

CULTURE IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES

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GENERATION X, TRANSITION AND CULTURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN NOVEL

Goce Smilevski

In this text, I will try to analyse the ways in which contemporary Macedonian novels, through characters belonging to Generation X, reflect the social circumstances and processes in the area of culture during the period of transition. In his work *The Spirit of the Age* from 1831, John Stuart Mill calls the time he lives in an “age of transition” (Stuart Mill, 1996, p. 6). Each epoch has periods in which the sense of living in a time of change is strongly emphasized, and the transition that Stuart Mill talks about is undoubtedly very different from the transition that we have been living in over the past few decades. The term itself has undergone a transformation in meaning over the past 50 years. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the term “transition” was used to refer to changes of regime, above all in South America, and marked “an interval between two different political regimes” (O’Donnel, Whitehead, Schmitter, 1986, p. 3). In his text “Kada su slobodi bila potrebna deca” (‘When Freedom Needed Children’), Boris Buden says:

Near the end of the 1980s the world changed. Since then, transitology has understood its subject differently. The political process of transformation is now predetermined. Its aim is strictly defined. That is the admittance to the global-capitalist system of Western liberal democracy. Since then the notion of transition refers almost exclusively to the so-called

postcommunist societies, and marks their transition into democracy, which has begun with the changes in 1989/90, and continues with smaller or greater success mainly in Eastern Europe. (Buden, 2010, p. 121)

In her text “Kultura i Tranzicija” (‘Culture and Transition’), Andrea Zlatar, discussing results from research published by Milena Dragičević-Šešić, a professor at the Faculty of Performing Arts in Belgrade, and Sanjin Dragojević, a professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade, points to the similarities between cultures in transition in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as to the similarities of the circumstances that they result from: “destruction or disintegration of the political system, economic crisis (or bankruptcy of the state), forced and uncontrolled migrations, interethnic and intercultural conflicts, disruption of transport and communications, political isolation, terrorist actions, a high degree of crime, corruption, economic fragmentation of the population – disappearance of the middle class, war, war suffering and destruction” (Zlatar, 2010, p. 113).

The term “Generation X” has frequently been used to designate a youth that develops during transitional social processes. In the novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* by Douglas Coupland, published in 1991, the term is related to the generation born in the 1960s. When referring to “Generation X”, contemporary experts in demography mean people born in the period from 1969 to 1979. The specific traits of the time in which the individuals from this generation have developed have a strong influence on the processes of building individual identity, and that is especially emphasized among those who have grown up in countries that have passed (and are still passing) through transition, such as is the case with Macedonia.

Individual identity, which is determined by psychological frames, is constructed on the basis of a completely individual experience.

Writing about this experience, Jean-Claude Ruano-Borbalan says that the individual is also part of institutions, whose function in building individual identity is to “channelize his activities, and provide symbolical evidence”. Almost all institutions of socialization and identification, such as the traditional family, political parties, religions, are passing through a phase in which they are losing their strength, which has become increasingly obvious since the second half of the 20th century, whereas the only institution that is not going through such a phase is the state, which still retains its central position (Ruano-Borbalan, 2009, p. 5). With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Macedonia’s Generation X has faced the specific situation of losing the state in which it spent its childhood and early youth, which undoubtedly has consequences on the processes of constructing individual identity.

The socialization of the individual, as well as the establishing of the individual’s identity, passes through several stages, which are not identical in every human being, that is, they are not clearly delineated and do not follow a single determined trajectory through periods of life, rather, they represent a formative and transformative process that stretches from birth to the end of life. A certain assumption about someone’s identity exists before that individual’s birth, because “the child already exists in the fantasy and discussions of the parents”. Taking into consideration the fact that identity is based on passionate relations of the individual with “the other”, “it is in fact conflicting” (Ibid., 2009, p. 6). Contemporary research of individual identity is mainly focused on examining the notion of the *self* – what the individual has as an image of him/herself, idea of him/herself, self-development, self-control... Representing the internal aspect of individual identity, *I* is constructed and realized through relation with the environment and others, and within groups, which can be narrow or broad, and can be formed either on the principle of affinity, or based on agreement, or imposed. The primary groups of belonging include the nuclear family,

closest friends and groups created through professional obligations and achievements. Then, “another sphere of belonging is represented by cultural, religious or political institutions. Finally, a significant part of the constructing of identity has depended for centuries on the relations, conflicting or not, with the social and political instances: the state – the nation” (Ibid., 2009, p. 9). Indicating the role of the group as an exceptional catalyst of individual identification, Ruano-Borbalan emphasizes its function in the socialization of the individual, in the process in which the individual at the same time identifies himself with it. It is a process that has two seemingly contradictory characteristics – one is enabling “the individual to be different and act upon his environment” (Ibid., 2009, p. 9). Enabling the individual to be different certainly does not always mean that the group permits individuals to be different but that within the group itself, the individual experiences difference, regardless of how similar the others from the group are, and regardless of how much that difference is permitted or how clearly and publicly it is stated.

The question of the relation between individual identity and the society (especially a society undergoing transition) is complex, and there is always a conflict when identity is understood as a simple unification of the social roles and belonging, that is, when such a view is imposed on it. The main impetus of individual identity is its dynamic character, generated by the fact that the different elements that compose it either complement or oppose each other, and their relationship is not predetermined once and for all, which means that certain elements may complement each other in one period of an individual's life, whereas in another period they may oppose each other. Hence the need of the individual to construct “identity strategies with whose help a person insists on defending his existence and social perception, his integration in society, and at the same time evaluates himself and searches for coherence” (Ibid., 2009, p. 9). The issue of

cultural identity has special significance in examining the relation between identity and generations that develop in social contexts undergoing transitional processes. Cultural identity, as Svetlana Boym emphasizes in *Budućnost nostalgije* (*The Future of Nostalgia*), is based on a certain social poetics, or “cultural intimacy”, which in everyday life carries out the role of a tie. Boym insists that it is necessary to recognize the difference between *political nationalism* and *cultural closeness*, emphasizing that cultural closeness “is based on a common social context, not national or ethnic homogeneity” (Boym, 2005, p. 88). The *cultural intimacy* that Boym discusses, upon which the cultural identity of Generation X is based, is the common trait of the novels *Skriena kamera* (*Hidden Camera*) and *Rezerven život* (*A Spare Life*) by Lidija Dimkovska, *Prizraci so srmeni niški* (*Apparitions with Silver Threads*) by Kalina Maleska and *3 minuti i 33 sekundi* (*3 Minutes and 53 Seconds*) by Bert Stajn (pseudonym of Branko Prlja), which are the subject of research of this text. In fact, the authors themselves belong to the Macedonian Generation X: Dimkovska was born in 1971, Maleska in 1975 and Prlja in 1977.

Literature as transcultural dialogue in the time of transition

Discussing contemporary tendencies in literature, Azade Seyhan, in her work *Writing Outside the Nation*, suggests that narratives created from transcending borders cannot be limited by national borders, languages and literary and critical traditions. These narratives, “born from crisis and change, suffering alternatively from amnesia and too much memory, set at the crossroad of different spaces, histories and languages, attempt to name and configure the cultural and literary production with their own terms, and introduce new forms of transcultural dialogue” (Seyhan, 2001, p. 4). When discussing the Macedonian author Lidija Dimkovska and her literary output, it could

be said that her life and literary path is imprinted on the transnational map of culture. After graduating from the Department of World and Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje, in 1994 she went to Romania, where she received her PhD for her thesis on the poetry of Nichita Stănescu at the University of Bucharest, and then worked as a lecturer in Macedonian Language and Literature at the same university. Since 2001 she has lived in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where she continues to write in the Macedonian language. For several semesters, she was a professor at the University of Nova Gorica, and now she has the status of a professional writer. Among the numerous translations of her works, her poetic and prose works are available to Slovenian readers via the translations of Aleš Mustar. Apart from being twice a laureate of the Stale Popov Award of the Writers' Association of Macedonia for best prose book (for the novels *Skriena kamera* and *Rezerven život*), Dimkovska has also received several significant international awards: the Hubert Burda Prize for poetry, and the Petru Krdu, Tudor Arghezi, as well as the European Union Prize for Literature. The three novels published by Dimkovska so far, *Skriena kamera* (*Hidden Camera*) (2004), *Rezerven život* (*Spare Life*) (2012) and *No-Ui* (*No-Oui*) (2016), are works that discuss the transcultural dialogue between several languages and cultural inheritances in the transition era.

Skriena kamera, Dimkovska's first novel, is constructed with two narrative voices – one of Lila Serafimska, Macedonian writer and global nomad, and the other – of the hidden camera, which is a small bug that has remained in Lila's big toe since her mother cut her while she bathing her when she was six months old; since then it has been recording all the events in the life of the protagonist. Lila Serafimska narrates in first person singular, whereas the hidden camera is an auctorial narrator, who speaks in first person singular, but also in first person plural (when it speaks on its own behalf, but also on behalf of

Lila). Culture in transition is discussed several times in the novel. In this work, the effects of the transition process are indicated through various aspects of the characters' lives: from the way they dress, through their habits, to changes in their behaviour and mentality. The narrator comments that the transition process in Macedonia, which started at the end of the 20th century, continues into the 21st century. Seen from the perspective of interpretation of transnational literature, it could be said that the novel *Skriena kamera* by Dimkovska on one level is a novel about the encounter of cultures: one is the meeting of Macedonian and Romanian cultures, which takes place when the protagonist Lila Serafimska goes to live in Romania, and the other is the encounter of Macedonian, Albanian and Pakistani cultures, initiated by the close friendship that grows among Lila, Edlira and Joseph during their stay at an artist-in-residence programme in Austria.

During her encounters with other cultures, Lila Serafimska refuses to see otherness as something alien. This is how she thinks: "A person should get into contact with everything, should accept everything, recognize, and only then the Other will yield with its power and will become an adopted other, or just adopted" (Dimkovska/Димковска, 2004, p. 22-23). And during her stay as an artist-in-residence in Vienna (which serves as the framing story of the novel), when Lila Serafimska meets the ethno-jazz musician Joseph from Pakistan, and the photographer of coffee grounds Edlira from Albania, she finds herself face to face with otherness: gender, national, religious... That otherness positively effects changes in some of her positions, such as those regarding foreign countries and living abroad. Namely, Lila Serafimska experiences each change in her place of residence (and there are many such changes in her life) as another foreign place, and even when, as a six-year-old, she returns to the home of her parents after several years in Shlegovo, "Lila came to the new home as a foreigner with a pedigree, and retained that feeling for a long, long time, all the

way to our going to Romania” (Dimkovska/Димковска, 2004, p. 63). In Vienna, Edlira tells Lila that she was an outsider in her own home because of the people who came to her grandfather (a close associate of Enver Hoxha), and who were alienated from themselves because they were alienated from their closest. From that moment on, after experiencing the Other’s (Edlira) experience as her own, Lila changes her attitude towards foreign countries: “That was the moment she somewhat erased the word ‘abroad’ from her dictionary and starting talking only about the variants of the Home wherever she stays or lives” (Dimkovska/Димковска, 2004, p. 45). Writing about *Skriena kamera*, the literary theorist Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser says that in this novel “traveling, living and staying in several different countries are the essential motive material (...). The unusual diary entries from the various countries represent a kaleidoscope of images of various events, experiences, impressions, scene, historical facts, present events: from the waiting for visas and documents, through experiences in the Roman lecturer dormitory, through intimate and love sequences, through specific reactions to the war developments, all the way to the remarks about the Struga Poetry Evenings and the treatment of the Macedonian poetry and generally, about Macedonia in the world” (Stojmenska-Elzeser/Стојменска – Елзесер, 2009, p. 54-55).

The novel *Rezervni život* is a literary work in which Dimkovska in a detailed way conveys the development of the generation born in Macedonia in the 1970s, a generation that spent its years of maturation in the period of transition. Therefore the events in this novel take place in the period from 1984 to 2012. In this way, covering a period of almost three decades, Dimkovska in this novel paints a complex image of the overall social context in which Generation X is formed: the turbulent economic and political processes in the 1980s, the dramatic events surrounding the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the tragedy of the wars linked to that disintegration in the 1990s (“The wars coincided with

our undergraduate studies, absurdly filling our time with the heaviness of death. Refugees from Bosnia were flowing into the oasis of peace, as Macedonia called itself. They were mostly women, covered with scarfs, overdressed, with little children in their hands, with bags and suitcases, with lost looks or worried expression, looking for shelter” (Dimkovska/Димковска, 2012, p. 144); the independence of Macedonia and the developments connected to it (“On 3 December 1988 before the Greek consular office, a meeting was held as a protest against the fact that the Greeks did not recognize us as Macedonians. A mass of people, flags and posters, shouting and support, artistic speeches and events” Dimkovska/Димковска, 2012, p. 108); and, above all, the transition with all the traumas that accompany it, among which poverty (“Yes, poverty drives the people mad. In Macedonia, there was an increasing number of mad people” Dimkovska/Димковска, 2012, p. 213). Just as in *Skriena kamera*, a specific narrative perspective is also used in *Rezerven život*: here, Zlata is the narrator, and she is the driver of the developments in the novel along with her Siamese twin Srebra. The destinies of many characters are intertwined with the destinies of the twins, in the course of which Macedonian culture, tradition and customs in a turbulent period are presented, and it is therefore a work that could be exceptionally interesting for anthropology, sociology and cultural studies.

In the context of the theme that this text deals with, we can emphasize the activity that Dimkovska undertakes in regard to the affirmation of the authors whose work belongs to several cultures. In 2014 Dimkovska, along with seven associates, prepared the work *Iz jezika v jezik* (*From Language to Language*). It is an anthology of contemporary minority and immigration literature in Slovenia, which includes 34 authors who are either immigrants in Slovenia, or were born in Slovenia and belong to minority groups and write in their mother tongues: English, Bosnian, Italian, Macedonian, Slovakian,

Serbian, Hungarian and Croatian. At the same time, all the authors are represented in the anthology with translations of their works into Slovenian. Through the support in the affirmation of the literary values of these transnational authors who live in Slovenia, and write in their mother tongues, Lidija Dimkovska offers a great contribution in building the new forms of establishing transcultural dialogue.

Novelistic portrayal of the Macedonian Generation X

The novel *Prizraci so srmeni niški* (*Apparitions with Silver Threads*) by Kalina Maleska is a subtle portrayal of the representatives of the Macedonian Generation X, their attempts to face the feeling of hopelessness which appears as a result of the social circumstances that are a consequence of the transitional processes and their search for meaning. It is a work that, according to its structure, is a novel-within-a-novel, the second (embedded) narrative not being subordinate to the first (frame) narrative, but they complement each other and exist on an equal level. The protagonist from the first narrative line, Srna, writes the novel that composes the second narrative line. After graduating from the Faculty of Philology, Srna works for a short time in non-governmental organizations, state and private schools and in the media, but all these employments are temporary. On becoming unemployed, she decides to go back to Struga so that she does not have to continue to live in the flat of her brother Mihail, who is a writer, and his wife Radmila in Skopje. Srna writes a novel in which the protagonists are Daniel, a student at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje, and his sister Tereza, who is an architect and who goes to Dubai, where her cousin works as an engineer. This second narrative line in the composition of *Prizraci so srmeni niški* is not only a novel-within-a-novel, but it is also a reflection of how one character (Srna) sees her generation – the novel that she writes is a mirror image of the existential moment

in which the Macedonian Generation X exists, in the same way that the frame story about Srna is a reflection of Maleska's experience as part of Generation X. The fact that Maleska, already a recognized prose author with her story collections *Nedorazbiranja* (*Misunderstandings*) (1998), *Imenuvanje na insektot* (*The Naming of the Insect*) (2008) and *Mojot neprijatelj Itar Pejo* (*Clever Pejo, My Enemy*) (2016) and the novel *Bruno i boite* (*Bruno and the Colors*) (2006), is a university professor, teaching at the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje, has undoubtedly played a part in the representation of the life of the student Daniel and the psychology of his generation.

"All novels from all times are turned towards the enigma of the human 'I'", Milan Kundera says in *Umetnosta na romanot* (*The Art of the Novel*) (Кундера/Kundera, 1990, p. 27). According to him, the forming and transforming of stylistic formations depend on the way in which novelists in various periods tackle this issue. Kundera identifies the representation of that "I" in his novels with *understanding of the existential theme* of the literary character, and he achieves that through representation of his *existential code*. Seen from the perspective of Kundera's contemplations, we could say that Maleska in her novel *Prizraci so srmeni niški*, precisely because of the specific structure of the work which could be characterized as a novel-within-a-novel, represents the existential code of the Macedonian Generation X both on a fictional and metafictional level.

One of the themes of Maleska's novel is alienation, as well as the ways in which people attempt to abate the blows faced in their everyday transitional life, thus unnoticeably sinking into losing their identity, because by living without giving resistance, they lose their ability to thoroughly interpret the situations and circumstances, and to react to them in a timely and proper manner. In *Prizraci so srmeni niški*, Srna's awareness of such behaviour is presented in the following way:

She barely left the flat, and could not understand how the other people around her, who saw the same events broadcasted in the news, do not experience a sudden end of their calmness, calmness that, as it seemed to her, everyone else but her enjoys. The others seemed to her untroubled, joyous, cheerful, occasionally discussing current events, and occasionally other diverse topics. How is it possible for anyone, Srna was wondering, to joyfully discuss other topics amid this horror? She did not understand that it was just a superficial, seeming pleasure of people used to living in a perpetual agony, used to apprehension and uncertainty, who had to get used to it, or else disintegrate – yet, she did not manage to acquire this habit. In her thoughts, her future character Stiht was starting to take shape, Stiht who, like herself, will not be able to understand the superficial pleasure. She had nothing in common with Mihail's guests, but although their jokes about the political events in the country seemed to her stupid and inadequate, they helped her to survive easier the crises that attacked her as soon as she heard something that made her apprehensive. Mihail's friends' jokes mitigated the power of the impressions of the constant political problems in the country, the disputes with the neighboring countries, or the international crises in the world. (Maleska/ Малеска, 2014, p. 11-12)

In her novel, Maleska also examines the role that the media plays in societies in transition, as well as the misinformation that takes place in the media during the transitional processes. In a paragraph in the novel, an image of chaos in the world but also chaos produced by the media is given in a very impressive way:

... at one of the meetings they agreed greece must veto
macedonias accession into nato
chicago minister slupchane law

attack pakistan tensions islamabad and washington successful
launch of intercontinental ballistic rocket hit by a bullet in
the vicinity of people fighting in the skopje area of aerodrome
airplane disappeared from radar lagos stolen sum of credit
cards skopje residents beaten up by hooligans in a bus a new
great crisis in the world economyimf predicts nuclear threats
stolen from an apartment in skopje deteriorated interethnic
relations... (Maleska/Малеска, 2014, p. 76)

In the quoted extract from the novel, the ongoing chaos broadcast in the media is emphasized through the way in which the text referring to the media reports is organized: through blending excerpts from news, without using punctuation marks.

It could be stated that for some of the characters in Maleska's novels, above all Srna and Daniel, art and culture are a kind of ideal that humans should strive towards. To them, art is not an escape from reality, and dedication to art is not an escapist act with which they avoid facing the social context in which they live, but it is their way of creating order in the chaos produced by the transitional processes. Searching for the values produced in culture, they attempt to re-establish an axis of values in a world in which they are lost, an axis that can give meaning to existence even amid the chaos of transition. Therefore, we find in Maleska's novels reference to some of the pillars of world and Macedonian literature: *Gilgamesh*, *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne, John Keats, Daniel Defoe, Rabindranath Tagore, Jorge Luis Borges, *The Makioka Sisters* by Tanizaki, *The Loom* by Vlado Maleski, Petre M. Andreevski's poetry and Blaze Koneski's poetry. Elite art in this context is placed against everything that in transitional societies is used by the populist political approach as part of the popular culture, aimed at creating a political elite (the word "elite" in

this syntagm signifying an enormous difference in wealth from the other layers of society, and not referring in any way to culture).

In *Prizraci so srmenai niški* there are parts that refer to specific events from Macedonian political reality. At one point, we can read this: “When the following night, he and Manev met, they knew that nobody was going to be interested in their promotion. There were very few guests at their promotion, and they all talked about the political events in the Parliament. It was quiet and lonely at the promotion that he was looking forward to with such great excitement” (Maleska/Малеска, 2014, p. 151). According to the date on which the promotion of Mihail’s book was scheduled, it can be concluded that the political event referred to here is the unscrupulous expulsion of journalists by security in Parliament, by the order of the then ruling party, on 24 December 2012. The political aspect is also very relevant in understanding Daniel’s quest to discover the enigma surrounding the nameless poet, whose origin and period in which he lived are unknown, and next to whose poems in handwriting, the word “Go_rah” is written – which some interpret as his pseudonym, and yet, these two syllables, with the missing letters between them can actually be interpreted as Gomorrah.

A sentence from the novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Milan Kundera, then repeated in the chapter “Sixty Words” from Уметноста на романот states: “The battle of the human against the authorities is a battle of remembrance against forgetting” (Kundera/Кундера, 1990, p. 116). We could say that novels are part of that battle, and seen from that perspective, the novel *Prizraci so srmenai niški* by Kalina Maleska is a remembrance of the time given to the Macedonian Generation X, the time of transition: it is a novel that remembers the demonstrations, poverty and lack of jobs, the injustices of the system and the regime, and the strife of individuals to attain the ideals of a just society and dignified human existence, an essential part of which is art.

Writing the intimate history of Generation X

In her work *Writing Outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan emphasizes the importance of cultural memory for all those that do not live in the country in which they were born and where they spent a part of their lives. Seyhan defines the term *cultural memory* as “intentional remembrance through concrete written records and experiences or their symbolic interpretations by a community that shares a common culture”, which can be linguistic, religious, institutional, migrant, diaspora, ethnic or some kind of a combination of all these. The meaning of cultural memory for all those who face moving from one cultural and social context to another is even greater because “the social disruptions caused by the moving, migration and exile lead to impoverishing the common life and the shared cultural heritage. Such loss requires restoring of the cultural memory in order to link the meaning, objective and the integrity of the past” (Seyhan, 2001, p. 15). It could be stated that the seed for the writing of the novel *3 минути и 53 секунди* by Bert Stajn, who was in the list of three finalists for the Novel of the Year Award of *Utrinski Vesnik* for 2015, is precisely in the loss of a cultural and social context and the need to connect the past with the present through restoring cultural memory. Bert Stajn is the pseudonym of Branko Prlja, and the subtitle of the work *An Intimate History of Music from 1984 to 2004* points to two important characteristics of his (the autobiographical character of this literary work, as well as the interweaving of events with music, which is a substantial part of the protagonist's – narrator's) understanding of life and the world. In the “Forward to Work”, the author gives explanation that “3 minutes and 53 seconds is the average duration of a contemporary song”, and that it is the time needed for the readers to read a chapter.

It is a historical analysis not only of music as reflection of the social and political events in the world and in our country, but it is also a broader social and culture analysis that operates on three levels. The first level is the local one, through which the history of these areas in the specific period is examined as well as its correlation with the global events, but also the personal stories of the protagonists in this book. The second level is the global one, through which the author attempts to analyze our place amid the world events and how they were reflected in our reality. The third level is the individual one, i.e. the intimate view of the author about all those local and global events, interwoven with his personal history. (Stajn/Стајн, 2015, p. 159)

Stajn's novel is composed of 21 chapters, each chapter referring to one year, and each chapter is titled according to the music composition that was popular in the year the chapter covers. This establishes a living relationship between life and music: in a certain way, the title, indicating the song, the musical style to which it belongs, as well as its content, determines the atmosphere that dominates the chapter. Thus, the first chapter, in which the narrator talks about his childhood in 1984, is entitled "*Thriller* – Michael Jackson", and it discusses the deep internal disturbances of a child, caused by a family trauma due to the divorce of his parents; it is a chapter about the life of the narrator with his father and grandmother in Sarajevo, while his mother and sister live in Skopje. The second chapter, "We Are the World – USA for Africa", starts with a contrastive comparison of the life of children from Africa and children from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and then continues with the announcement of the transition and the wars: "as if all illusions broke and the seed of all that brought inflation, national hatred, territorial appetites and wars sprouted" (Stajn/Стајн, 2015, p. 14). The chapter for 1986, entitled "The Final

Countdown – Europe”, starts with the narrator buying a tape that includes the mentioned song, and continues with the narrator meeting his mother again. This is followed by the chapters “*Where the Streets Have No Name*– U2”, “*Seventh Son*... – Iron Maiden”, “*Epic* – Faith No More” and 15 more musical compositions (chapters from the novel), and they are composed of stories about growing up in Yugoslavia, the disintegration of the fatherland, the beginning of the war, the escape to Macedonia, where he continues to live with his mother and sister, the search for his identity and the meaning of existence, passages about popular culture and sub-culture, music (from punk, though metal, to rap) and film, and brief and insightful analyses of local, regional and global political events.

Apart from being, as the book’s subtitle says, “an intimate history of music from 1984 to 2004”, *3 минути и 53 секунди* is at the same time is a personal history of a part of a life, but also a history of the generation born in the 1970s, that was maturing in a period of transition that still continues, history that follows, year in and year out, through two decades, Generation X, Yugoslav, post-Yugoslav, Macedonian. Through writing this work, Bert Stajn (Branko Prlja) through cultural memory restores a whole world of a once common culture, through which he connects the past with the present in a creatively exceptionally well-structured piece.

At the end of this text, we remind ourselves of the thoughts of Milan Kundera in the *Umetnost na romanot*, that “historiography writes the history of society, but not the one of man”. Kundera emphasizes that the task of the novelist is precisely in focusing on what historians and political thinkers neglect: novelists should remember and write down what is essential in the human being in a given historical moment (Kundera/Кундера, 1990, p.38-39). In the novels of Lidija Dimkovska, Kalina Maleska and Bert Stajn (Branko Prlja), this very intention to write the history of the individual is noticeable, but in a certain way, also

the history of their generation, the Macedonian Generation X, in the form of a novel. Their generational closeness (born in the 1970s), their life experiences gathered in a great measure on a common territory, their focus on writing about what is happening here and now, about what is happening to them (us), leads them towards creating novels in which they research the world open before the subjects thrown into it, facing their characters with the Other, with all that surrounds them, and in that way giving them a literary shape of the current issues of our time, the time of transition.

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