

## LOST PRESENT: BECOMING AS BEING

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**Abstract.** *In this article we will discuss a particular case of "becoming" and how this human condition, under certain historical conditions, takes over the "being." As a narrative and metaphorical context, I will use sericulture (silk production), the topographical language of the Pannonia plains, and the historical wanderings of Serbs in the morning of the creation of nations. As a personal, emotional context, I will use my memories from Banat, a region in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina.*

**Key words:** *silkworm, becoming, being, Sebald, Serbian migration*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Bombyx mori is a beautiful silkworm moth. The male dies soon after mating, and the female lays three to five hundred eggs in several days, then dies. Silkworms hatch from the eggs that have, at birth, black, velvety fur. After six to seven weeks they shed their old skin on four occasions and emerge every time whiter, larger, smoother, finally almost transparent. Redness on the throat announces the onset of metamorphosis. The caterpillar spins a fragmented web for protection of the cocoon and starts constructing an egg-shaped casing around himself out of interrupted thread a 1000 yard long. Inside the cocoon there is no air and no moisture. The silkworm sheds off one last time its skin and transforms into a nymph. For 2-3 weeks it remains in that state until the butterfly emerges. In order to collect the silk, one kills the worm/ nymph and interrupts the metamorphosis. Billions of worms/nymphs have lived only to their continued but neglected **becoming** phase.*

In this article I will discuss a particular case of "becoming" and how this human condition, under certain historical conditions, takes over the "being." As a narrative and metaphorical context, I will use sericulture (silk production), the topographical language of the Pannonia plains, and the historical wanderings of Serbs in the morning of the

creation of nations. As a personal, emotional context, I will use my memories from Banat, a region in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina.

In *Organs without Bodies - Gilles Deleuze and Consequences: Becoming versus History*, Slavoj Žižek talks about the virtual state of "being":

The ontological opposition between **Being** and **Becoming** which underpins Deleuze's notion of the virtual is a radical one in that its ultimate reference is pure becoming without being (as opposed to the metaphysical notion of pure being without becoming). This pure becoming is not a particular becoming OF some corporeal entity, a passage of this entity from one to another state, but a **becoming-it-itself**, thoroughly extracted from its corporeal base. (emphasized by the author of this article) (Žižek 2004:2)

Serbs in the northern province of today's Vojvodina have been *less* under Turks and *more* under Austro-Hungarian Empire, unlike the rest of the Serbian territories. Under Viennese governance and in co-habitation with German settlers (among others), Vojvodina Serbs have undergone a special treatment of *becoming* "more civilized" and more "(petit)-bourgeois."

On the other hand, Serbs from the 17th century Kosovo, fearing the incoming Turks, fled their homes and started a major period of wandering, known as Great Serb Migrations, towards Turkish-free Magyar territories in Hungary.<sup>1</sup> During those migrations "the already existing Serbian population on the territory of today's Vojvodina, wasn't considerably enlarged because the immigrants continued much further north (all the way to Komoran and Saint Andrej)." (Kicošev 2010:14).

North of the Sava and Danube rivers, in the Hungarian *Lowlands*, secluded by the Carpathian mountains, lies a large plain, once called Alföld. At the beginning of the 16th century, Serbs (Rascians) who lived a very primitive, nomadic life, were fighting Swabians and Magyars for dominance of the Alföld plain and the rich vales of Tisza (Theiss) and Danube. There were constant migrations of Serbs towards Hungary, but Magyars and Germans proved themselves to be better farmers in the upper land, and after the Banat was occupied, the migration stopped. In fact, the Germans and many other "settlers," followed Serbs down south to the large plains of today's Vojvodina:

After the Banat had been occupied, a stop was put in the part of the country to the constant migrations of the nomad Serb goat-herds, which jeopardized the security of property. They were compelled to do regular military service, and an attempt was made to force them to settle in permanent homes. (Marczali 1910: 203)

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<sup>1</sup> Following the debacle of the Turkish forces at Vienna in 1683, the army of Western-European Alliance (Austria, Poland and Venetia) continued to drive the Turks out of the Balkan region of Podunavlje. During the Turkish counterattack of 1689/1690, it was driven back to the north on main direction Skopje-Belgrade, across the Sava and the Danube. Around 37000 Serbian families crossed the rivers with allied forces. Those were the families which took part in the war on the side of Austria, either by staging an armed uprising or in some other manner. Austrian authorities regrouped them on the Croatia-Slavonija-Hungary-Erdelj stretch. Serbs received privileges from the Roman-German Emperor Leopold I, which guaranteed them national and religious singularity and certain rights and freedoms in the Habsburg monarchy. The key person in this process was the Patriarch of Peć, Arsenije III Čarnojević. The same emperor approved of him as of the head of the newly established Orthodox church in the Monarchy in 1695. Arsenije III Čarnojević and subsequent religious leaders of Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy had jurisdiction over all Serbs in the Habsburg Monarchy, including Serbs of Vojvodina, and Serbs of Vojvodina accepted the idea of a separate Serbian voivodeship in this area, which they managed to create in 1848). (Explanation from SANU archives).

Serbs are not "good" immigrants - they are wanderers, not settlers. The large Serb migrations from the Balkans to the Pannonia Plain started in the 14th century and lasted until the end of the 18th century. People do not spend four centuries covering a distance that can be traversed in three days on horseback (some of the territory already occupied by Serbs) to immigrate. Serbs, their wives, children, and livestock have moved with the winds and flows of more ambitious and historically concerned powers (and their kings and queens), back and forth, and have settled again on their own territories. Rascians, "rasejani": dispersed, the ones who went all the way to Siberia and fought the Chinese; Thracians, believed to be Serbs in the times of Herodotus (legend again); Serbs who cherish a possibility of big space not as a political but rather a space of Serbian myth in which the purpose of wandering/migration is not the conquest of new territory but the business of the soul and perpetual reinvention.

Slavoj Žižek writes: "The emergence of the New occurs when a work overcomes its historical context. And, on the opposite side, if there is a true image of fundamental ontological immobility, it is the evolutionary image of the universe as a complex network of endless transformations and developments in which *plus ça change, plus ça reste le même*:" (Žižek 2004:2). He (Žižek) follows by a quote from Gilles Deleuze:

I became more and more aware of the possibility of distinguishing between becoming and history. It was Nietzsche who said that nothing important is ever free from a 'non-historical cloud.' /.../ What history grasps in an event is the way it's actualized in particular circumstances; the event's becoming is beyond the scope of history. /.../ **Becoming isn't part of history;** history amounts only to the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to "**become,**" that is, to create something new. (emphasized by the author of this article) (Deleuze 1995:170-171)

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In the late sixties, I used to spend parts of my summer vacations in Pancevo, a small town in the region of Banat, not far from Belgrade, where my aunt lived in a tiny house on a broad suburban street of Stevan Supljikac, across the street from a shoe factory. Streets in Banat were broad and straight with concrete, chipped sidewalks. The street that they lived on had two endless rows of magnificent mulberry trees on both sides that stretched as far as the eye could see down the street. Most of the houses behind the trees were attached to each other. They shared walls, yards, trees, fences in an unpredictable way, and were directly bordering the sidewalks.

Beyond the mulberry street, the town of Pancevo spread out and disappeared into the glittering marshes, agricultural plains, the Danube river and the small Tamish river.

There was a certain *grandeur* in that endless flat of Banat, filled with marshes, or bare and sandy; there was also a certain majesty in its melancholy and hillless horizon. Summers in Banat were hot and, because of the marshes and underground waters, mosquitoes were everywhere. The sidewalks on our street were stained with fallen mulberries, attracting green summer flies whose buzzing, paired with the music from small workers'-type transistor radios, would put us to sleep for lazy afternoon naps, wrapped like worms in cotton blankets that smelled like the marsh behind the house.



Stevan Šupljikac Street in 2010

The mulberry trees provided good shade for the big windows facing the street, and their ripe, white or dark-red fruit was sweet and delicious. It was a part of the town where the working class lived on the edge of survival, in two-room houses invaded by mold; their children would walk miles to attend school, and housewives would clean the hallways and staircases in four story residential buildings in nearby, emerging socialist-architecture zones. Most of the wives, like my aunt, had problems with their gall bladders, thyroids and pancreas, likely a consequence of polluted water and food rich in pig fat and carbohydrates used in Austro-Hungarian cooking. I never asked myself whose ideas it was to plant mulberry trees, or how old they were? I can only recall my fascination with the mystery of the house next door: in their attic, the neighbors had colonies of silkworms. I suppose it was a small source of additional income for a family without land. They used that little space above their tiny sleeping rooms, full of gritty children; children in beds, silk worms above their heads, and Chagall's roosters on the crooked red roof.

The street was sleepy and unaware of the incoming synthetic revolution boiling in the tubes of the "Refinery", the big, black institution, constructed the year before, where crude oil (a malignant inversion of silk) was to be refined. As such, it would be used to mimic many natural materials. The manufacturing of a look-alike started: synthetics would replace cotton, wool, and silk; plastic would replace wood and metal.

Our neighbors probably bought the worms from the silk factory before it closed. The father was a nice tall man with a moustache, brightened into a sordid yellow by nicotine, and mostly out of work and drunk. The mother was a remarkable Banat woman, who spoke straight words with no adjectives, and who took care of their small silk business.

Only later did I learn that there were no metamorphoses in that attic - the process was interrupted in order to collect the cocoon' shells, the metamorphosis material, to capture the vehicle of that peculiar Houdini-like process between two states of being: one miserable and crawling, the other light and flying.

The idea of transforming one's (biological) identity into a different register fascinated me deeply. The only metamorphosis I could see that summer was the new life my aunt and her family were quickly absorbing, far from their old land where I still lived. The changes were reflected on every level – what they ate, how they talked, etc. They came to get a new identity, and the new identity demanded new myths, or at least new stereotypes of speech, and a "non-history" (Zizek 2004)<sup>2</sup>. But "Myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion" says Roland Barthes (Barthes 1972).

<sup>2</sup> This is a reference to a term "non-history", used in Slavoj Žižek's *Organs Without Bodies – Deleuze and Consequences*

Typically, the first generation of immigrants wraps itself in a cocoon-like life, half-way between who they were and who they wanted to be, similarly to silk production, where the "doll", the "bride", the worm, was never to fly. Even simple exposure to a hot, sunny day would interrupt the process. The cocoons are usually baked in ovens or placed in special rooms for fumigation.

Many years later, while reading W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* (Sebald 1998: 289-290), my mulberry street came back to me; the book cited some archival facts, in an artistic manner, about the failure of a sericulture in the Austro-Hungarian province of Banat. According to the book, *Pancsova* was one of the threads'ends in the 18<sup>th</sup> century silk geography. The silk-trends had spread from the Greek islands, Italy, France and England to Germany and its provinces. The newly made town of Pancsova was given a *silk* chance.

In 1690 most of the Serbs from the first big Serb migration, crossed the Sava and Danube and settled in the territory of present-day Hungary, while a smaller part of them settled in the territory of present-day Croatia and present-day north-western Vojvodina (the rest of Vojvodina was still under Ottoman administration). In 1717 there were 70 houses in Pancevo. The same year Maria Theresa, the future queen of Hungary and Bohemia was born. Pancevo was established as a town now and was ready to join the new "trend" in the Austro-Hungarian economy:

...everything had to be done (by the Viennese gov.) to promote sericulture in Hungary, for Vienna and the Hereditary Provinces would thus be able to secure the raw material required by their manufacturers at a cheaper rate in Hungary than in Italy or the East.

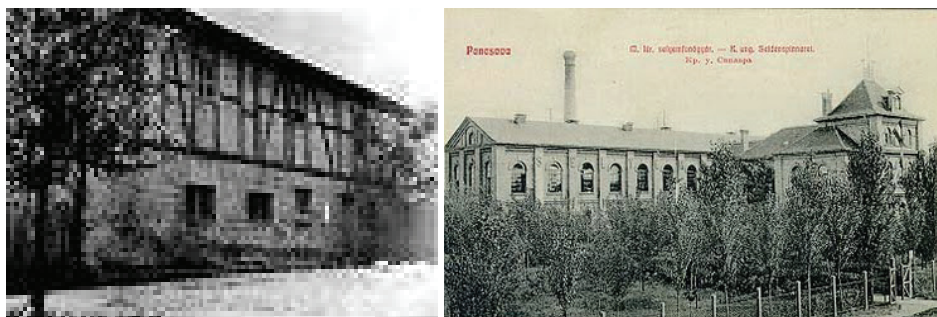
...for sericulture requires, above all, work and care, not capital or land. A certain amount of success was obtained in the southern parts of Slavonia, where, as the returns show, the number of mulberry trees and the production of raw silk increased from year to year. (Marczali 1910:59)

In Sebald's novel, the reflections on sericulture are made in the chapter introduced through the imaginary collection of the *Museum Clausum – Bibliotheca Abscondita*, (Browne 1684)<sup>3</sup> as a veritable and yet non-historical fact, told in a poetic, dream-like manner. After an extensive description of the marvels from Sir Thomas Browne's list /museum, Sebald abandons the enumeration and picks up the bamboo cane in which, at the time of Byzantine Emperor Justinian, two Persian friars had brought the first eggs of the silkworm to the Western world. (Sebald 2004: 289)

In the beautiful Spring of 1733, seventeen years after the Turks left and Austro-Hungarians overtook the government of the region, silk production in Pancsova commenced. Thousands of mulberry trees were available to feed enough cocoons to make 90 pounds per month of raw-silk. Then, one evening - a storm touched the grounds; hailstones, big enough to kill birds, damaged the trees and the young industry. One reads in municipal archival books: "*Grad pogodila jaka vremenska nepogoda.*"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sir Thomas Browne, *Musaeum Clausum – Bibliotheca Abscondita*, 1684. The book contains short descriptions of supposed, rumored or lost books pictures and objects. The subtitle describes the book as an inventory of remarkable books, antiquities, pictures and rarities of several kinds, scarce or never seen by any man now living.

<sup>4</sup> Most of the dates about Pancevo's silk production history are taken from the Pancevo Archives site. (<http://www.arhivpancevo.org.rs/ist01.htm>)



The old silk mill on Bavaniste road (1889), near Kovin and the silk mill Galatea on Tamish river (1899), abandoned.

Five years later, in the fall and the winter of 1738, a plague devastated the town and Turks occupied Pancevo, only to be chased away again by the Habsburgs a year later (the town was completely destroyed by both forces). During these turbulent times, Serbs were moving (again) towards Syrmia (Srem) and even further, deep into the Hungarian territories.<sup>5</sup> That same year, in 1739, Habsburg Kingdom of Serbia and Banat of Temeswar ceased to exist. Serbian population around Tisza and the Mures rivers, traditionally on the military border, were now left deep into the interior territory of Austrian empire. These Serbs were now forced into demilitarization as a part of their assimilation into the Hungarian Diet. Many Serbs saw this attempt as a threat to their freedom and identity, and many of them migrated to Russia on the banks of the Dnepr and Donets rivers.

Both Serbian Migrations were going to participate in the building of the great Habsburg Empire and its own mythological history. In 1767 the town of Pancevo became home of the XII German-Banat regiment (who will be in charge of the silk production). There were 82 German and 217 Serbian families in town, according to the city of Pancevo archives.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the silk cultivation in Germany collapsed, and the Austro-Hungarian border regiments in Banat (Vojvodina), who conducted research into outdoor silk cultivation, informed the Imperial Royal Counselor of War (as narrated in Sebald's book) that in the locations of Homolje and Hopovo (Vojvodina) the silk cocoons, after sloughing of their skins for the second time, were knocked of the trees by the hailstorm. (Sebald 2004: 289)

The caterpillars were at the mercy of numerous enemies, such as sparrows and starlings, which devoured them as soon as they were set in the trees. Colonel Minitinovich of the Gradiskan regiment complained of the worms' lack of appetite, of the changeable weather, of gnats, wasps and flies, while Colonel Milletich of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brod border regiment reported that, by the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, the few silkworms and evolving papillons that had survived on the trees had been burned by the fierce heat of that summer, or else, unable to graze on the now tough and leathery leaves, had simply expired. (Sebald 1998: 290)

<sup>5</sup> The Second Serbian Migration took place in 1737–1739 under the Patriarch of Peć, Arsenije IV Jovanović, also parallel with the Habsburg withdrawal from territories that they held in the Balkans, which between 1718 and 1739 were known as the Kingdom of Serbia and Banat of Temeswar.

According to Henrik Marczali, Hungarian historian, the misfortune of sericulture in the region was attributed to the negligent, landless "cottagers" from the area, possibly the ones who were dispersed from the land below Danube.

But, owing to the very fact that sericulture required such concentrated attention, it could not be engaged in by (Hungarian) peasants who had to look after their fields, but only by poor cottagers (...). Another obstacle in the way of its advance, as several counties pointed out, was that the inhabitants refused to renounce smoking in their kitchens "for the sake of caterpillars", and that extra rooms with a smokefree atmosphere were few. Despite all the support given by the highest authorities, sericulture remained unpopular and had, at that time, absolutely no influence on the life of the people of Hungary. (Marczali 1910: 60)

In France, Duc de Sully, prime minister to Henry IV argued against the introduction of sericulture because of "the danger that the rural population, from whom the best musketeers and cavalymen had always been recruited, would lose their innate vigor by being employed on work more fitting women's and children's hands" (Sebald 1998: 279)

Did the silkworms really have to come and die from natural causes, evil sparrows and starlings, or changing weather condition (hailstones) for that matter in my Pancevo (*Pancsova*)? Worst of all, did they really have to lose their appetite? Do papillons truly expire in Banat?

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Only on a rare occasion would we leave our street and ride our bikes to the outskirts of the town towards Kovin (where the oldest mulberry trees were planted), and further East to Deliblato Sand / Deliblatska Pescara.<sup>6</sup> The area of *Deliblatska Pescara* covers 300 km<sup>2</sup> in the Southern Banat, from the Danube river up, north and west, in the same corridor that has a strong wind, called *koshava*. A fertile, elliptical area on the map, intersected by sandy hills, spreads out towards the Danube and Carpat mountains and the mythical plains of Alföld.

My cousins and I would go there to look for swamp birds, local orchids, and sticks to make home-made fishing poles. At that time of the year, the worker-ants nests were everywhere in the sandy soil. With a stick, we would cover the entrance into their nests and confuse a long shiny line of ants.



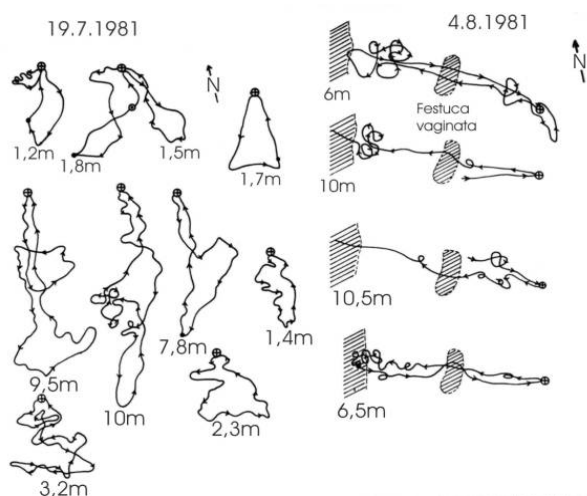
In the vibrating air of the hot afternoon, kneeling on the dry earth, I still see the small bodies of my friends jumping over the ant nests. I wondered what would happen if I took one ant and moved it far away from the nest? Would it find its way home? I got the answer many years later, during a lecture given by Alan Schoenfeld, a mathematician at the University of California, Berkeley. Shoenfeld mentioned an experiment in which researchers moved a colony of ants a few miles away from its nest. It was noted that the

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<sup>6</sup> *Deliblatska Peščara* is the largest sandy terrain in Europe, once part of a vast prehistoric desert. It originated from the withdrawal of the Pannonia Sea. It was proclaimed to be the Special Nature Reserve.

ants didn't find their way back home – they just repeated the *west-east-north-west* code (the exact steps backward), imprinted in their memories, which would have brought them back to their nest if it had not been displaced. They did not use any experience, sense of smell or visual memory for that matter.

"During their foraging trips, workers of *Caenescens* leave the nest 10 to 12 times during the day, reaching the maximum distance of about 10 m from the nest, and showing site fidelity by going always in the direction chosen by the first exit. Disposition of the queen in the nest was variable. Generally, it was always found at lower levels of the nest. Only once, the queen was found at the upper level. The temperature in the chamber with the queen was variable too." (Petrov 2006)



Route shape and the site fidelity by exits of workers. (Ant related images: Petrov 2006)

At the beginning of the 18th century, the Serbian population of Banat, wheatland and desert, less experienced in farming than their Hungarian and German neighbors, stopped wandering the upper Alföld steps and started to learn farming and city-life from their German neighbors, who came down to the undevelopped lands of Banat to start new lives. Rascians (Serbs) who played an important historic role in fighting back the Turks from the Austro-Hungarian Empire trasformed themselves into obedient workers in newly built small towns in the Danube and Tissa Valleys.

Inverted, imposed or worshipped, the story (rather than History) of Banat will define the European position of Serbia far in the future. The Viennesse government used both the "uncivilized, vigorous but proud Rascians (Serbs) and German settlers to overthrow the Hungarian constitution." (Marczali 1910)

Vojvodina, part of Austro-Hungary, was freed from the Turks much earlier than the southern regions of Serbia and started attracting multicultural wanderers from all parts of Europe. For most of them, it was a matter of a day trip.

When the silk cultivation in the German provinces collapsed and the production came to a halt, even before it had properly begun, the mulberry gardens disappeared, the trees were uprooted for firewood, and the machines were broken up. Sebald concludes: "The



main reason why silk husbandry failed so soon after it had been introduced was not so much that the mercantile calculations were adrift, but rather the despotic manner in which German rulers attempted to force it along, whatever the cost." (Sebald 1998: 287)

Unlike counselor Hazy, a character in Sebald's novel, the ex-marines of the vanished Pannonian Sea were not capable of "recognizing the mistakes that had been made" (Sebald 1998: 290) because their sense of social improvement was on a rising note. At the same time, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Vojvodina, there was a period of rapid population increase, prosperity, sustained economic development, expansion of the transportation infrastructure and relatively peaceful interethnic relations. All of these things happened despite the formation of various nationalistic and reform movements. It was a period of integration into Europe, both economically and spiritually. At the beginning of the century, the diverse population of Vojvodina was composed of Swabians, Hungarians, Serbs, Jews, Turks, and Romanians – all of those who stepped hard on the invisible Pannonian sea and failed on the silky road.

I can only imagine the social confusion of the population in the Danubian principalities (one of them being Vojvodina) in the vertiginous and stormy summer of 1811: two years after Napoleon had refused the peace offered to him by Austria, retreated from Germany, while Imperial Russia and the French Empire were chasing away the Ottoman Turks from the area (working secretly together against the British Empire). Russians were already seeping tea across the Danube in Silistra, Bulgaria, after the 1811 massacre of 9,000 Ottomans in Rousse; in that year of 1811, one year before Napoleon invaded Russia, and Stevan Supljikac from Pancevo was switching between French and Austrian armies, I was still a century and a half away from my fortunate mulberry summers.

Later on, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the silk industry was revived in Banat in a different, "non-imposing way", as the historic character Counsellor Hazy in Sebald's book suggests: "it should be born out of nothing, as it were, and be run as a minor pursuit in domestic rooms and chambers by women and children, servants, the poor and elderly, in short, by all who were not at present in a position to earn money. (...) In Hazy's estimation, there could be no more convenient way of imposing on the lower classes the virtues of order and cleanliness" (Sebald 1998: 290) Sebald goes even further connecting the history of silk cultivation to the "improved" methods of a silk cultivation in Führer's Germany propaganda film, a hundred year later: "men and women in white coats, in whitewashed rooms flooded with light, snow-white sheets of paper, snow-white canvas protective gauze, snow-white cocoons and snow-white mailing bags. The whole film promised the best and the cleanest of all possible worlds (...)." (Sebald 1998: 292)

Many Hungarian settlers came to Banat (Vojvodina) during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, Germany was preparing its industry to be self-sufficient; the education in pureness, whiteness and cleanliness was authentically promoted through silk-industry.

The second attempt at silk cultivation later in the same century, although "less imposing," was to transform and "purify" the population of Vojvodina, according to new, western standards.

Vojvodina Serbs were, in a way, *lucky* to become citizens of the big empire. They couldn't see yet the "virtues" of cleanliness, chlorine fumigation, and other new-order advantages. At the same time, and with the population growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a transition was made towards the factories that produced plastics and other new materials. Only this time the fumigation was all over the town.



(from Pancevo archives)

After World War II, the unifying *national economy* in Yugoslavia was simplified to *whatever* industry, anything that would feed the incoming, hungry, illiterate people from the mountains of the Carpathians, Balkans, Shara, and other impoverished regions. Unlike the countries on the *other side* of the Danube, the newcomers to Vojvodina were far from both the national awareness and *vérité occidentale*.

The production of artificial fertilizers began with the opening of "Azotara". The silk factory stopped working. First plants for the oil refinery, that would enhance the production of synthetic materials, started working. Mulberry trees were cut down. Materials derived from oil started to replace natural products such as cotton and silk. The silk cocoons died a year earlier with the closing of the silk factory.

The Austrian Empire's goal, from the beginning of the 18th century, was to produce cheap silk (cheaper than silk from China) by conscripting its production on the local, nomadic, landless population; at the same time, in China, 20 million households did nothing but silk production. In this second attempt to introduce silk industry in its Provinces, along with silk-production, the Serbian population was undergoing a change in civilization.

Two centuries later, cheap silk came with the first Chinese-settlers in Pancevo. In 1992, one of the changing governments in Milosevic's Serbia realized the potential of re-starting sericulture and proposed a plan that was adopted by the government. That plan was never realized – this time there was no hailstorm like in 1733. It was the sanctions imposed on Serbia by the Western World that prevented it. By inversion, the biggest flea market in Europe formed on the outskirts of Pancevo during the economic crisis, prompted by these sanctions. The market attracted a large number of Chinese immigrants who showed up for the first time in Eastern Europe. One could see them sleeping like cocoons on top of their open-market tables, where they would offer cheap silk and plastic good-luck kittens.

The oldest mulberry trees in Pancevo are still found today in Kovilj, Srem. Not too long ago, people of Kovilj started an annual event called *Parastos dudu* (Memorial to the Mulberry Tree), when the fruits from the trees are collected and made into an exceptional

mulberry brandy, *Dudovaca*. The only place one can find real *Dudovaca* today is served in a restaurant, The End of the World, in Arkanje, near Kovilj. If there is a violin around, the chances are that one of the most beloved Serbian songs can be heard: *Svilen konac pletem ja od sna, Tanka predja pa se pokida...*<sup>7</sup>

The last time I went to Pancevo I visited a local cemetery in the aftermath of the 1999 NATO bombing that seriously endangered the town by destroying parts of the oil refinery. A poisonous gas, which stayed in the air for weeks, fumigated the whole area. As a result, almost every family had a member dying from cancer (including my aunt's young daughter-in-law). Before World War II in Yugoslavia, there were more than two and a half million white mulberry trees; today there are not more than a couple of thousand.

According to Deleuze and his concept of *difference*, there is no new identity, and in repetition, nothing is ever the same. Rather, "there is only difference: copies are something new, and everything is constantly changing. Reality is a becoming, not being." (Deleuze 1994)

In the case of Serbian repetitive, myth-making conversation with history, where "everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse," (Barthes 1972) an appearance of new stereotypes/copies would be more beneficial than the implementation of new myths as a mode of signification: "Myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion" wrote Barthes in *Myth Today*.

During the silky periods in Vojvodina, there was a strong attempt to transition from raw, uncivilized, unsettled to pure, settled and civilized – and petit-bourgeois. The Serbs were learning from their German neighbors how to live in towns, to become the "other":

The petit bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. In the petit-bourgeois universe, all the experiences of confrontation are reverberating, any otherness is reduced to sameness. The spectacle and the tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors. (Barthes 1972)

Even in modern day Serbia, as suggested by Slavoj Žižek, direct exposure to "raw Serbian data" is confusing, if not prepared and "explained" in the context of the "representative" works of art, produced from that same context, in a non-historic inversion:

One often hears that, in order to understand a work of art, one needs to know its historical context. Against this historicist commonplace, a Deleuzian counter-claim would be not only that too much of a historical context can blur the proper contact with a work of art (i.e., that, in order to enact this contact, one should abstract from the work's context). Even more, it is, rather, the work of art itself which provides a context enabling us to properly understand a given historical situation. If, today, someone were to visit Serbia, the direct contact with raw data there would leave him confused. If, however, he were to read a couple of literary works and see a couple of representative movies, they would definitely provide the context that would enable him to locate the raw data of his experience (...). (Žižek 2004)

In that sense, Serbs have often connected History with a *myth*. In a myth, an historical event is frozen in time, and doesn't argue the state of "being." To Barthes, for in-

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<sup>7</sup> "Silky thread I make out of my dreams, the thread is so thin it breaks." (Transl. by the author of this article.)

stance, myth is seen as a distortion of history, a meta-language that can give the image of a whole without any explanation as to its roots.

Even in their most disturbing need for "today," present events in Serbia are, in fact, a continuation of the past. Serbs are left, once again, with the poetics of phenomenology, rather than **difference-in-itself** ontological presence.<sup>8</sup> (Smith and Protevi 2008) Serbian "today" emphasizes recent *historical* events and suggests past more than a future. Therefore, the present is not the point of exchange between past and future; it is a continuation of an unfinished past, a place where the past is in *decay* because it overwrites future and doesn't qualify as "new", a place where "present" comes to a still.

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## IZGUBLJENA SADAŠNJOST: POSTAJANJE KAO POSTOJANJE

Cvetanka Perović

*U ovom članku diskutovaćemo poseban slučaj "postajanja" i kako to ljudsko stanje, pod izvesnim istorijskim uslovima, nadvladava "postojanje". Kao narativni i metaforični kontekst korišćićemo razvoj proizvodnje svile u Vojvodini (Pančevu) u 18. veku, topografski jezik panonskih ravnica, kao i istorijska lutanja Srba u zoru stvaranja nacija. Kao lični, emocionalni kontekst, korišćiću moje uspomene iz Banata, regiona u severnoj srpskoj pokrajini Vojvodini.*

Ključne reči: *svilena buba, postajanje, postojanje, Sebald, srpske migracije*

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<sup>8</sup> In *Difference and Repetition* (1994), Columbia University Press, Deleuze's main philosophical project concerns the relationship between Identity and Difference. "In Deleuze's ontology, the different is related to the different through difference itself, without any mediation by an identity." (Smith, D. and Protevi, J., "Gilles Deleuze", (2008), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)