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Tradition and Patriotism: Thought and Kitsch

Folk music is more than just a quaint curiosity, the lowest common denominator in our collective vocal knowledge, bringing total strangers in a mountain cabin and on a glass of wine to sing in choral harmony. Coupled with lyrics and stories it has to tell, ethnological musical heritage serves a kind of portal: an entry point to tradition and the past. And being creatures of time and memory, people need such portals. By crossing from one side to the other we search for, and occasionally find, ourselves; by uncovering traces of individuality in stories which contribute to our collective consciousness, we establish ourselves as individual parts of the community, the very one which paradoxically enables our unique existence.

I begin the reflection on my own history of working with Slovenian musical tradition with a notion or rather a phenomenon which proved to be one of the key companions to our integration into our common past: I am talking about the notion of patriotism. Some of you might be surprised by my decision to do so, yet patriotism in the context of reflection on one's own position in relation to community is inevitably a crucial question: whether in the spirit of political catch phrasing or intimate emotion; even if we decide to reject it in our (pseudo) cosmopolitan stance, or simply pay no heed to it, it remains a key element of our cultural existence. Spoken or left unsaid; disavowed in the spirit of often naive general humanism, or spelled out on flags too often flying at primitive patriotic and nationalistic gatherings: patriotism is one thing we just cannot dismiss.

The question of patriotism is an extremely complex one, and this and similar subjects are best disassembled into more easily manageable elements. When talking about patriotism, one of the key elements is the question of presentation.

It only takes a fleeting glance into the aesthetic of discourses, self-described as patriotic, to see that their imagery is often extremely close to kitsch. This is not a moral judgement, as understanding kitsch in the given context as an expression of bad taste is nothing but a crude simplification, stripping patriotism of its complexity and reducing it to a primitive emotion typical of backwater simpletons; the ones who are simply not capable of perceiving life in all its integrity, and subsequently reading it through their own blood-and-soil prism of nationalist narrow-mindedness. A haughty position such as this can only lead to rejection of patriotism altogether, which would in turn put a prompt end to any meaningful reflection on the subject.

Yet, of course, kitsch as one of patriotism's presentational forms remains a fact; a fact we should approach with absolute seriousness. The first and fundamental question that presents to me therefore goes something like this: Why does patriotism so often chose to present as kitsch?

Patriotism as I understand it is a vital emotion of continuously re-birthing its own identity through a dialogue with a community and its history. The community is in itself a coincidental factor; it is not a matter of choice but of fundamental coercion. Just like my first language which I was unable to choose for myself; just like my history that hasn't been created by me, but rather by others. The space and time into which I was born are not a matter of choice, my freedom begins with the way I communicate with the culture I was placed in; with the way I choose to establish myself as a human being in relation to others, first to those speaking the same language; the language I have no choice but to call my own. Cosmopolitan affiliation with humanity and the planet seem abstract in its primality - it is an irrefutable fact that we are humans first - yet even my address to humanity doesn't reach beyond the boundaries of my language; the relationship with the general human and planetary nature is another one I enter into as - at least partially - already formed part of a certain environment which inevitably shaped me even before I got to make my first steps beyond its borders; which has already drawn the lines of the borders I am now stepping over; the environment which represents the a priori of my cultural existence.

A simplified cosmopolitan stance too often forgets about this fact, making patriotism one of the collateral victims of this oblivion. In this context, patriotism becomes at best an unwanted and at worst a forbidden word. On the other hand, nationalism and vulgar loyalty to one's country are rife with patriotism and tradition, but paradoxically often themselves succumb to a different kind of, yet no less harmful, amnesia; in their excessive exaggerations of the past they often forget one crucial factor: that although history as being in the past might seem static and unalterable, yet it keeps recurring through interpretation and reflection, again and again. That it cannot and should not become a museum artefact in the sense of a cultural basis, but instead needs to keep coming back to life through countless reinventions.

Integration into one's own culture and deep-rootedness in one's past call for a cognitive and creative effort. Without reflection, kitsch is all we are left with. By denying the past its aliveness, we condemn it to death. And that is what kitsch is, death; it is a denial of life. In other words: kitsch is the only possible representation of understanding the past as something dead; it is its compulsory aesthetic face.

When talking about reinvention I am of course not referring to any form of historical relativism, and even less to revisionism, which is politically motivated as a rule; I am talking about something quite different and much more fundamental. Let me emphasize at this point: a little while back I used the phrase museum artefact; the problem is not in the nature of museum itself as an institution of science. The word museum was employed in the semi-symbolic sense and the problem arises once the museum becomes a dumping ground, a space of conserved past.

Death appears in different forms. The past can be "dead", because it has been glorified, locked away in the rigid institutions and textbooks, and thus rendered absolute and static. It is made dead by our arrogant immersion in the future, pushing it aside as something unnecessary in the sense of things past. Another thing killing it is the already mentioned simplified cosmopolitan stance: by abstracting and transforming it from space (or time) of the actual experience and involvement into

an intangible entity. In all the cases mentioned we are really witnessing the same phenomenon: building an impermeable and impenetrable boundary between past and present, which contradicts the fundamental nature of time as knowing no boundaries. The past is not separate from our time but rather flows directly into it. As Marc Bloch once wrote: “Real time is uninterrupted by nature. And at the same time constantly changing.”¹

And it was Marc Bloch who told the famous anecdote that comes to mind at this particular moment: “I accompanied Henri Pirenne to Stockholm. As soon as we arrived, he said to me: ‘What should we go see first? I hear they have a brand new town hall. Let’s start there.’ And as though he wanted to cut through my surprise, he added: ‘If I had wanted to be an antiquarian, I would have had eyes only for old things. But I am a historian. So I love life.’”²

It is of course not unimportant that the two protagonists of this short adventure happened to be giants of European historiography of the 19th century. If Pirenne’s words came out of anyone else’s mouth, they would probably make us shrug them off. But they were spoken by Pirenne, so we need to take them seriously. And although the anecdote’s message surpassed the boundaries of my present reflection, if seen in the context of their scientific and intellectual heritage, it’s main point nevertheless serves as a convenient emphasis. The freshly erected town hall of the Swedish capital serves as a metaphor for the type of historiography which shifts its focus on the past from dead to living; which surpasses the focus on history seen as a sequence of important events, written in the unalterable past, and focuses on the human instead. Not on the human in the past, but on the human in time. Only then it does become a science of life.

Such an excursion into the history of historiography might seem a far reach from the questions I posed at the beginning, although I am really speaking of one and the

¹ Bloch str. 59.

² Ibid., str. 69.

same. With patriotism there is a collective self-analysis of never solved question of relation to one's own origins, which can never find its conclusion due to the very inability to see its beginning. In other words: confronting one's own past is an endless task which requires us to remain open to intellectual aliveness. Only living reflection can so much as come close to understanding a thing so complex as is my relation to community and my own and communal pasts; only in this way can I think patriotism in all shades of its existence and presentation. Despite their apparent contradiction and incompatibility, glorification and ignorance are just the opposite sides of the same coin: the loss of living thought. Without living reflection, presentation of relation to the past can be nothing else but kitsch.

And where do I and my creative work fit into this reflection?

Katalena band was founded in 2001. Our beginnings were quite modest, with no real creative or "business" ambitions; it all came about as an experiment without pre-set parameters and in-depth reflection. To be more precise: in July 2001 six musicians, including me, gathered in a pretty decrepit holiday cottage owned by the once mighty and then already ruined Slovenian company. As unimpressive as this might sound, the place and the environment were in fact very agreeable. The atmosphere was further lifted by thirty litres of wine, donated to us by the Student's Society of Bela Krajina.

And thus our first excursion into the past started. In one week of rehearsals we created short of an hour worth of music we dared call our own. More precisely: it was our own in as much as it was our understanding and adaptations of Slovenian folk songs: as they rang to us in that moment and those circumstances, coming out of our unconcerned quest. We saw absolutely nothing wrong with the term "our", despite the fact that we weren't sure who "we" even were.

But the whole thing got serious pretty fast, opening more serious questions in turn, mostly on where were the boundaries of "our". The first problem every (re)creator faces has to do with the notion of fidelity: how do you balance your own

interventions as an author with the original, how to even think and understand the notion of original in this context, and how to place your creation through the duality of binding reflection and free play into the dichotomy of tradition and continuity. These are the questions we could spend our whole lives answering.

The next few years our creative explorations - although still not organised and undefined - stayed within the set boundaries. Then the moment came when the field of our creative “fight” began expanding. Our albums were becoming increasingly conceptual, the term “folkloristic” acquired ever new connotations, our original scores and lyrics were gained importance as part of Katalena’s story, we were setting poetry by modernist male and female poets to music, sometimes flirting with the paradoxical principle of newly composed folk music ... The collage was becoming more and more colourful, while at the same time our initial assumptions were going through a serious transformation: folk music heritage was no longer just a source for our creative explorations for us, we increasingly saw it as our partner in dialogue. We were no longer only drawing on our heritage, we tried to communicate with it. Not one of us knows when and how this change came about. The difference may have been hardly noticeable, but it was then that everything really just began.

A dialogue is tied to life and thinking. It is possible and sensible only in relation to something living or something we perceive as living. At the same time it is a mentally extremely demanding process. As long as we address tombstones, we speak into a void. Only when we create and conjure stories of life out of them, only when we allow ourselves to be spoken to, when we invest our creative and mental effort into the past, time opens in all of its dimensions in front of us. Not the past, time. To paraphrase Marc Bloch: it is not about the bones in the past, it is about the human in time.

It is at this point that the snake bites its own tail. Experiencing the past and tradition as something static, fixed and in this sense dead, means the absence of living thought and consequently the loss of vital creativity. The aesthetic expression of this loss can be nothing other than kitsch, and let me reiterate once more: when I say

kitsch, it is not meant as a moral judgement. Kitsch is banality we slip into when our creative (or re-creative) endeavours lack living thought. This banality can overcome everyone dealing with creative research of tradition and the past. And we should never not be aware of the dangers of such a slip.

I have found this discovery ever more key in the last years. It seems simple enough, while it is really immensely difficult. It is as if this simple pledge to living thought was a distillation of all principles and creative experience. Only constant awareness of the dangers of slipping into kitsch and continuous presence of questioning creative and thematic procedures begin to open the space for true creative freedom, one that allows for absolutely everything. From here on, there is no recipe. Sometimes things need to stay exactly as they are, or were. Sometimes they need to be turned upside down, sometimes they have to be deconstructed to the most basic elements only to be reconstructed later. Sometimes they need to be handled with minute care, at other times broken to pieces with one big swing of a hammer. As long as we stay true to the basic rule, the game offers countless meaningful combinations. And as long as it is meaningful, it can never be kitsch.



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