Raznatovic 1995) or “Da raskinem sa njom” (“To break up with her”; Svetlana Ceca Raznatovic 2003). Despite not being sexualised the way she used to be twenty years ago, Ceca’s looks seemed hardly altered at all,

apparently not only conserving her youth, but also the image of “mother of Serbia” she had embodied since the late 1990s. This stasis appears to be a condition of her success: her unceasing popularity is drawn from a detachment from the present going hand in hand with an adherence to the 1990s, with the audience revelling in this celebration of the well-known.

In the cultural criticism of 1990s’ Serbia, Ceca is most commonly associated with her public endorsement of Serbian nationalism and the Milošević regime (Archer 2012). However, today’s Viennese listeners of turbo-folk distance themselves from that political stance by emphasizing their affiliation with all emigrants from the former Yugoslavia. Thus, a 36-year-old Bosniak waitress working at the Ceca concert expresses her discontent with the singer’s political statements. To my question whether this means that she dislikes Ceca, she replies: “I like her songs, I’m not interested in her politics or her life. If the songs touch me, I don’t care about her personality.” (Interviewee 05, 13 November 2021).

The love my interlocutors express for Ceca’s music, accompanied by their rebuttal of Serbian nationalism and the war, indicate a significant shift in the meaning of turbo-folk. Interviewee 06, a 27-year-old female university student who has moved to Vienna from Belgrade only recently, observes a crucial difference in the significance of turbo-folk in the two cities:

I think that it is much more meaningful here, it plays a much more important role, because this music actually not only connects people who are, for instance, Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, it does not only merge them into a unity, but it also connects all of them to their country of origin. (10 December 2021).

It could be argued that to Viennese listeners, turbo-folk signifies a double loss: the loss of their home country experienced in the course of emigration, and the loss of that country as a political entity through the dissolution of Yugoslavia. By remaining fixated on the 1990s—the very period in which Yugoslavia ceased to exist —, turbo-folk evokes this double loss and conserves it in the public memory.

I conceptualise that loss of home as a collective trauma for Viennese listeners of turbo-folk. According to social psychology, collective trauma is characterised by “a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society” (Hirschberger 2018: 1). This condition entails the compulsion to re-experience the event in order to make sense of it—an urge often crossing inter-generational boundaries and thus affecting people who were not physically involved in the event. Despite its shattering effect, trauma can be made productive by becoming the basis of a group identity and thus strengthen the sense of collective self. Similar to Halilovich’s (2015) conception of Bosnian diasporic identity as an attachment not to a specific place, but to a time in the past, the fixation of Viennese turbo-folk listeners on the repertoire of the 1990s can be interpreted as an attempt to process the trauma consisting in a double loss of home by clinging to a musical canon that continuously brings back the ‘90s, the decade of rupture and loss. It is noteworthy that, while Halilovich’s interpretation regards solely the group of Bosnian descendants, I observed similar processes in a sample comprising diverse former-Yugoslav belongings. While there are different traumata depending on an individual’s position on this or that side of the divide between perpetrators and survivors of the war, this was not discernible among my interlocutors.

The re-enactment of a traumatic event can be defined as a ritual – a practice characterised by the constitution of social meaning through recurring acts transcending the mundane routines of everyday life (Durkheim 1915). The practices surrounding turbo-folk in Vienna show all features described by Durkheim as distinctive traits of ritual action: the extra-ordinary quality is present in the lengthy preparation required in order to reach the state of being susceptible to turbo-folk, as well as in the hesitation to listen to “heavy” turbo-folk “on an empty stomach”. The repetitiveness can be found in the revival of the shattering timeframe of the 1990s through the adherence to an unchanging canon. Durkheim’s assumption of individual bodies fusing into a single large organism is mirrored by the particular movement patterns associated with turbo-folk and, most notably, by the practice of singing along. Finally, this joint performance of bodily practices goes along with the construction of a shared ‘Yugo’ identity. This matches the assessment of symbolist anthropology that collective identity does not precede rituals but is rather generated by the very actions thought to represent it (D’Orsi and Dei 2018) (6).

Turbo-Folk and pan-ethnic Nationalism

Both collective trauma and ritual have been described as generative elements in the creation of a national narrative (D’Orsi and Dei 2018; Hirschberger 2018). At first glance, the attitude of Viennese turbo-folk listeners is distinctly anti-nationalist in its rejection of ethnic boundaries in favour of a pan-ethnic ‘Yugo’ identity. Yet at the same time, this identity is constructed as immutable, deterministic, and exclusionary. According to Interviewee 04, there are specific traits uniting all people from the former Yugoslav region, while simultaneously distinguishing them from virtually anybody else: “Anyone who has lived in the Balkan area—Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, you name it—loves this music of ours.” He concludes that “the Balkans are one single strong emotion which I have never seen in Austria.”

The same informant sees the popularity of turbo-folk as being rooted in a shared heritage connecting its listeners to their ancestors: “This music exclusively speaks of some emotion of ours, within ourselves, our ancestors, our parents, and that’s it. And we feel it really strongly and we really love it.” This depiction evokes Anderson’s assessment that nations “loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future” (Anderson 2006: 11-12). In the same way that Interviewee 4 locates the origins of turbo-folk in a remote, mythical past, Anderson sees the proclaimed connection with the national myths of the 19th century as a core quality of nationalism.

He defines the nation as an “imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (Anderson 2006: 6). The limits inherent in the nation concept go hand in hand with the demarcation against the outside. This can also be discerned among Viennese listeners of turbo-folk: Interviewee 01 explains that “if I’m around ‘real’ Austrians, I always feel that I don’t belong 100 percent. Maybe that’s why the music kind of unites us? Or at least I think that they (the other listeners, author) are like me because they listen to the same kind of music.” Notably, the club manager I spoke to repeatedly referred to native Austrians occasionally finding their way into one of the Ottakringer Straße clubs as “foreigners”. Interviewee 04 even made explicit reference to a nationalist discourse

by linking the popularity of turbo-folk and folk music in general to the Serbian national awakening of the 19th century, when philologist and linguist Vuk Karadžić developed the Cyrillic script as a cornerstone of Serbo-Croatian language: “We write in Cyrillic and so our *dvojka* (traditional musical metre, author) is rooted in that Cyrillic script and in our people, and we feel this music simply through the emotion, through everything.”

Interestingly, while opposing the nationalist boundaries established throughout the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the essentialist notions of collective identity present in the field exhibit some defining traits of nationalist ideology. It thus seems justified to identify elements of a ‘Yugo’ nationalism visible in the discursive practices surrounding turbo-folk in Vienna.

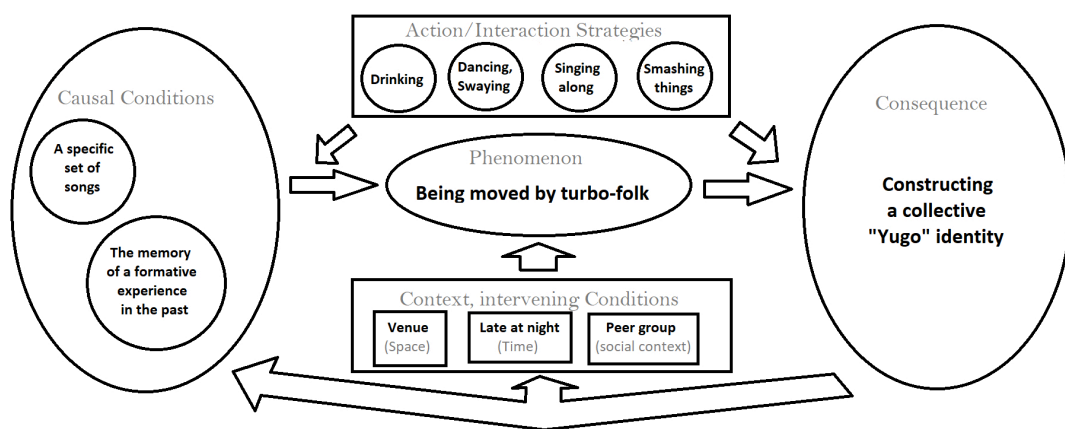


FIGURE 1. Interactions with turbo-folk in Vienna in terms of the coding paradigm.

Figure 1 illustrates the practices surrounding turbo-folk in Vienna by making reference to the coding paradigm (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 99): the *phenomenon* of “being moved by turbo-folk” is enabled by the existence of a definite canon of songs and by the memory of a formative experience in the past (*causal conditions*). In order to unfold, it requires a particular time, space, and social environment (*context*). To reach and then process the emotional state associated with it, actors employ a variety of *strategies*, such as drinking, moving their bodies to the music, smashing glasses, and singing along. This leads to the construction of a collective ‘Yugo’ identity – an identity that simultaneously precedes and enables the event in a circular way (*consequence, causal condition, context*), since “what are consequences of action/interaction at one point in time may become part of the conditions in another” (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 106).

Conclusions and Prospects

Based on the observations and interviews conducted within this project, I have shown how the significance of turbo-folk in today's Vienna differs from the one it was assigned in its context of origin. The explanation for its ongoing popularity in the Austrian capital suggested by this research lies in its ability to unify its listeners and to provide them with a shared identity. The experience of turbo-folk in Vienna is charged with emotion triggered by its association with the past—be it the listener's individual memory or the collective trauma of the violent destruction of Yugoslavia.

Given that many of its Viennese listeners have suffered a double loss of home — through the need to emigrate and through the disintegration of their country of origin—, turbo-folk serves as a common denominator with the capacity to unite virtually all people with origins in the former Yugoslavia. Paradoxically, its very connection to the traumatic period of the 1990s enables it to become a foundation of a diasporic 'Yugo' identity. However, this construction of identity is not a linear but a circular process, in which a common identity is evoked, re-enacted, restored, and generated through the interaction with turbo-folk.

Not using presupposed ethnic groups, but interactions with turbo-folk as the basic units of research enables us to observe the formation of identity *in actu*, as a process taking place in the practices of partying, drinking, and singing together to the familiar sounds of turbo-folk —calling to mind Assmann's (1997) and Brubaker's (2000) statements on the processual character of collective identity. Not presupposing ethnic groups as a-priori also enables the observation that within my sample, identity is defined along different lines than the ones suggested by an ethnic framework.

Given that this identity formation does not start from scratch, but builds on a body of collective memories, there is no real starting point to it, as visualised by the circularity of the coding paradigm. This iterative character of identity echoes Butler's (1993) concept of performativity which "consists of a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's 'will' or 'choice'" (Butler 1993: 234).

A positive identification with Yugoslavia as has been theorised under the term of "Yugonostalgia" (Ćuković 2015) has sometimes been presented as an alternative to dominant nationalist affiliations (Petrov 2018: 4). Yet, as I have shown, identification with the former Yugoslavia among Viennese listeners of turbo-folk does not preclude a nationalist narrative, but rather presents us with nationalism in the guise of pan-ethnic solidarity. From here, several directions emerge to be followed in the subsequent project. Therefore, I wish to conclude with three considerations, each of which opens up a possible pathway for future research.

Diaspora versus context of origin: Several of my Viennese interlocutors gave valuable insights into the stark differences between the meanings turbo-folk assumes in Vienna and in contemporary Belgrade. The intent of the subsequent project will therefore be the juxtaposition of interactions with turbo-folk in Belgrade and Vienna. I aim to highlight the significance of place within turbo-folk cultures and the differentiated meanings of the music contingent on the geographical, political, and social context. It remains to be examined whether interactions with turbo-folk imply the establishment of transnational networks, or if turbo-folk scenes remain largely local and separated.

Turbo-folk as intermedial phenomenon of popular music: I start from the assumption that the meanings ascribed to a certain kind of music are not arbitrary but constituted in the interaction between a situated human subject and a definite musical phenomenon. In the case of turbo-folk, that phenomenon is highly intermedial, given that not only the song texts, but also the visual and performative aspects of either live performances or music videos are defining features of the music and its experience. In this light, a multimedia analysis of exemplary songs is essential to a non-reductionist account of the interactions with turbo-folk.

Generational change: Although turbo-folk acts as the lowest common denominator among people with former-Yugoslav background in Vienna, my fieldwork showed that it is not the only genre present in the clubs on Ottakringer Straße. While it is indeed popular among all age groups, the youngest partygoers favour a different kind of music: turbo-folk's most recent descendant *trepfolk*. Its exponents—such as Jala Brat or Buba Corelli—are the stars of the 18- or 20-year-olds hitting the clubs on Saturday night. This musical change is accompanied by a cultural one: Generation Z, now entering the club scene, knows the war and the Yugoslav republic it put an end to merely from the tales of elders and history books. Nor do they have, in most cases, a personal memory of life in the Balkans, as this group mostly consists of third generation immigrants. Despite the strong 'Yugo' identification in the community, this generation seems less interested in clinging to its Balkan roots, let alone to the remembrance of war and ethnic conflict. Instead, global popular culture has become the main cultural reference point. As with turbo-folk, *trepfolk* aids the construction of a common identity, albeit one less oriented towards the past and ethnic roots, and more towards the present and global fashion. This change and its deeper cultural implications merit further exploration.

Endnotes

1. While the spelling variants 'turbofolk' and 'turbo folk' can be encountered in the literature, 'turbo-folk' is the most common version.
2. In this article, the expression "origins in the former Yugoslavia" refers to first generation as well as second and third generation immigrants. Applying the expression to these latter cases is justified by a strong identification as "ex-Yugoslav" by participants.
3. For an overview of the first two decades of literature on turbo-folk, see Grujić (2009, pp. 26–27) and Archer (2012).
4. For an overview, see <https://www.mdw.ac.at/ive/?PagelId=4622>.
5. A similar repertory of expression – crying and sobbing, singing along, a posture of devotion – was described by van de Port (1999) with regard to Serbs' interaction with Romani music.
6. Also Mitrović (2011) analyses the interaction with turbo-folk in terms of a ritual, albeit not centring on the musical canon but on the body of the female singer as symbolic representation of the imaginary national unity (132).

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