



The Centre-Periphery Dichotomy in Davor Špišić's *Vuk na snijegu* and Karin Peschka's *Autolyse Wien. Erzählungen vom Ende* and its Turns in Times of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the way how the culture of the city is represented in contemporary German and Croatian prose exemplified by Karin Peschka's *Autolyse Wien. Erzählungen vom Ende* [*Autolysis Vienna. Stories of the End*] and Davor Špišić's *Vuk na snijegu* [*Wolf in the Snow*]. The thesis of the paper is that Peschka's and Špišić's literary cityscapes of Vienna and Zagreb respectively are self-referential semiospheres or metaphors produced by their cultures, whose semiotic textual spaces are formed holistically as results of the geocultural and sociohistorical context of centrality (Vienna) and periphery (Zagreb), and the way they correlate and interchange. By applying a (post) structuralist, comparative and sociological approach, the paper analyses how the represented city space is reshaped in the dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives to a state of unrecognizability and is reconstructed by means of reception, experience and knowledge of the readers, e. g. by the end of the short stories' collection *Autolyse Wien* Peschka's Vienna remains alive only in the characters' memories, while most parts of Špišić's Zagreb are altered in terms of their function, character, purpose, and accessibility. On the one hand, this results in the loss of the represented city's cultural and urban identity, and on the other, the dichotomy of centrality and periphery, the urban and the rural, the civilized and the wild, the cultured and the natural becomes blurred.

Keywords: Contemporary fiction, City, Semiosphere, Centre, Periphery



1. Introduction

Juri Lotman's notion of semiosphere underpins the following analysis of two urban narratives of Vienna and Zagreb, two capital cities whose urban culture has been strongly shaped by their interplay and relations throughout their shared socio-cultural and political history. The paper will investigate how the cultural features of the capital cities of Zagreb, Croatia and Vienna, Austria are presented in the prose works *Vuk na snijegu* [Wolf in the Snow] by Davor Špišić and *Autolyse Wien. Erzählungen vom Ende* [Autolysis Vienna. Stories of the End] by Karin Peschka, both of which can be considered as *mimesis*, a reflection and projection of their own current urban issues respectively. The aim of the paper is to examine how the literary urban spaces of both capital cities change in appearance, function, signification and positioning in terms of centrality and periphery. Namely, Vienna, as a well-known city has a long history of cultural, economic, administrative centrality, whereas Zagreb is a lesser known capital that has a more peripheral role on a larger, regional and European scale. The thesis of the paper is that Vienna and Zagreb as represented in the literary works function as self-referential semiospheres whose features of centrality and periphery change on several levels. Both prose works have their narrative set in capital cities that are the bearers of their surrounding cultural identity, and through Špišić's Zagreb dystopian or in Peschka's Vienna post-apocalyptic elements, they bring the culture of the space to an extreme change or disintegration, leading to the loss of the city's identity. The depicted cities represent a dichotomy within themselves that sways between the two extremes of centrality and periphery. This oscillation occurs on three levels. Firstly, this is evident in the plot setting in which the urban centres turn into spaces that do not bear cultured, civilized, urban features anymore. Secondly, it is evident on the title-text level, where there is a discrepancy between associations and expectations based on the title and the content of the literary works themselves. Thirdly, the extra-textual socio-cultural context and relationship between two prose works, where the Austrian capital Vienna represents a well-known centre, while the Croatian capital of Zagreb is compared to Vienna, somewhat peripheral.

There are several sociological dichotomies that support these arguments. Firstly, the centre (core)-periphery dichotomy in terms of the world systems approach. Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) influential world system theory provides the structural explanation of regional developmental and economic imbalances between core, peripheral and semi-peripheral regions as parts of one interdependent economy system. The core/

periphery concept was first proposed in 1950s by Prebisch (ECLA; esp. Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe – CEPAL; as cited in Klimczuk and Klimczuk-Kochańska, 2019, p. 2), but the terminology of core and periphery had already been used in 1929 (Prebisch, 1929, as cited in Klimczuk and Klimczuk-Kochańska, 2019, p. 2). Core regions are highly economically developed and wealthy as a result of exploiting the periphery from which they draw resources such as cheap labour. Historically, especially as part of the Habsburg Monarchy, Vienna and Zagreb showed this type of relationship based on their interconnectedness not only through economical, but also sociocultural ties and cultural transfer, with Vienna being the core and Zagreb the periphery.

Secondly, to support the same argument, there is a centre-periphery dichotomy in terms of urban culture, which was employed by many theoreticians in an attempt to explain the differences in sociocultural development between cities that are geopolitically situated in regional/country centre and those situated peripherally. In those conceptualizations, centre/periphery power relations are interpreted as socio-spatial configuration that results in asymmetrical socio-spatial cultural development (Castells, 1997; Kühn, 2015; Scott and Soja, 1996; Shtern, 2018; Wacquant, 2008, as cited in Yavo-Avalon, 2019, p. 463). Peripheral cities, in this kind of interpretive framework, only passively accept the influence of central cities as a source of cultural authority and legitimacy. Yavo-Avalon (2019) challenged this perception of culturally inferior periphery and concludes a case study with a notion that changes in sociocultural structure of periphery can overturn the centre-periphery power relations and can result in an erosion of the centre-periphery macrosocial structure. Such erosion of the centre-periphery structure will be shown in the analysis for the selected literary texts.

Thirdly, there is an urban-rural dichotomy in classical sociological approaches, such as that by Georg Simmel, who is well known for his early contribution to the debate about the characteristics of urban life versus rural life in *The Metropolis and Mental life* (1950). Simmel observes that the metropolitan individual is constantly exposed to a multitude of stimuli, and as a result, in need to protect himself from this intensification of nervous stimulation, the urban dweller creates a protective blasé attitude, characterised by a dulled sensibility for the differences between things (Boy, 2021). Simmel described the metropolitan individual as fundamentally different from one living in traditional, more peaceful, slower, rural way of life where much stronger social ties of a small community exist. This dichotomy (and the oscillation between) is obvious in the representation of Vienna as a rural space and Zagreb as highly urbanized.

Lastly, the interplay between the two poles of the urban-rural dichotomy in context of a rural-urban continuum concept needs to be explained in order to support the argument of lack of boundaries between the urban/central/cultured and the rural/peripheral/natural. Namely, more recent research on urban/rural dichotomy shifted from rigid rural-urban dichotomy to a more fluid concept of rural-urban continuum based on a notion that urban and rural communities can have different degrees of urban and rural characteristics simultaneously. The process of urbanization of the countryside happens parallel to the process of ruralisation of the city (Urbain, 2002, as cited in Woods, 2009, p. 853). Forms of social organisation and social interaction typical for urban places become adopted in rural settings, so a significant part of modern urbanity is now exercised in rural places, creating a phenomenon named *l'urbanité rurale* (Pouille and Gorgeu, 1997, as cited in Woods, 2009, p. 853).

The imagined space in both prose works refers not only to real spaces, but also represents some of the contemporary problems such as inflation, the war in Ukraine, or people's destructive behaviour towards nature. Juri M. Lotman believes that fictional space shapes "an infinite object" through "finite text" – in other words, reality (1977, p. 211). Research by Irena Malenica and Zdenka Matek Šmit showed that dystopia depicted in the Croatian novels of Josip Mlakić *Planet Friedman* (2012) and Edo Popović *Lomljenje vjetra* (2011) refers to the present and warns of distorted values of a new, threatening, disturbing and highly dehumanizing age (Matek Šmit, 2018, p. 345). The literary work can be understood as part of a sophisticated system of "extra-textual connections" that, with its "hierarchy of non-artistic and artistic norms on various levels", is systematized by the "experience of the artistic past" and forms a complex code that enables deciphering the information that is present in the text (Lotman, 1977, p. 295). This paper will show how the cultural features of recognizable extra-textual, 'real', empirical Zagreb and Vienna change in a dystopian and post-apocalyptically presented environment, with the dichotomies of central/urban/cultured/civilized versus peripheral/rural/natural/wild clashing and interchanging to a point of their borders and distinctions being completely blurred. The starting point of the research is the hypothesis that the cityscapes in Špišić's *Vuk na snijegu* and Peschka's *Autolyse Wien* are self-referential semiospheres of Zagreb and Vienna, which through a critical narrative towards contemporary urban problems, lead the culture of the imaginary space to disintegration, and thus, the city to change or loss of its identity.

2. Semiosphere, signs, centrality, periphery and the border

A city is defined by the characteristics of its material and immaterial urban culture. Lotman views culture as information that “depends on human consciousness” and is not transmitted through the genetic code (Zylko, 2001, p. 393). It is a system of signs that form a semiosphere. However, the semiosphere is not synonymous with culture, quite the contrary this term encompasses both “culture and its semiotic environment” (Nöth, 2006, p. 260).

Both represented cities are capitals: Zagreb is the capital of the Republic of Croatia, and Vienna of Austria. As such, they are the cultural, political, scientific and economic centres and are known as the largest cities within their country. Their identity and recognizability arises from the signs that are perceived by the senses and known or learned from experience. Juri M. Lotman (2005, p. 208) defines the semiosphere as a system of signs, as a “semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist” (p. 208). According to Lotman (2005), the boundary of the semiotic space serves as “the most important functional and structural position, giving substance to its semiotic mechanism” (p. 210). Signs can be understood as all the demarcations of urbanity and urban identity like language and its site-specific expressions like inscriptions or graffiti, spatial features like cultural heritage, architecture and the built environment that comprise the public space, social norms in the urban environment like mass gatherings and the connection of the dense urban community in certain parts of the city and the socioeconomic division between groups of inhabitants. Lotman’s semiosphere includes “the larger framework that constitutes and creates culture as a whole” (Nöth, 2006, p. 260). The semiosphere is, therefore, not only created before but “is presupposed by cultural semiosis” (ibid). As segments of cultural semiosis, we can consider “textual space created in the arts, in myths, social codes, or ideologies”, and a “metatextual space created in the form of cultural self-descriptions” (Nöth, 2006, p. 261). The culture of Zagreb is thus constituted by, e. g., the attitudes of its residents towards their city, their habits, and behaviours such as walking along Maksimir and shopping at the markets, Zagreb art, music, street and other artistic creations and, of course, places like the Zagreb Cathedral, the Art Pavilion, the Croatian National Theatre or Mark’s Square, which is the seat of the Government of the Republic of Croatia. On the other hand, the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, the work of Gustav Klimt, places like Schönbrunn, St. Stephen’s Cathedral, Votive Church, the Burgtheater, the Golden Quarter and other spaces clearly signal that it is the city of Vienna because they

form a known part of Viennese culture and identity. Such generally known and recognizable elements of the culture of a certain city are in literature changed into signs in the formation of self-referential semiospheres. By bringing together the metaphorical, literary and socio-cultural levels of these signs, a creative and logical structure of the world is created, which is, to the reader, recognizable and identifiable by senses and/or experience. By changing the genre of representation of the literary cityscapes of Zagreb and Vienna from realistic to dystopian and post-apocalyptic, both authors use the method of defamiliarization to produce new “perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable”, and they do so “by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings” (Booker, 1994, p. 19). In the novel *Vuk na snijegu*, Špišić criticizes precisely the class differences in society and the civil weakness that torment contemporary Croatian citizens. By placing these topics in a dystopian future, the reader moves away from his immediate reality and, through the time gap provided by defamiliarization and imagining the consequences of these negative practices, the reader expands his awareness of the problem. Like Špišić, Peschka also problematizes consumerism, but in Peschka’s texts, the issue of neglecting care for the environment, taking nature for granted, and losing basic natural survival knowledge dominates. This brings us to the juxtaposition of the urban versus the rural and the border between them. The border, as one of the operating terms in Lotman’s notion of the semiosphere, enables the establishment of contact with “non-semiotic and extra-semiotic spaces” (Lotman, 2005, p. 210):

In the early years of 19th century culture, the “destructive” zone on the outskirts lay in direct contrast with the town centre, which embodied the dominant social structure, outskirts described, for example, in Tsvetaeva’s poem (“Frontier Post”) as part of the town, and yet belonging to that place, which destroyed the town. Its nature is bilingual. (Lotman, 2005, p. 211)

With the mechanism of the border, Lotman therefore divides the centre as a space of culture from the periphery, that is, a space of destruction and disorder. In other words, the border “separates the territory of one’s own, good and harmonious culture from its bad, chaotic, or even dangerous anticulture” (Nöth, 2006, p. 255). The importance of the border is in its protection of “the system from undesired external influences” and in establishing “the semiosphere itself”:

Moreover, since 'culture not only creates its internal organization but also its own type of external disorganization' (1984: 212), the self-construction of a semiosphere does not only extend to the construction of its own boundary, but also to the 'chaos' which surrounds it, a chaos which makes the own internal structure appear the more orderly. (Nöth, 2006, p. 260)

Therefore, the centre is defined as the urban and the cultured, whereas the periphery is defined as the rural, the natural. The analysis of the selected literary works shows how the relations between these two spheres change due to the method of defamiliarization, which is a common method in dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature, with the aim of highlighting contemporary societal problems.

3. Dystopian and post-apocalyptic modification of urban space

Demir Alihodžić and Selma Veseljević Jerković (2016) point out that "[t]he city's reproduction of entropy arises from its function as a metonymy for civilization" (p. 78). Since the capitals are the centre of political, cultural, economic and other aspects of their state and can therefore be seen as the core from where all major decisions about the life of the state originate, the capitals described in the literary text can symbolically represent the state of the entire country. This argument is the second to support the claim that the dichotomy of centrality and periphery is in the chosen examples blurred or even disappears: the centre stretches its borders to represent the periphery and the periphery permeates the centre.

Apocalypse has become a standard term in popular literature for a global catastrophe that shatters the social order (Pommer, 2020, p. 16), bringing chaos and wilderness into the order of the urban centres. Similar to the post-apocalypse, dystopian narrative can also depict a chaotic environment and, as Patrícia Vieira (2020) claims, "dystopia [is] pre-eminently political literary genre [...] that hinges upon societal criticism and a desire for social change" (p. 354). Dystopia does not actually insist on the contrast between a "better" (real) and a "worse" (dystopian) society, but a dystopian society develops as a gradation, emphasis or hyperbole of what is bad in empirical reality (Sumpor, 2021, p. 79). The same can be said for the post-apocalyptic genre; both genres create a warning effect through their narrative.

Analysing dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels for young people, Alexander Pommer (2020) finds out how both genres are primarily defined by their significant space (p. 30). In dystopias, it is a dystopian social space, and in post-apocalypses, it is a post-apocalyptic natural space (ibid.). Pommer (2020), however, distinguishes dystopian space from apocalyptic space in that dystopia is characterized by absolute control, while post-apocalyptic space defies all order (p. 29). The geography of the post-apocalypse belongs to nature, and the post-apocalyptic wilderness and landscape of ruins is an indicator of the victory of nature over society (Pommer, 2020, p. 29).

3.1. Dystopian Zagreb

Davor Špišić (born 1961), contemporary Croatian playwright, prose writer and screenwriter, imagines in his novel *Vuk na snijegu* the Republic of Croatia in 2035. In retrospect, the plot of the novel returns to 2017, when Danko and Milena met, 2019, when Vuk was born, 2022, when Vuk was three years old, 2032, when Croatia became one of the poorest countries in the Third World, and 2033 when the People's Salvation Government came to power. Past events, such as the burglary of two hungry men in a bakery in 2017, the insecure life of the Erceg family and Milena's walk to the hospital in 2019 explain how poverty was the cause of violence and general dissatisfaction in the city, which contributed to further negative circumstances. The narrator also talks about the insecurity of the past when he reveals that Milena is happy for not being fired as a pregnant woman and for receiving a full salary because this was not a common case for pregnant women in 2019. In 2022, however, the crisis expands from economic to political, and the reader learns about the Russian occupation forces that blew up the old Chernobyl reactor in Ukraine. Besides the fact that Špišić emphasizes the referential function of his literary work by placing his imaginary spatial narrative in a real city, real events such as the war in Ukraine and inflation are recognized through the description of the events that preceded the dystopian state, which strengthens the appellative function of the text. All these events, including the COVID pandemic, deepened the gap between the rich and the poor and encouraged the creation of a Zagreb in total crisis in 2035. The architecture of the city is described as extremely derelict residential buildings and neglected infrastructure where the protagonists, representatives of the working class, are located: "Muddy, rusty water runs from the faucet. The pipes in the whole neighbourhood have been rotten for ages" (Špišić, 2022,

1 "Iz slavine nahrupi blatnjava hrdasta voda. Cijevi su u njihovom kvartu odavno istrulile svoje" All translations of the original texts into English have been done by the authors of this paper.

p. 26). As opposed to the insecure housing conditions of the working class, there are government institutions that are stable, even armoured to protect the ruling class: "A rain of stones came down on the armoured windows of the Banski dvori [Ban's Halls]"² (Špišić, 2022, p. 51). In addition, Zagreb is presented as a megacity with ten-storey buildings and the largest shopping centre in the Balkan. Thus, Zagreb develops to be an area dominated by capitalism. Consumption becomes the main priority of the city and overshadows all forms of culture, both social and material. Mass hunger that forces citizens to protest, theft and double jobs show Zagreb as a place of extreme socio-economic differences, and these differences are best manifested in the shopping centre *Baš Čelik*, which the poor class of the population is prohibited from entering. On the other hand, the prosperous part of the population worthy of moving around the area of the shopping centre throws away food and buys goods in a frenzy. Changes in the city landscape, attitudes towards culture and spatial behaviour occur with the change of the ruling elite. More precisely, the first thing that Ivan Tomanić's government (ironically named the People's Salvation Government) does after its establishment is shutting down the Ministry of Science, Education and Culture, which shows that education and culture have no place in this social structure. Instead of this, a new Ministry of Faith and Hope is formed, which protects the set of opinions formed and approved by Tomanić's politics. President Tomanić appears in person only once in the novel, and more often as a hologram in the middle of the city, peeking into the Ercegs' house and changing scenes. Sometimes Tomanić's hologram speaks with pressed lips, sometimes he is dressed as a military pilot or Santa Claus, and in one hologram appearance, he gave himself communion, which can be interpreted as an act of unlimited power in both the profane and sacral spheres. He is described as the supreme saviour, the greatest son of the nation, and he secures his position by propaganda and media control. The city's public space is thus dominated by advertising displays with luxuriously produced films about Baščelikovci as the entitled class (the inhabitants that are allowed to enter the *Baš Čelik* shopping centre) and Tomanić's holograms. The cult of his persona is depicted in an ornate stained-glass window that was installed over the facade of the fifty-storey skyscraper, which replaced the old Parliament building, with an allegorical depiction of his life from the cradle to his prime minister's title (Špišić, 2022, p. 47). The People's Forum – again an irony in the name given – is formed, which is a medium that knows how to please any government in order to receive financial support, which is then, in turn, used for corruptive purposes. The press in Špišić's Zagreb is therefore not free, and the restriction of freedom of speech and media freedom confirms that the

2 "Kiša kamenja obruši se na blindirane prozore Banskih dvora."

People's Salvation Government is implementing a totalitarian form of government. As typical themes of the dystopian genre, the system of oppression and terror over citizens, control of opinion and manipulation of the truth change the space of Špišić's Zagreb and define the dystopian landscape.

3.2. Post-apocalyptic Vienna

The Austrian contemporary author Karin Peschka (born 1967) creates a post-apocalyptic Vienna through the collection of short stories *Autolyse Wien*. By depicting the cityscape in ruins due to an unknown disaster, she defamiliarizes the real city space and creates a post-apocalyptic environment in which 31 stories told from the perspective of different Viennese people, 7 stories told from the first perspective and the story of the Viennese Child, which consists of the last 3 stories, unfold.

The post-apocalyptic narrative of each story - except for the last three stories about the Viennese Child - begins with a question about the city and pointing out some of its negative features: "Vienna? Has become unreachable."³ (Peschka, 2017, p. 36) When asked about Vienna, Malik and Alisia say that it is empty, Olja says that it is desolate, Imre, Tyson and Goliath say that it has bled to death, while it has become unavailable to Ivelina. The beginning of each character's story suggests a threatening or uncertain spatial setting. Peschka places various characters in the destroyed and burned space of the metropolis. It is unclear exactly what disaster struck Vienna, only that the disaster struck suddenly and had catastrophic consequences for the city (Peschka, 2017, p. 36). After a disaster, chaos arises. The main bridge in Vienna, the Reichsbrücke, becomes a place where people jump to their deaths. Houses and shops are robbed. While some of the survivors collect food, pots and various other materials, others live like nomads or try to create order out of the chaos or simply think over their own death. For some characters, the disaster brings good changes, for example for Sebastian. Disappointed in life and himself - he was an alcoholic, lost his job - Sebastian intended to commit suicide, but the disaster prevented him from doing so, so he remains alive, weans himself from alcohol and starts eating healthy with apples and nuts he finds.

Similar to Špišić, Peschka also offers information about the past of the characters throughout the story. Through retrospection, certain elements of the crisis that could have preceded the disaster are shown. As possible reasons, Peschka identifies on the

3 "Wien? Unzugänglich geworden."

one hand the destruction of nature: "Earlier he threw burning cigarettes at the tree. He poured drain cleaner between the roots."⁴ (Peschka, 2017, p. 35) On the other hand, it might have been an economic crisis: "For economic reasons, this would be a smart thing to do. [...] Back to the childhood bedroom at the age of 38"⁵ (Peschka, 2017, p. 23). In addition, similar to Špišić's novel, Peschka addresses the downsides of capitalism and society's orientation the need to fill voids by purchasing goods and spending uncontrollably are emphasized: in Anna's story, it is described that most customers who do not find the goods they were looking, do not leave empty-handed either (Peschka, 2017, p. 64). The catastrophe, however, brings the economic crisis to an end as money loses its importance in post-apocalyptic Vienna. Existence in the post-apocalyptic world is no longer ensured by earnings and profits, but by finding food and by possessing knowledge about nature and survival. However, when it comes to the past of the characters, not all stories are filled with crisis. Moreover, through a return to the past, the reader learns how the characters lived an ordinary life, as is lived in modern reality, which gives an insight into the average lifestyle of the Viennese. Before the disaster, Peschka's Viennese travel, use smart phones, walk through the Lobau, eat Langos in the Prater, etc. Through the descriptions of the previous lives of the characters, the reader recognizes Viennese culture, its social life and habits. By recalling places (signs, landmarks) such as Café Jenseits, Stephansdom, Karlskirche, Haas-Haus, Naschmarkt, Lainzer Tiergarten, Lasalle Street and other real Viennese places, the reader is made aware that these spaces are also an important part of Viennese culture. Moreover, all these customs and spaces are semiotic signs that together form the semiosphere of Viennese urban culture, giving this metropolis its identity:

There was no more Stephansdom [St. Stephen's Cathedral] to orientate oneself, no more Haas House, no Michael's Church and the Plague Column on the Graben had also disappeared, because the Graben [the Grave] had defined itself in the real sense of the word and its name as such.⁶ (Peschka, 2017, p. 9)

4 "Früher hatte er den Baum mit glosenden Zigaretten beworfen. Er hatte ihm mehrere Flaschen Abflussreiniger zwischen die Wurzeln gegossen."

5 "Aus Kostengründen wäre dies nur vernünftig [...] Mit achtunddreißig zurück in das Kinderzimmer."

6 Es gab zwar keinen Stephansdom mehr zur Orientierung, kein Haas-Haus, keine Michaelerkirche, und die Pestsäule auf dem Graben war ebenfalls verschwunden, weil der Graben sich als solcher im eigentlichen Sinn seines Namens definiert hatte.

Vienna has become a city without a future, a ruined city. Beneath the collapsed Naschmarkt, along with the vegetables, lie dead people, and in the case of the Viennese Child, who survives the collapse of the house thanks to the dogs, not only is there no interest in the former culture of Vienna, but the Child cannot even pronounce Vienna. He thinks about why he would even talk and with whom. However, as Boguslaw Zylko (2001) states, while studying Lotman's cultural studies, the natural world is "culturalized" by naming, whereby parts of nature become "humanized" and included in some of culture's languages" (p. 394). By forgetting and not naming the city, this cultured space returns to nature and loses its cultural meaning.

Nature, moreover, shows greater resistance to disaster than culture even though it had also been hit by the disaster, as evident in the broken trees, sudden weather changes and falling rusty rain. Nature was not completely destroyed and is recovering quickly:

But it still enrages him, everything, the fact that this tree, all the trees here, simply continue to green regardless of the disaster, as if nothing had happened. Bushes, both beautiful and ugly, hedges, everything springs, even without the Horticulture Department to trim, to form the wild growing plants in the desired form.⁷ (Peschka, 2017, pp. 47-48)

Furthermore, as time goes by, the nature grows even stronger. While before the disaster Gerrit believed that the city was the concrete, the earth belonged to trees, the disaster showed the fragility of the city, the central and the urban and its culture versus the strength of nature. It showed that the city in a time of total crisis is overpowered by nature, as can be seen in the descriptions of the ruins interwoven by flowers and grass. The lawn on Heldenplatz becomes a meadow, and rain begins to fall again on the parched land due to the dry period in the story of the Viennese Child. By recovering from the disaster, nature digests the urban space and erases the semiotic signs of the former city, of any sign of centrality, of a once very neat and cultured urban space.

3.3. The capitals as semiospheres amidst crises

By setting the action of prose works in capital cities, Špišić and Peschka place culture in the core of the semiosphere. Therefore, by analysing the cultural insignia of imagined

⁷ Aber wütend macht es ihn dennoch, alles nämlich, auch, dass dieser Baum, dass alle Bäume hier, ungeachtet der Katastrophe einfach wieder austrieben, frisches Grün ansetzten, als wäre nichts geschehen. Sträucher, prächtige wie hässliche, die Hecken, alles sproß, kein Gartenbauamt, um das Treiben zu stutzen, um das wild Wachsende in die gewünschte Form zu zwingen.

cities, the reader becomes familiar with the dominant system of semiotic signs of a certain country or region. Culture and identity are usually formed in relation to Others. This is where semiotic boundaries according to Lotman's theory are observed, and centre-periphery oppositions are especially important for the semiosphere. In Špišić's novel, the culture of the city is most clearly formed in the very centre of the semiosphere - in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia. Fleeing from Zagreb towards the state border, which is a rural area, the novel's protagonists enter the periphery. This area in relation to the centre can be described as empty and abandoned, inhabited by a few remaining people who live in misery and dream nightmares (Špišić, 2022, p. 171). In Peschka's collections of short stories, the semiotic boundaries are lost as a result of a disaster, so there are no longer any distinctions between city districts, borders and other city areas (Peschka, 2017, p. 95), which are a recognizable feature of Vienna.

In addition to blurring boundaries of the urban-rural and/or centre-periphery dichotomy on the content level, they are also observed at the title-text level. Namely, *Vuk na snijegu* [*Wolf in the Snow*] with its title, connotes nature, the wilderness, the periphery and the outside, while the plot is in fact set into a highly urban space, which normally connotes culture, order, civilization, development, and centrality. Since the setting of the novel is dystopian, it exhibits the features of wilderness in which one needs to struggle to survive. For these reasons, the urban centre is being abandoned and the characters flee outside of the city, crossing the borders of "culture" and the centre that is actually not the centre anymore. It is clear from the start that in this urban space, we actually encounter the chaotic circumstances in which a "civilized", "cultured" person has to survive as one would need to in nature. The title of Peschka's collection, on the other hand, evokes the image of Vienna as embodiment of culture, centrality, order, and civilization, whereas the process of autolysis connotes from the very beginning that this culture will be digested and transformed by the end and returned to nature, the 'uncultured', the rural and the peripheral. As the short stories show, the process of autolysis becomes more prominent towards the end of the collection, stronger, more visible; it progresses in terms of the changes visible in the city as the city itself degrades. In *Autolyse Wien*, the cultural geography of Vienna disappears with a catastrophe that triggers the return of the life of human civilization to the beginning, namely to the wilderness, where each character fights for his survival. Therefore, the boundaries of the semiosphere disappear. Thus, in Peschka's Vienna, the centre does not differ from the periphery and the rural and nature anymore, and the cultural semiosis of the former city cannot occur due to the city's inability to exhibit its recognizable

signs. The semiosis is impossible in the Austrian novel due to a disaster, and its signs remain only in the memories of those characters who once experienced it and who remember the destroyed spaces as spaces of culture, as buildings and streets that had their names. Špišić, on the other hand, plays with cultural semiosis and subjects it to government as a highly organized, civilized phenomenon, a controlled environment set usually in the centre, in the urban space. Ironically, this overkill of control as well as the change of subjects into oppressed, into consumers without freedom of creativity leads to the tragedy of culture, in Georg Simmel's sense, where the control of objective, or more strictly speaking, totalitarian culture over the subjective one is manifested (Lambropoulos, 2001, p. 241).

Comparing the novel that represents the space of Croatia with the one that represents the space of Austria, it can be noted that the space of Vienna and the signs of Viennese culture, considering the central importance of the Viennese metropolis throughout European history, are widely known, while Zagreb with its cultural signs is less well known. Therefore, compared to Croatia, Austria represents the centre, the territory of cultural development, while Croatia stands for the periphery. However, the artistic transformation of the Austrian and Croatian urban space puts them on a relatively similar level in terms of losing their centrality and becoming the periphery with its struggles.

In their novels, both authors create a metropolis in which the semiosphere of the city, or the sign system that gives it its identity, is doomed. The dystopian social mind in Špišić's novel, moreover, was secured primarily by the abolition of the Ministry of Science, Education and Culture, which shows this department, as well as the signs of the culture it represents, as threatening to the emerging political system. In addition, Zagreb public spaces, which can be recognized as the signs of the real city, in Špišić's fiction are repurposed to serve the People's Salvation Government. This can be seen in the use of the stadium for shooting people or in the change of the windows on Banski dvori, which is also the seat of the Croatian government in real life. In this dystopian city, the windows are armoured to protect the rulers from the masses, similarly to the real-life events when the Croatian government posted guards and fences in 2020-2022. The totalitarian government controls the culture of the city, changes and destroys it, and creates a new 'culture' that speaks in favour of the government. Democracy as a form of civilized, cultured social order turns into a totalitarian regime, more characteristic to less-developed, marginal or peripheral, if you will, societies in which disorder rules.

By constructing a dystopian Zagreb, Špišić shows that changing the political structure and neglecting subjective culture, as well as free education, which drives towards what can be described as uncivilized. Moreover, the absence of culture that would be free to question the system creates an extremely unfair oppressive system where the majority works for the minority and is punished in case of the slightest disobedience, similar to pecking orders in nature or to packs of, say wolves. The architecture of this dystopian Zagreb does not indicate preservation either, quite the opposite, the spaces inhabited by Špišić's characters are described as extremely old, in a state of decay, the settlement is overgrown with weeds, and piles of discarded antiquities are also mentioned. Consumption becomes the main priority of the city and overshadows all forms of culture, both material and immaterial, for which the city is known or by which it can be recognized.

The culture of the city in *Autolyse Wien*, on the other hand, is ruined due to the effects of a possibly natural catastrophe of unknown cause which, as the title of the collection of stories suggests, prompts the autolysis of the city: "I didn't know that each cell carries in itself the enzyme for autolysis. After death, a process of self-digestion begins, a self-dissolving. The dead matter eats itself up."⁸ (Peschka, 2017, p. 100). Like a dead man, the dead city in Peschka's stories digests itself in such a way that grass grows out of concrete and nature replaces city structures. Nature proves to be more resistant to disasters than culture and means salvation for certain characters, and some characters like the Viennese Child fully adapt to life in the wild over time. Moreover, during the civilization, the Viennese child was diagnosed with a mental illness, the signs of which seem to disappear in the natural environment. In Peschka's post-apocalyptic space, the question arises whether Austria still exists, since no help comes to the Viennese after the disaster, and if we return to the claims of Alihodžić and Veseljević Jerković (2016) that the reproduction of the city's narrative is a "metonymy for civilization" (p. 78), it can be concluded that the fate of Peschka's imagined Vienna is shared by the entire imagined Austria, that is, that the catastrophe has the power to destroy signs of culture and identity on a global level. Namely, in Peschka's Vienna, the boundaries between the centre and the periphery of the metropolis become completely erased. Vienna is no longer a place of culture, a home of an urban civilization or the centre, but a place in which the ability to adapt to nature as well as natural knowledge are vital for survival, like in the wilderness:

8 "Ich wusste, jede Zelle trägt in sich das Enzym zur Autolyse. Nach dem Tod beginnt die Selbstverdauung, die Selbstauflösung. Das Abgestorbene frisst sich auf."

Ferenc flipped through, compared and showed the father the picture, read: "Morus nigra, black mulberry." The father took the calendar away from Ferenc's hand, leaned over the page, put it against the faint light of the candle, took carefully one of the berries and looked at it closely.⁹ (Peschka, 2017, p. 26)

Vienna therefore becomes a wilderness, devouring its own, original semiosphere. Spatial identity is lost due to the non-existence of borders with the Other, by which the specific semiotic signs of the city could be determined.

The urban and cultural degradation is noticeable in both prose works. Špišić's space is dominated by the wild construction of huge buildings, a passive attitude towards a decaying and derelict architecture, as well as the alienation of citizens for whom instead of an active social life, on the one hand, consumption becomes more important, while on the other hand, cultural social activities are not mentioned at all because the literary text is dominated by the characters' struggle with difficult socio-economic situation as well as government pressure. Špišić thereby shows what happens to culture and space when capitalism wins and when wrong politics comes to power.

4. Conclusion

A (post)structural and comparative analysis of the dystopian and post-apocalyptic elements in the imaginary space of capital cities of Zagreb and Vienna in *Vuk na snijegu* by Davor Špišić and *Autolyse Wien* by Karin Peschka has shown how the centre-periphery dichotomy changes amidst crisis, reflecting the socio-cultural and extra-textual context. Furthermore, the recognizable semiosphere of both 'real' cities completely changes along with the disappearance of the border between the centre and periphery, the urban and the rural, the civilized and cultured, and the uncivilized and natural. In the strategic use of dystopian and post-apocalyptic narrative methods, the recognizable, real-life signs of the urban culture of the represented cities remain solely in the memories of the characters that reflect the experience and knowledge of the reader.

9 Ferenc blätterte, verglich, zeigte dem Vater ein Bild, las vor: „Morus nigra, schwarze Maulbeere.“ Der Vater nahm Ferenc den Kalender aus der Hand, beugte sich über die Seite, hielt sie in das schwache Kerzenlicht, nahm vorsichtig eine der Beeren, betrachtete sie ausführlich.

The fluctuation of the centre-periphery dichotomy within the two represented cities themselves can be established at different levels. At the level of the plot setting, it becomes clear that Vienna and Zagreb as capital cities proverbially represent urban, cultured, civilized central spaces in their countries respectively. By the end of the texts, it is evident that the spaces have lost these features, and the natural, wild, uncultured has permeated these spaces, changing the signs that once made them recognizable. The semiospheres are dissolved through the processes of defamiliarization used in dystopian and post-apocalyptic narrative techniques, but reconstructed only through the characters' memories appealing to the readers' experiences and knowledge of the cities, again making the semiosis possible. This is what was meant by defining the cities in the selected works as self-reflexive semiospheres.

Secondly, the blurring of the boundaries between the urban-rural as centre-periphery dichotomy is evident on the level of title versus text content. It arises from the disagreement between the elements in Špišić's title that refer to nature (a wolf in the snow) and the plot setting, which is the Croatian capital and most developed city in the country, Zagreb. This Zagreb turns out to be a dystopian battleground of the ruling classes and the ordinary people, both of which are trying to survive under the totalitarian regime. Regarding Peschka's title-text disparity, the title immediately evokes a Central-European metropolis of Vienna, but is soon revealed as a space that has devoured itself and returned to nature.

This argument directs towards the third level of the inconsistent centre-periphery dichotomy arising from extra-textual historical and political context of the two cities and countries: the Austrian capital Vienna historically represents the cultural, administrative, economic, social, political centre, while Zagreb is, due to its relatively recent status of the capital city of Croatia as an independent state, compared to Vienna, somewhat peripheral. In Vienna, there is no more centre in terms of culture, economy, administration, etc., while Zagreb becomes the epitome of centrality: as the seat of Tomanić's supreme political power, as the shopping and capitalism centre in this part of Europe and a place of overkill in control altogether.

The research showed that Špišić's urban geography reflects a negative connection between culture, politics and economy, whereby the cultural aspects of the city become reduced, and culture can still be recognized only in the existence of rare buildings and spaces that were part of the city's identity in the past. Only by the remnants of these spaces, the reader can recognize that Špišić is talking about Zagreb. The auto-referential

semiosphere of Špišić's Zagreb has thus been changed to a large extent as a result of the rule of the People's Salvation Government, a totalitarian government that limited culture, abolished its ministry and transformed the city into a space of political propaganda. Although Zagreb is still a Croatian city and its geographical coordinates remain unchanged, its identity, which was reflected in the characteristics of its spatial landscape as well as the habits of its citizens, becomes lost in Špišić's novel. That which was once civilized and cultured is now uncivilized, aggressive and oppressive.

In Peschka's *Autolyse Wien*, cultural geography disappears with a catastrophe that triggers the return of the life of human civilization to the beginning, namely to the wilderness, where each character fights for his survival. Therefore, the boundaries of the semiosphere disappear and in Peschka's Vienna, the centre does not differ from the periphery, and the cultural semiosis of the former city is not possible anymore due to its post-apocalyptic signs. Moreover, the reader can conclude that the story is about Vienna only from the memories of the characters who remember the destroyed spaces as spaces of culture, as buildings and streets that had their own names, and through their interpretations of the ruins and the speech about what they once represented. Therefore, the culture of the city of Vienna remains preserved only in the memories of those characters who once experienced it, and with the appearance of a new generation that did not live in Vienna for a long period before the disaster, one notices not only indifference to material culture but also to language.

By blurring the boundaries and by constantly playing with the positioning of different narrative elements between the two parts of the centre-periphery dichotomy, the self-reflective semiospheres of Zagreb and Vienna are deconstructed. Both prose works set their narrative in capital cities that are the bearers of the country's cultural identity, and through dystopian or post-apocalyptic elements, they bring the culture of the space to an extreme change or disintegration, which not only means the loss of the city's identity, but also the identity of the entire country. Yet, the remnants of recognizable sign of the cities' urban culture do allow reconstruction and enable semiosis. The unrecognizable signs become recognizable in the social contexts that are reflected in the texts: the war in Ukraine or the overturning of political regimes in recent Croatian history in Špišić's novel, or the problems of megacities such as Vienna in terms of pollution, overpopulation or other forms of crises that may lead to catastrophes, as in Peschka's short stories.

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