Jessica Ortner

The Puzzled Reader: Reception Strategies and Gaps of Indeterminacy in Bosnian Wartime Memory

Can literature function as a medium of transcultural memory and circulate the traumatic memories of the Bosnian war across cultural, mental, and mnemonic borders? This chapter explores this question by analysing Saša Stanišić's German language novel *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* (2008; *Wie der Soldat das Gramofon repariert*, 2006), which describes the conquest of the Bosnian town of Višegrad and the ethnic cleansing in which the Muslim citizens of the town were killed. By investigating how the memories expressed in the novel relate to the readers of the novel, I ask which narrative techniques migrant authors from the former Yugoslavia use to make these experiences memorable (Rigney 2021) for non-Bosnian readers in Copenhagen, Manchester, and Berlin, enabling them to become emotionally immersed in memories of an event that is from their perspective distant and opaque. By analysing focus group interviews with actual readers of the novel in three western towns and two Bosnian ones, I ask how the social frameworks of memory (Halbwachs 1925) that the readers are socialised within affect how they make sense of the experiences represented in the novel. I use Wolfgang Iser's reader reception theory to investigate the transcultural reception of memory. Iser argues that literature has two poles, one of them artistic and the other aesthetic. The artistic pole is the literary text itself, while the aesthetic one is the concretisation of that text by the reader. The literary work of art only fully exists in the convergence of the two poles (Iser 1976, 38). Furthermore, the act of reading primarily depends on the ability of the reader to fill in or counterbalance the "gaps of indeterminacy" that offer different possible interpretations (Iser 1989).

This chapter investigates the extent to which one single articulation of memory transmission acquires different concretisations at different destinations. It demonstrates that the reader activates several, often overlapping frameworks to fill in the gaps of indeterminacy in migrant literature. I combine this reader-centred approach with Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" (2004) and Ann Rigney's (2015) redefinition of that concept. Landsberg suggests that museums, theatres, and movies are powerful memory media that can not only transmit knowledge about other people's experiences but also make people affectively adopt a memory they did not live through. The memory media do this by creating an emotional "interface between a person and a historical narrative about the

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past" (Landsberg 2004, 2). Following Landsberg, Rigney suggests that not only movies but also literature can create prosthetic memory "thanks to the surplus aesthetic pleasure offered by art" (2014, 353). Fiction, she suggests, can translate memories between different zones of Europe, and so shape the emotional bonds between countries that are economically interlinked but distant from one another in their historical experiences (Rigney 2014, 354). This article refines Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory, arguing that since readers activate different frameworks of memory in order to decode a text and fill in the gaps of indeterminacy, the prosthetic memory that one reader might adopt may be different to that of another reader, while some readers do not get emotionally attached at all. How the specific mnemonic and affective potential of a text is activated depends on the readers' set of mnemonic frameworks and how they are situated in social contexts. This article further suggests that prosthetic memory is prompted if the reader is able to fill in the gaps of indeterminacy by associating the experiences described in the text with a memory of their own that touched them emotionally. Finally, I show that frameworks of memory are also decisive for how readers respond to the "rhetoric of cultural memory" (Erll 2009, 219) that a novel employs. Whereas a reader who has no knowledge about the historical event described will activate several related, perhaps less relevant reference points, readers who have embodied memories of the event will read the same novel in a "monumental mode" (Erll 2001a, 157–160) in which the event represented is understood as a reference to the horizon of cultural memory. In this case the gaps of indeterminacy are filled in with historical knowledge bolstered by the reader's own experiences of the historical event.

Frameworks of memories and gaps of indeterminacy

According to Astrid Erll, reception has always implicitly been a central concern of memory studies. She writes that "all media of cultural memory need to be actualised, charged with meaning, in order to unfold their mnemonic potential and to have an effective presence within the social sphere. Literature as a medium of cultural memory is therefore first and foremost a phenomenon of reception" (Erll 2011a, 160). The issue of reception is even more critical in transcultural memory studies. Landsberg's (2004) prosthetic memory deals explicitly with memory reception and "describes it graphically as the 'taking on' of a mediated 'memory limb'" (Törnquist-Plewa, Sindbaek Andersen and Erll 2017, 4), highlighting the role of empathy as an important requirement for memory transmission. Following the logic

of mnemonic migration (Ortner 2022, 8–13), migrant literature makes memories "travel" between different social frameworks of memory. Migrant literature represents protagonists who immigrate into a new social framework, and this mnemonic media has the special ability of highlighting memories that have fallen out of the mnemonic framework of the host country and of finding a vocabulary to express these particular new memories with. Migrant literature as a media of cultural memory thus "disseminates versions of the past across space" (Erll 2001b, 13). This leads to a deterritorialisation of memory, since "for transcultural memory to actually come into existence, deterritorialised transmission must be followed by localising reception" (Törnquist-Plewa, Sindbaek Andersen and Erll 2017, 3). It is precisely the localised reception of travelling memory in different national contexts that is the focus of this chapter.

Migrant literature negotiates the social frameworks of memory that govern the reader's preconditions for reading a given text, and it does so by voicing memories that have not earlier been deemed important to remember and that were therefore excluded from the living memory of the canon (Assmann 2008; Rigney 2016, 69–70). According to Halbwachs every person's individual memory is influenced by a number of social frameworks of memories, such as family, class, religion, or nation. These frameworks "shape what people remember by filtering narratives according to their collective significance" (Rigney 2018, 245). People's individual memory is simultaneously facilitated and also limited by these multiple frameworks of memory, without which no memory would be possible at all.[1] Frameworks of memories, or "cognitive schemata that guide our perception in particular directions" (Erll 2011b, 15), are created by several different agents and may point in diverging directions. National frameworks of memories are created by official decision-makers, who select and mediate memories that legitimate the identity and unity of their society, and embed these memories in the long-term memory of the community. These national memories intersect or compete with generational memories that are formed by decisive historical events which people of about the same age experienced themselves or have been exposed to through various media. Generational memory is an embodied memory that lasts for the short time frame of about thirty years. A third dominant framework of memory is formed by the transgenerational transmission of memories in families, which recycles memories within a period of 80 to 100 years, "which is the period within which the generations of a family [...] exist simultaneously, forming a community

1 Jeffrey Olick names the individual memory that is influenced by the social framework "collected memory" (1999). Collective memory in contrast is the shared memory that a society has accepted as being important for its identity.

of shared experience, stories, and memories" (Assmann 2006, 214). In the present age of globalisation moreover, people are increasingly affected by transnational and transcultural frameworks that transcend the boundaries of national cultures and are shaped by global dissemination of memories, travels, migration, and the heterogenic composition of modern societies. De Cesari and Rigney (2014, 5, 9), working along these lines, identify a multi-scalarity of mnemonic frameworks, which means that people are part of a large amount of partly overlapping frameworks including "the intimate and local as well as the regional and global" (Rigney 2018, 250).[2] This chapter argues that these various social frameworks of memory influence not only how people remember their own lives in the process of *collected memory*, but also how readers make sense of the memories that are transmitted in fictional texts. All these frameworks provide different reference points that come on top of each person's specific knowledge and that are activated in the "act of reading" (Iser 1976).

I assume that frameworks of memory are decisive for how readers fill in the gaps of indeterminacy in literary texts. Of course, no reading can actualise all the potential meanings [*Sinnpotential*] of a text, but the empirical reader composes their own reading by choosing from among several potential actualisations of the text [*Aktualisierungspotential*] (Iser 1976, 55). Iser defines these different paths into the text as the implied reader. Gaps of indeterminacy are passages in the text where the reader can engage with the text by filling the gaps in with their own ideas, prior knowledge, and prejudices (Iser 1976, 282–283).

I aim here to tease out the extent to which readers can apprehend and perhaps also be emotionally touched by the mnemonic content of migrant literature about the Bosnian war, and how the style of the writing about it promotes or hampers this emotional engagement. Erll's idea that memory-making novels use the rhetoric of cultural memory is very useful for exploring what Iser calls the artistic pole of the texts, since it fits with Erll's idea that literature can have "*potential* memorial power"[3] (Erll 2009, 220) depending on the written medium and the manner of reading. She defines a number of modes for the rhetoric of cultural memory that are characterised by "clusters of narrative features", whose interplay may "contribute to a certain memory effect" (Erll 2009, 220). She distinguishes between the experiential, monumental, antagonistic, and reflexive modes. All of these modes convey the past by using certain narratological features. For example, the experiential mode represents the past as "lived-through experience" (Erll

2 Recently, Erll (2022) also introduced the concept of unconscious memories, which are memories that are remembered without the person remembering being able to determine a specific media or event that formed them.

3 Emphasis in original.

2009, 220). There is extensive use of "the present tense or of lengthy passages focalised by the 'experiencing I' in order to convey embodied, seemingly immediate experience" (Erll 2009, 220). In contrast, "monumental modes envisage the past as [...] part of the 'Cultural Memory'" (Erll 2011a, 158) by anchoring the individual experience in shared dates and facts that are well known in specific mnemonic communities. Finally, "literary forms which help to promote one version of the past and reject another constitute an antagonistic mode" (Erll 2011a, 159), and the most obvious technique used in this mode is negative stereotyping. Erll thus finds that authors use several literary qualities that urge the reader to choose a particular path in their reception of the text, but she equally points out that it is impossible to predict how actual readers will receive the text. I extend this idea by showing that the effect of the mnemonic modes varies with the mnemonic community in which the reader is socialised. Though an author may use the narratological means of the experiential mode, groups of readers in cultural or mnemonic settings where the event narrated is already part of cultural memory will actualise the potential meaning of the text as if it were written in the monumental mode, which is the mode that links a literary text to cultural memory. Other groups might also see the text as part of a memory contest, reading it then in an antagonistic mode.

My analysis of Stanišić's novel *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* asks which clusters of narrative features are at play in the novel, how frameworks of memory determine the strategies for counterbalancing gaps of indeterminacy, how the strategies of German, Danish, or English readers differ from those used by the Bosnian readers, and how the frameworks of memory affect the choice of which prosthetic memory to adopt.

Mediating the Bosnian war

Stanišić's novel *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*[4] is an autofictional description of the Bosnian war through the limited perspective of a child. The novel can be very roughly divided into four parts. It begins by describing the peaceful childhood of the boy Aleksandar in the idyllic town of Višegrad, where he goes fishing and has a good time with his friends from school. The idyll is disturbed by the death of his beloved grandfather Slavko, who was a passionate communist, and by the looming nationalism that he senses in the schoolyard and that makes its first violent appearance at a family party, when a family friend threat-

4 All quotations are from Stanišić 2015. In the following only page numbers will be given.

ens a band that he accuses of playing gypsy music instead of "songs from the glorious days that once we knew and that will come again" (46–47). The second part describes the invasion of Višegrad, and here the perspective of the child is seen in full effect. The invasion is not described from a conscious, historically and politically informed point of view, but is instead viewed through a cellar window and heard about in unintelligible messages on the radio. After playing at soldiers and war in the cellar during the shelling, the child sees the soldiers suddenly enter the house and start harassing and raping its inhabitants. These events are narrated as an immediate experience that transmits only the pure sensory account of what Aleksandar sees and hears. The events are represented in a fragmentary manner, so that a rape scene does not show what happens between the soldier and the girl for example. Instead the reader only gets the point of view of Aleksandar, who sees the soldier closing the door behind him and the girl Amela and shortly after leaving the room again with a satisfied smile.

At the beginning of the third part, the family flees the town to take refuge in Serbia, which is the part of Yugoslavia that had attacked Višegrad. From that point onwards, the novel begins to disintegrate, as Aleksandar's arrival and integration in Germany is only described in the letters that Aleksandar writes to Asija, who he had met immediately before the invasion of the town and whose contact he had lost in the turmoil of the flight. The third part also contains numerous phone calls to Sarajevo, as Aleksandar had heard that Asija might have fled there. There is also a text within a text in the form of a book about the time "when everything was alright", and numerous lists of Aleksandar's memories of Višegrad. Finally, in the fourth part, Aleksandar visits Višegrad after the end of the war and begins to compare what he sees with the lists of memories he had made during his time in Germany. He finds that everything has changed. His best friend has disappeared, while another friend has turned into a bitter and traumatised young man whose memories estrange him from Aleksandar, who had survived the war in safety. The novel ends without closure with a phone call that may or may not be from Asija. The most remarkable feature of the novel is its style, which has a chaos of memories and emotions; combines features from several genres covering diary entries, letters, lists, phone calls, and a separate sub-novel; and switches between various narrative situations and narrators.

The description of the war scenes in the novel are typical of the rhetoric of collective memory, which Erll (2009) describes as experiential mode. In this narrative mode the past is represented as the living memory of a generation or a family. It presents an immersive first-person account and internal focalisation that give the impression of a seemingly immediate detailed experience of everyday life in the past (Erll 2009). Novels that serve as media of memory usually tend to represent one and the same event, the Bosnian war in this case, in two different regis-

ters of memory at once (Erll 2011a, 158–159). The war appears both in the "near horizon of memory" that is connected to the lifeworld of those who remember and that is told in the mode of communicative memory, and also in the "distant horizon of memory" of cultural memory. The entanglement of these two registers lets memory-making novels affect both horizons of memories. Telling about an event in the communicative mode makes distant cultural memories present and understandable for the reader. Representing individual memories as paradigmatic examples of common experiences means they can be transferred into the distant horizon of cultural memory and gain general validity (Erll 2003, 152; 2022, 32). Rigney describes this function as a *pars pro toto* "which allows a general situation to be depicted through the select number of singular individuals with whom viewers or readers can empathise and with whose fate they become involved" (2016, 70). Memory-making novels are thus able to subvert the fixed perception of the past by transferring elements of communicative memory into the collective and liable realm of cultural memory, and vice versa (Erll 2003, 152). However, an explanatory voice that adds to the individual observations has to be included, or the narrating protagonist has to be given the authority to understand and explain the historical circumstances. Neither of these apply in Stanišić's novel. He avoids combining the personal voice of the figure Aleksandar, who is living through the events, with an "authorial voice" (Lanser 1999, 15) that provides sense. This lack of an explanatory voice, according to Iser, "opposes the desire for consistency, which we constantly reveal when we are reading" (Iser 1989, 27). Furthermore, this feature creates a discrepancy between the violent events described and the narrating voice of the child, who lacks the authority to understand and to explain to the reader what is happening. He makes no moral judgement about the events and is more concerned with the personal and family consequences of the war such as whether he will still be able to go fishing, whether the soccer season will go ahead, and when the school will open again (314).

An example of the lack of an explanatory voice is the scene in which the soldiers conquer the city. The narrator reacts with distrust when his friend Edin says that he has seen soldiers in the streets:

> Soldiers shot men in the stomach. They fell forward, like when you get hit with a volleyball – just like that. I saw it from the upstairs window, Edin fantasised when he came back [...] I didn't believe a word he said, but I didn't say anything, and anyway, what soldiers? (110)

Later, when Aleksandar himself sees the soldiers, the reader still does not get any explanation about who has actually conquered the town. The boy identifies the sound of the horn with wedding parties and describes the soldiers as "bearded bridegrooms" who "celebrate their bride, our town" (113). In the following section

I will investigate how readers react to the experiential cluster of narrative features that Stanišić makes use of. What does the lack of an explanatory voice mean for the ability of readers to fill in the gaps of indeterminacies? Which social frameworks of memory do they activate to decode the text? And consequently, how do these pre-existing frameworks of memory influence the circulation of the memories across national borders, and the creation of the prosthetic memory of the Bosnian war?

Reading the Bosnian war

These questions are answered by the results of three focus group investigations that were conducted by the research project *Mnemonic migration* of the University of Copenhagen in Berlin, Copenhagen and Manchester. A total of 47 readers were divided into seven groups and given four weeks to read the book before the discussion session.[5] We composed groups that had an equal number of men and women, and in which both an older generation that would be able to remember the time of the Bosnian War, and a younger generation that presumably had little memory of the war or of Yugoslavia were represented. Almost all of the readers felt that the novel was a complicated and demanding read, and some even found the novel almost unintelligible. Many of the readers were especially frustrated and discouraged by the lack of historical information, and it is true that the child's perspective particularly means that the novel intentionally contains numerous gaps.[6] One reader put it as follows:

> Because it doesn't describe what happens, how the battle took place and that people killed each other, you need to have previous knowledge in order to understand the background and to interpret the book. I think you need to know roughly what happened there. (Berlin 1)

This reader counterbalanced these gaps by activating his own previous historical knowledge about the war while reading. Quite a lot of the readers tried to fill the gaps of indeterminacy that were produced by the lack of an auctorial voice

5 The Covid-19 pandemic meant that we had three focus groups with only five people in each group so that we could ensure there was sufficient distance between the participants. In Berlin and Manchester, we had two focus groups with eight participants in each. The focus groups are numbered here by giving the city and the number of each focus group.

6 Iser (1976, 15) claims that authors increased the indeterminacy of their writings in the period of modernism. Stanišić's novel seems to be at the same level as novels like *Ulysses* by James Joyce for the number of its gaps.

by searching for information about the war on the internet. This was most often the case for younger readers, who were often only dimly aware of the war. One reader explained that: "All I knew about Yugoslavia is that it existed, and then it didn't. I never knew why" (Manchester 1). In contrast, older readers tended to activate their generational and transnational memories. Many had had refugees from Bosnia as classmates and many of the German readers especially had childhood memories of their holidays in the former Yugoslavia. As an older German reader noted: "For our generation it is really still Yugoslavia. For it is not so long ago" (Berlin 2). News coverage was another source for many of the older readers. A middle-aged Danish reader explained how he had a clear memory of the war: "The war was something we talked a lot about back then, because what happened was so mad" (Copenhagen 1). However, not all readers felt the need to fill in the missing information. A reader from Berlin found the lack of an auctorial voice interesting:

> Nobody explained why the Serbs attacked Bosnia. The whole historical background was not explained, but the story took place when he was young. He did not understand it. That is something that fascinated me in the book – that it is written from the point of view of a child. Suddenly there are soldiers, and they are carrying weapons. ...and he does not know why they are there and why his father is driving their car to Serbia – to the enemy, because the Serbs conquered Bosnia [...] he does not answer the questions but only asks them. (Berlin 3)

This reader not only accepts the gaps as a necessary literary feature of the book, but is also fascinated by this style of writing. It is precisely the style that was the most significant cause of frustration about Stanišić's novel. However, it is possible to detect two opposing opinions. For some, the complex style meant that the plot of the novel was almost unintelligible, and those readers found the book annoying. Other readers accepted the style and described it as, for example, "patchy and jumpy" and "a bit chaotic" (Manchester 2) but supposed that it was meant to be like that. One Berlin reader who likewise understood the confusion to be intended suggested that the number of jumps and mental leaps were meant to show how Aleksandar as the protagonist of the book was "a very bewildered person" (Berlin 3). The readers used different techniques to counterbalance the gaps of indeterminacy produced by the style. A younger reader from one of the Berlin groups found the book both interesting and captivating because the mental leaps allowed her to use her own imagination, to think along ["*mitdenken*"] and "to contemplate a little bit how the book might continue and what he [the protagonist] thinks" (Berlin 3). Another reader ceased to understand the book as a novel and read it instead as a series of short novels that he found "quite amusing" (Berlin 3). Yet another reader used her family memory to actualise the text: "I liked how the book represented

the point of view of the ordinary people. I was able to imagine it. I have often been to Yugoslavia and still go there often" (Berlin 1). Interestingly, this reader could only relate to the very first part of the book, which reminded her of her own experience of the former Yugoslavia. Even though she had found a way to fill in the gaps of indeterminacy about life before the war, she did not engage in most parts of the novel. Perhaps as a consequence, when she was asked about what touched her the most, she stated that she felt no compassion for anyone in the novel.

The most radical reaction to a text, according to Iser, happens when the text "contradicts our own preconceptions to such a degree that it calls forth drastic reactions such as throwing the book away or, the other extreme, being compelled to revise those preconceptions" (1989, 8). The first reaction was exactly what one of the readers of our focus group in Berlin felt, as she gave up reading the book entirely. The reaction was not prompted by a disagreement with the world described in the book, but by a dislike for the style: "The book was so bad that I did not want to read it. Long-winded like chewing gum" (Berlin 1).

It could be concluded from these examples that the novel's "cluster of narrative features", meaning its strict experiential mode, often impeded the direct transmission of memories of the Bosnian war. This was the case when readers wanted the book to give them some historical information but found they had to look for it in other sources, or when the style estranged the reader to such a degree that they entirely stopped the process of filling in the gaps of indeterminacy. Even those who appreciated the style or the dim historical context of the novel did not necessarily learn anything new, even though it activated memories from when they were young and came into contact with refugees, travelled to the former Yugoslavia, or followed the news coverage about the war. However, prosthetic memory does not depend on cognitive knowledge being learned. Rigney (2014) states that the ideal reading experience would have the effect of producing emotional bonds to historical experiences that the reader did not live through. This expectation matches Iser's idea of the most extreme reaction being that the reader revises their preconceptions. Landsberg (2004) and Rigney (2014) find that the reaction of a reader revising their preconception or adopting a new memory does not have anything to do with whether they learn any knowledge on a rational level, but comes from becoming emotionally immersed in the text. Although emotional immersion is not considered in Iser's systematic account of reader reactions, I would suggest that it seems to be a precondition for a reader counterbalancing the gaps of indeterminacy. The following section outlines the extent to which the readers were touched by the text and how the diverging frameworks of memory affected the kinds of prosthetic memories that they could take away from their reading experience.

Social frameworks of memory as a backbone of prosthetic memory?

Even though a lot of readers expressed difficulties with reading and understanding the novel, most of them were emotionally affected by at least one aspect of it or by an event described in the book. From these emotional responses, it becomes obvious that the attachment depends heavily on the reader's social frameworks of memory, which influence how they counterbalance the gaps. A reader from Manchester with a background as a migrant explained for example that her personal background supported her emotional reaction: "Because it was from the child's perspective, I could relate. I was a child when I moved – not because of war, but just immigrated – I could relate to what he went through when he came to Germany" (Manchester 2). Another example demonstrates a reference to Germany's national framework of memory. The reader reacted emotionally to the scene where the soldiers entered the house. He stated that the scene "really stuck with [him] and reminded [him] of the Second World War" (Berlin 1). Since this was a young reader without previous knowledge about the Bosnian war he used the Second World War as a template to understand it. That he did not live through these events himself does not change the fact that a dominant cultural memory provoked his emotional reaction and affected how he filled the gaps. A third reader related the war scenes to the contemporary wars she had experienced through global media: "The whole book is quite emotional because, as I am reading it, it feels real. I know it's a story, that stuff happens, it happens now, it is happening. Reminds me of Syria and Iraq. Got emotional hearing about all the death, the bodies in the river, the football match. That stuff happens" (Manchester 1). Even though this does not exactly express a transmission of the specific memory of the Bosnian war but rather a universalised understanding of a war situation, I would argue that these comparisons show a renewed awareness of the Bosnian war being just as bad as current events, and therefore just as important to remember.

I consider that the feeling of "being there", of being drawn into the world of the text marks the passage from being emotionally affected to adopting the memory in the sense of Landsberg (2004). One reader stated that the war scenes in the book reminded him of the news coverage that he had seen in his youth and that had made a deep impression on him back then (Berlin 2). However, the descriptions in the book were even worse, because it appears that the news cameras had avoided the most terrible scenes. Whether or not the author had really experienced the war, the reader confessed that the descriptions of the war captivated him, painfully reminding him of those he had seen before, and hijacking him into another world (Berlin 2). This example shows the powerful impact that the

transnational framework created by global news media has had on this reader. The scenes described in the book couple with earlier media-mediated memories in an uncomfortable way and seem to stick more emphatically in the mind of the reader. These two examples show how earlier social frameworks of memory are decisive for emotional engagement with a text and for filling in the gaps of indeterminacy. These frameworks also determine what memories the reader ends up adopting as prosthetic memories. In the first case, the mnemonic potential is realised by a link to the television images of the wars in Syria and Iraq. Here, the prosthetic memory about the Bosnian war is formed by the analogy with other, more recent wars. In the second case, the war scenes in the book activated contemporary media-mediated memories of the Bosnian war, but also added to the earlier memory of the war by offering more gruesome pictures. This then indicates that literature has the potential to create prosthetic memory, but the capacity to impress the reader emotionally does not depend exclusively on the mode of literary representation. Rather it depends on the ability of the reader to find reference points in their own social frameworks of memory, or otherwise, that add to the world described in the text. Again, transmission of memory does not necessarily happen when gaps of indeterminacy are filled in with historical information from the internet, but rather when the reader can engage with the text because of associations that have earlier had an emotional impact on them.

Destabilising the narrative mode

As stated earlier, the reader's own experiences can be crucial for the realisation of literary texts. This becomes especially evident in the focus group readings by Bosnian readers, who almost univocally stated that Stanišić's representation of the war was authentic. We conducted four focus group discussions on Stanišić's novel in Bosnia-Herzegovina, two in Sarajevo and two in Banja Luka, involving a total of 25 respondents. The book was deemed "real" in Sarajevo, even "100 per cent real" (Sarajevo 2).[7] One reader related the events in the novel to their family framework of memory: "In Višegrad they fell asleep in peace and woke up to war. That's literally the way it was. My Mum told me" (Sarajevo 1). In Banja Luka too, the representation was acknowledged as authentic: "What he described in the book – the war was like that" (Banja Luka 1). A reader from Sarajevo says about the football match on Mount Igman: "As far as I know, the stories are quite

7 I am indebted to Fedja Wierød Borčak's translation and the consideration of the Bosnian focus group interviews in Andersen and Borčak 2022.

real. That football [match]. Even worse things than that happened" (Sarajevo 1). This was then confirmed by another reader: "Yes. A lot of similar, perhaps even worse situations that we've heard about, seen or experienced" (Sarajevo 1). In Iser's reader response theory, these readers are filling in the gaps of indeterminacy by referring to external verifiable factors in such a way that the book "appears to be nothing more than a mirror reflection of these factors" (1989, 7). Indeed, the accuracy of the representations was to a large extent judged against the readers' own memories, whether first or second-hand, and their personal conceptions of what the war was like. Iser debases this into a mere fact-checking exercise that almost empties the text of its aesthetic quality, but I would rather emphasise that this reading technique demonstrates how far the social framework of memory in which the reader is socialised causes the entirely different reactions to the "clusters of narrative features" (Erll 2009, 220), which are the representation of the past as a lived-through experience, the use of the present tense, and the focalisation by the 'experiencing I'. In other words, it is not the narratological structure alone that allows certain entries into the text, since both the potential meanings [*Sinnpotential*] and the mode of writing change according to the mnemonic context. As mentioned above, what Erll calls a monumental mode sees the past as part of cultural memory by anchoring the individual experience in shared dates and facts that are well-known in specific mnemonic communities (2011a, 158). This is often done in the text itself by adding an auctorial voice, but in this case the Bosnian readers themselves interlink the memories described in the novel with their memories. There was a tendency for the readers in Sarajevo to treat the texts as memory accounts that represent a shared, collective image of the war even though they are based on the perspective represented artistically. Thus, the readers undertook a monumental reading in which the text is anchored firmly in a certain version of collective memory.

However, since the memory culture in Bosnia is highly diverse, the readings sometimes resulted in a negotiation of collective memory. This point becomes especially relevant in the focus groups in Banja Luka, which is the capital of Republika Srpska, a part of Bosnia Herzegovina that is populated mainly by Serbs and has its own separate social framework of memory. In contrast to the perception of the Sarajevo focus groups, where respondents thought the account was fairly objective, the sentiment among the Banja Luka readers was that the Serbs are portrayed as the "bad guys", and exoticised as primitive, war-loving cavemen (Banja Luka 1). One reader expressed a wish for more objectivity (Banja Luka 2), while several readers thought that the book neglected to talk about atrocities committed against Serbs. In this particular framework of memory the content is consequently seen not as part of collective memory, but as a version of the past that leaves out the history of the Serbs, leading to the conclusion that the novel in this context is

part of an antagonistic memory discourse. Addressing the memory conflict between the Bosnian and Serbian parts of Bosnia Herzegovina directly, one reader states that, "of course people in Republika Srpska don't perceive it that way [meaning how the novel represents the past] and you won't hear it in any media here. It'd probably be the same thing if it were the other way around" (Banja Luka 1). In Sarajevo though, the texts supported the reader's position in the Bosnian memory landscape by confirming much of the memory discourse in the Federation, the other part of Bosnia Herzegovina. It could be argued that there are some slight indications of such an antagonistic discourse in the novel. When the family flees, they take the road towards Belgrade, directly into "the enemy's arms" but the father's Serbian descent means that they are allowed to cross the border to Serbia. After arriving at his uncle's house, Aleksandar remarks: "Višegrad was on the TV first but the people who are defenders on our TV at home are the aggressors here, and the town didn't fall, it was liberated, because a madman and not a hero was trying to blow up the dam" (139–140).

The focus groups indicate that similar memory conflicts govern their reading of the novel. Some readers from Banja Luka expressed a more liberal notion though, accepting that the war looked different from different perspectives:

> All of us from this region have our own war stories. Never mind if you fled or stayed. We all look at these things from our own angle. He [Stanišić] wrote from his angle. This is what he saw. In his mind, the war, the killings, the people whom he knew are all associated with men with beards. (Banja Luka 2)

For some younger readers the book served as a source to complement a fragmented memory transmission within the family. A reader in her thirties stated that:

> [There are] many things we don't get to hear about from our parents. Maybe they told me about certain things, but I have always carried the question with me: What else happened? What other situations were there? I'm glad that I read this book. This is but another piece of the war and what happened that I don't know about or am not familiar with. It'd be good for my generation to hear about. (Sarajevo 2)

In another comment the novel is part of coming to terms with a very personal family history:

> I'm from a generation born right before the war; I was born in 1991. My father lost his hands in the war. Lately, he's gone into himself more, dwelling on his problems and bringing thoughts from the front. I'm looking for some answers, because I can never get them from him; he never speaks about it, because he doesn't want to, he runs away from it. Then I gather information from others, younger people who weren't as affected, who didn't lose limbs. I follow it a lot. The events themselves, from the testimonies of soldiers, commanders; who

> was what, who did what, what were their stories, how did they end up in their positions? Then I also watch films, from different angles. (Sarajevo 2)

These readings can be explained by Rigney's idea that literary texts may serve as a means to make the past "memorable". Indeed "for things worth remembering to be constituted as memory, they must also be translated into transmissible experience" (Rigney 2021, 13). The example above indicate that the novel helps in remembering an event that the parental generation has lived through but is unable to communicate. Read as a monumental representation of cultural memory, the novel provides the younger generations with a means of understanding their family history.

In contrast to the Western readers, who related the war to World War Two and the war in Syria, only a few Bosnian readers read the book outside the specific Bosnian frame. One reader thought the novel was "nicely packaged", because it was general or universal in its outlook, focusing on individual human experiences and avoiding nationalist discourse, or "talk of Muslims and Serbs" (Sarajevo 1). In stark contrast, other respondents read the book as a very specific story about Bosnia, stating that Europeans and even certain groups within Bosnia would not understand the book.

> I don't think this book is for everybody. I think it's for some older generations. And I think it's a local book [...] I don't know how others in Bosnia and Herzegovina will understand the book. Some things they won't understand, some they will. Not to mention the European market! Neither do I think that somebody at the age of 17 or 18 will get anything. I believe they'd be struck by great confusion. They wouldn't get it. Here's somebody killing somebody else, why, how? It wouldn't have the same effect as it had on me, who remembers the war and the time before it. (Sarajevo 2)

Indeed, this reader very precisely describes the type of confusion that Danish, English and German readers expressed, which is nonetheless confounded by the fact that the book was a bestseller in Germany and was translated for numerous European countries. It is clear however, that most western readers would not be able to understand the multiple political implications of the book, but would rather particularly like or dislike its style, and that Western readers have to fill in a lot of gaps of indeterminacy that the Bosnian readers fill in with their personal experience, family stories or particular cultural memories. It may be supposed that the political relevance of the book is one of the main reasons why the style of writing was discussed less in the Bosnian focus groups. Many readers in both Sarajevo and Banja Luka liked the style and were touched by the depictions of the events of the war. One reader from Sarajevo said for example that: "the value [of the book] is the writing style, how in every sentence there is a richness, and he [the author] is able

to keep that a constant" (Sarajevo 2). A reader from Banja Luka agrees, that "you notice he knows what he's doing, the man is imaginative, and funny at that" (Banja Luka 1). Indicating the emergence of prosthetic memory, one reader there stated that Stanišić managed "to describe Višegrad in such a way [...] that it's easy to imagine it. It's scenically described" (Sarajevo 2). "You're able to see it in your head, what happened and how". Other readers appreciated the stylistic features as a distancing factor that made it bearable to read about these events, perhaps because, as one reader says: "it gives enough information" without traumatising the reader (Sarajevo 1).

Conclusion

The investigation of the localised reception of transcultural memory has shown that we must take a reader-centred approach in order to gain an insight into the processes of what happens to mnemonic migration in literature when it arrives at its destination, which is the reader in different mnemonic contexts. A reader-centred analysis looks at the reference points that readers use when confronting historical reality represented in a literary text. The differences between the reference points that are activated offer various ways of actualising a text, filling the gaps of indeterminacy, and gaining prosthetic memory. The examples selected from the focus group interviews show that readers in the Western European contexts tend to fill the novel's numerous gaps of indeterminacy by drawing on their own generational memory, as some of them followed the Bosnian war in the news media when it was happening or had refugees as schoolmates. Other readers had acquired memories from family members who have (post-)memories from World War Two, who had fought in current wars in Syria and Iraq, or who had, in contrast, nice memories from holidays in the former Yugoslavia. Bosnian readers on the other hand drew on embodied family and cultural memories and current memory. What does this tell us about the ability of literature to forge prosthetic memory? It seems that the large amount of gaps of indeterminacy produced by the experiential mode of Stanišić's novel and its lack of an auctorial voice complicates its transmission of memories. For many readers, the style and the lack of historical information were an obstacle to any deep emotional immersion. Often, more comfortable memories of the time before the war were adopted instead of the descriptions of the war, and they were added to with the reader's own memories from holidays. Rather than creating new memories, the book tended to trigger earlier memories. One German reader who felt drawn into the text had powerful memories of the war from public broadcasting. The novel reactivated the negative sentiments and added more gruesome pictures to a memory that was al-

ready established. The ability of such a text to impress the reader emotionally consequently does not depend exclusively on the mode of literary representation, but rather it depends on the ability of the reader to find reference points in their own social frameworks of memory that can fit with the world and the events described in the text. Furthermore, this chapter has shown that the "clusters of narrative features" of the text is only one aspect that decides which mode the reader applies when decoding the text. The experiential narrative features of the novel have a different effect in a mnemonic context where various embodied and cultural memories circulate. In Bosnia, the difficult stylistic features of the text lost their importance or were appreciated because they did not complicate the understanding of the text to the same extent. The novel was read not as a communicative memory of a confused child, but rather as an expression of cultural memory (monumental mode), or as an intervention in the memory debate between the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina and Republika Srpska (antagonistic mode). The gaps of indeterminacy are thus filled in with historical knowledge bolstered with embodied memories and various circulating cultural memories. This produces an entirely different prosthetic memory to that encountered in Western European countries, as it is one that does not travel across large geographical distances but crosses cultural and mnemonic differences, perhaps forging an understanding of the point of view of others. Prosthetic memory as a potential outcome of the reading that happens when mere understanding switches into a feeling of "being there" is variable and changes together with the mode of reception, as both depend on the frameworks of memory that are activated in the act of reading.

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