

The Elements of Camp in *Black Cat, White Cat* and *Odessa Tales**

Ksenia Zanon
Indiana University

1.0. Introduction

Separated by almost a century, set in disjoined geographic milieus and embedded in disparate historical contexts, Emil Kusturica's *Black Cat, White Cat* and Isaac Babel's *Odessa Tales* nevertheless evince a remarkable similarity of themes, motives and style. In fact, in a *New York Times* interview with Joan Dupont Kusturica directly acknowledges Babel's influence: "*Arizona Dream* was inspired by *Catcher in the Rye*; *Black Cat, White Cat* by Isaac Babel's short stories."

The film is a 1998 romantic comedy set along the Danube riverside. It follows the exploits of several Roma families. Matko Destanov (Bajram Severdžan), a luckless petty criminal, enters a peculiar agreement with the prosperous gangster Dadan Karambolo (Srđan Todorović), acquiescing to marrying his son Zare (Florijan Ajdini) to Dadan's sister Afrodita (Salija Ibrahimova). The conflict arises from the reluctance of the young people to consent to this arrangement. Zarije Destanov (Zabit Memedov) and Grga Pitić (Sabri Sulejman), the community patriarchs, get involved in the ruckus of the narrative, contributing a great deal of the macabre and the comical. The protagonists inhabit decrepit shacks and gaudy mansions, engage in petty crime and commit grave transgressions, swindle and get swindled; they are headstrong and tractable, passionate to a histrionic degree and serenely wise, vulnerable and potent. These extremes manifested in the character traits, the choice of the locale, the sets and the props underscore the fringe status of those depicted: the characters' emotions, reactions and dwellings transcend the "average" – they are pinned to the edges of the "normal," much like the place of the actual Balkan minority groups – to the societal periphery. This is precisely the crux of affinity between the two texts. In *Odessa Tales*, a series of short stories set around the Russian Civil War, Babel portrays the denizens of Moldavanka, a Jewish ghetto of Odessa with an extremely poor reputation:

Mass-circulation daily newspapers described the neighborhood as notoriously menacing, a kind of “looking-glass world” where the values and attitudes of respectable middle-class society were systematically distorted and subverted. Journalists portrayed Moldavanka as a place where parents abandoned their children to “the street,” which initiated each new generation into the criminal world, inculcating in them the anti-values of depravity, debauchery, and vice (Sylvester).

This essay focuses on the four short stories in the collection – *King*, *How It Was Done in Odessa*, *Justice in Parentheses* and *Ljubka Kazak*. Each piece is a brief snippet of the Moldavanka criminal routine. In *King* the reader is introduced to Babel’s glorious antihero Benia Krik, with the telling sobriquet “King.” The story opens with an opulent wedding celebration: Benia is marrying off his sister. During the feast he learns of an impending police raid, which he thwarts by setting the police station on fire. *How It Was Done in Odessa* provides a backstory on Benia’s acquisition of his distinct moniker. It is his benevolence in arranging for a lavish funeral and a generous pension to the mother of the man accidentally killed during a heist that elevates him to Moldavanka royalty. *Justice in Parentheses* reveals Krik’s propensity for violence: for bad information that resulted in a botched heist, the King thrashes the tipster – only relenting when the underling’s children and wife begin to clamor. *Ljubka Kazak* is a sketch of an encounter between a strong Moldavanka business woman, who sells contraband for a living, and her male debtor.

Dina Iordanova maintains that the screenwriter borrowed certain narrative elements and character traits from the literary source (83). The contention of this essay stretches beyond that: the features convergent in both texts are not confined to the mechanical devices deployed in each work, but rather implicate a distinct technique used to treat the topic of polyglot minority cultures. In particular, it is suggested that the elements of Camp as defined by Susan Sontag are traceable in *Black Cat*, *White Cat* and *Odessa Tales*. In fact, Camp is the driving force behind the construction of the characters and the plot. The latter are largely devoid of autonomous significance; rather, they serve as vehicles for the rendition of style. Yet, this monopoly of style over content does not hinder the exploration of serious topics: the isolation of minorities, their marginalization and maltreatment by the

dominant ethnic groups. Quite the contrary: the social structures explored in the two texts generate and inform the Campy stylistic component.

2.1 Over-the-Top Extravaganza

“The hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance” (Sontag 283). Critics and scholars alike immediately acknowledge that exaggeration and exorbitance permeate Kusturica’s and Babel’s works.

[...] Kusturica's one-man war on minimalism has its excesses. [...] He isn't likely ever to be accused of knowing where (or when) to stop. But *Black Cat, White Cat* is made with such overriding jubilation that its coarseness is mostly liberating (Maslin).

The visual oversaturation, the sensation of overabundance imbues almost every scene in the film. Consider first the dwellings of the protagonists. Grga’s bedroom is an embodiment of opulent gaudy magnificence. The windows are adorned with heavy curtains; an exotic white parrot inhabits the cage above the bed; the walls are overrun by paintings and lighting fixtures; elaborate lamps, glasses and bottles monopolize every inch of every available surface in the room; a peacock freely traverses the room; and the mirrors multiply this bewildering lavishness. The centerpiece of the interior is, of course, Grga’s bed – a grotesque adult-sized cradle, embellished with casting and accessorized with flashy pillows.

While Grga’s mansion displays authenticity and uniqueness (extreme ornateness aside, his interiors are hardly normal), Dadan’s abode is beset by kitsch and conventional *nouveau riche* glamor: his office is clogged up with various mass-produced goods – fans, washing machines, boxes, lamps and kitchen appliances – all against the backdrop of luxury, conceivable in a studyroom of an executive (albeit with a propensity for the garish). Dadan’s rather orthodox vehicle (for a gangster of his caliber) – an aged limo – contrasts with Grga’s custom-designed transportation. In fact, all the accessories associated with Grga are idiosyncratic and singular in opposition to the clichéd, kitschy and standardized props linked to Dadan. The parallelism between the two Gypsy gangsters emerges from the sense of extreme: the flamboyancy and lack of restraint are intrinsic

likewise in Grga's persnickety, highly individual tastes and in Dadan's kitsch-dominated chic.

The juxtaposition of characters' physiques and the costumes further enhance the sensation of the "over-the-top." Grga's grandchildren are comically different: lean, hyperbolically angular Grga Veliki looks like a giant in comparison with his stubby brother. Miniscule Afrodita can fit into the palm of her inamorato's hand. Dadan's designer accoutrement is an antithesis of Matko's robe, boxers and earflaps hat ensemble. Grga appears in all the glory of solvent Gypsy chic – dress shirts with ties, lots of jewelry, massive watch, fedora, obligatory glasses, and a full display of all the precious metals in his mouth. Zarija, as though to accentuate his more fortunate friend's wealth, is clothed in rags.

These unexpected, outré oppositions, along with bedazzled, almost blinding sets and bizarre props produce a caricature, a reality that is clearly too "off" to be true. It is this artifice, "the love of the exaggerated [...] of things-being-what-they-are-not" (Sontag 279), and the ubiquitous kitschy elements that limn the Campy facet of the film.

The sound complements the visual row. Traditional Gypsy tunes, a vaguely punk piece of *No Smoking Orchestra* and turbo folk are not only juxtaposed, but also often rendered at the same time (most notably in the wedding celebration scene). Even quieter, domestic scenes, include superfluous noise. The dialogue of *Casablanca* mingles with the music box-like sounds, emanating from Grga's rocking bed. These relatively tranquil moments are still rare; the viewer is bombarded by the incessant clamor and cacophony.

On a more abstract level this auditory overload is achieved through the idiom, or, more precisely, through the hodgepodge of languages that the characters wield. It is this peculiar vernacular that becomes a conspicuous point of affinity between *Black Cat*, *White Cat* and *Odessa Tales*.

The protagonists of the film speak a bizarre concatenation of Romani, Bulgarian and Serbian as if they have absorbed all the vital cultural components of the environments in which they find themselves, and integrated them with their own linguistic heritage. "Братко [Bulgarian], када имаш проблем [Serbian] и не можеш да го решиш со пари, и го решиш со много пари [Bulgarian]!"¹ – is Dadan's colorful response to Matko's business proposal (itself delivered in Romani).

The denizens of Moldavanka speak the language of the Empire. It is not a dull standard variety, but a delightfully expressive Odessa incarnation of Russian *Balkanistica* 28 (2015)

– with its many loan translations from Yiddish, borrowings from Ukrainian, Hebrew and Polish, and scrumptious disregard for Russian grammar. “Папаша... пусть вас не волнует этих глупостей,” advises Benia Krik to his father in “King.”²

Babel’s Jews of the 1900s in Odessa, like Kusturica’s Gypsies of the 1990s in the Balkans, preserve their identity through cultivation of this dialectal uniqueness. But the means for achieving this renders the characters isolated and marginalized: their language is incomprehensible or too “substandard” for the dominant ethnic groups. And so, this linguistic oversaturation shapes two interconnected elements of Camp: through the use of stylized idiom, light, frivolous and eccentric, the writer and the director manage to convey a serious sentiment – their characters are social outcasts. Yet, this plight of the minorities is but a theme, which serves to funnel the style.

Just like *Black Cat*, *White Cat*, *Odessa Tales* embraces extravagance, delivering an expressive dose of the “over-the-top”:

Benia Krik and his gangsters share an appreciation of ostentatious style with the heroes of popular folklore [in underground songs], the kings and knights of Moldavanka. The pseudo aristocratic manners of the gangsters, the exotic colors of their clothing, and the theatrical effects of their appearance in public all constitute what Babel called “Moldavanski chic.” While the author depicts this style in terms of “kitsch” culture, his narrator admires it (Briker 128).

The “aristocrats of Moldavanka” boast a particular fashion: “they were cinched in crimson vests, the rusty coats enveloped their shoulders, the skin of sky azure color burst on their chubby feet.” They have access to any number of exotic items, illicitly procured. They are jubilant and have a distinct taste for boisterous celebrations: “... they served turkey, fried hens, geese, stuffed fish and fish soup, in which the lemon lakes shimmered like the mother-of-pearl” (*How It Was Done in Odessa*).

The effect of extravagance, *over-the-topness* is largely due to the enticing language. It is in *Odessa Tales* where the “poetic function of the language”

(defined as “enjoyment for its own sake” achieved through the creation of rich imagery) becomes most conspicuous (Mendelson 100).

Babel stuffs his sentences with tropes: in the two minuscule fragments above, the metaphors (“cinched in crimson vests,” “skin ... burst on their ... feet”) overlap and intermingle with similes (“like the mother-of-pearl,” “of sky-azure color”), reifying the images of a spectacular feast or of flamboyant goons. These literary devices, however, contribute little to the advancement of the plot or the development of the characters. Instead, they serve mainly as a vehicle of emotional expression or a conductor of certain atmosphere (Mendelson 100-03); they are intemperate embellishments on a parsimonious canvas of narrative. Indeed, as a compliant exemplar of Ornamental Prose, *Odessa Tales* puts style ahead of everything else: “[n]ot only is story secondary to style in Ornamental Prose, but also character portrayal and exposition of ideas are frequently relegated to positions of less consequence” (Browning 347).³

Babel himself acknowledges that his stories hold together by the style alone: “Who will believe that a story can survive on style alone, without content, plot or intrigue?” (Paustovsky). Similarly, in *Black Cat, White Cat* the “narrative [...] frequently comes close to falling apart”; “the stories are adjusted to assist [the director] in [...] using his idiosyncratic imagery and imagination” (Iordanova 84).

But it is exactly this primacy of style over content that defines Camp (Sontag 287). In fact, the shift of focus from substance to expression is a consequence of the Camp mode of aesthetics. After all, to “emphasize style is to slight content” (*Ibid.*). Whether through the masterful manipulation of language or through the construction of visuals, *Odessa Tales* and *Black Cat, White Cat* channel the crucial elements of Camp – that of extravagance, dominance of style and artifice.

2.2. Formulaic Characters

As though extracted from a *лубок*, Babel and Kusturica’s characters approximate the one-dimensional quintessence of a caricature. This formulaic nature of protagonists is yet another ostensible element of Camp in *Odessa Tales* and *Black Cat, White Cat*:

What Camp taste responds to is “instant character” [...]; and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility (Sontag 286).

Benia Krik is unflappable in any adverse circumstances, “the king speaks little, and he speaks politely,” which “scares people so much that they never ask him again” (*Justice in Parentheses*). His self-imposed restraint and refined manners are unorthodox for a criminal of his ilk. But the regal demeanor is the only distinctive feature discernible in this character which is in compliance with Babel’s Ornamentalist predilections:

In depicting characters, the Ornamentalists commonly choose the romantic, eccentric, and exotic rather than the typical. Characters rarely are portrayed with subtle psychological analysis, but generally appear [...] as cards, that is, “unaware monomaniacs” (Browning 347).

Krik acts without an obvious internal motivation. In *How It Was Done in Odessa* Benia accidentally sees a lovely woman; Benia wants to marry her; Benia executes his grandstand display (by returning stolen items to the future father-in-law); Benia gets married. There is no logical external impetus that would justify this sequence of events – Benia exhibits no pangs of passion and eschews “proper” courtship. He is apparently so smitten with the lady’s appearance that this alone is enough to warrant a proposal. And so, the excitement of falling in love is substituted with a single fleeting glance and the developing “romance” culminates in the grand gesture of the pilfered goods’ restoration.

Even the way Krik approaches his “business” transactions is entirely formulaic. Briker argues that Babel’s protagonist follows the criminal protocol of the time punctiliously. Just like many real criminals of Odessa, Benia produces extortion letters, replete with “clichés found in business correspondence” (Briker 119). The raids, whether real or fictional, are theatric in nature (*Ibid.*) – the gangsters enter dramatically, elocute with affectation and brandish their weapons

with thespian alacrity. The theatricality essentially supplants the content and hinders any real development of the characters. The protagonists are endowed with ersatz agency, whose main purpose is to convey the style.

Kusturica's approach to his characters is no different:

Close-ups are no longer used as windows into someone's soul but mostly to show faces we are to marvel at. The protagonists are no longer there to care about but mostly to admire for being so extraordinarily exotic ... While *Gypsies* had memorable characters, *Black Cat* is built on memorable caricatures (Iordanova 87-88).⁴

Unequivocally, Dadan is Kusturica's quintessential caricature. The scene in which he is introduced provides an exhaustive summary of his traits: the man imbibes in excess; he is prone to violent outbursts; cocaine sustains him; loud music and a convivial entourage accompany him everywhere. Really, there is very little substance behind his character – he *is* the pit bull from the song, whose actions are governed and motivated by physiology. He is not depicted as a malicious villain. Even his truly nefarious acts are contextualized in such a way that it is difficult to perceive them as such. First he orders the murder of a customs officer and then runs around the field with his mates like a mischievous boy preparing to behold the results of his prank. He forces his sister to marry against her will, yet he dances with such unadulterated joy at her wedding that it is absolutely impossible to construe his intent as mean-spirited.

The other characters are equally flat. The younglings – Zare and Ida – are depthless. They tread lightly through the narrative unencumbered by any psychological complexities. Their passion distinguishes itself by a pronounced burlesque flavor. Initially they are engaged in an adolescent flirtatious tug-of-war: she pretends to be a damsel in distress and he plays her superficially reluctant, yet obedient knight. This dynamic does not evolve, however, as the film progresses, even when the events turn serious. The very depth of their feelings for each other is suspect: we see two petulant teenagers playing house. They turn from sobbing to immediate jubilation after Afrodita's escape, betraying no hints of even vague contemplation on the consequences of such a development.

The scenes with Ida's grandmother serve the same purpose as the depictions of raids in Babel's *Odessa Tales* – they promote theatricality.⁵ Consider the *Balkanistica* 28 (2015)

fragment in which Sujka negotiates the nuptial deal with Dadan. Without any overt, logically warranted explanation, she offers her granddaughter to the gangster (nothing in the antecedent narrative indicates Dadan's interest in such an arrangement). It is not an accidental oversight: the scene reveals the bizarre opulence of Dadan's residence and his ostentatious demeanor. He receives his guest while bathing in a hot tub. Their conversation is accompanied by the abrasive sounds of "No Smoking Orchestra." The usual pandemonium surrounds them. Sujka is unperturbed by the peculiarity of the environment and continues her bargaining calmly, as though the proposal they are discussing is but a trifle. Unsurprisingly, no consequences ensue from this scene – this bartering meeting is promptly forgotten; neither Dadan nor Sujka follows up on the negotiations. In fact, Sujka is delighted to see her granddaughter off with a penniless fellow in the final scene.

The perfunctory nature of the characters and the disregard for cause and effect in the construction of the plot in *Black Cat, White Cat* are akin to Babel's approach to the narrative. Both the film and the short stories confine their focus to the expressive element, realized through the rich imagery or the language (with a conscious slighting of content and character development).

2.3. *Black Humor and the Absurd*

In the literary and cinematic sources we are scrutinizing, the macabre, the absurd and the hilarious fuse together in such a way that the objectively ghastly moments are obliterated in the audience's perception. Babel and Kusturica adopt a *laissez-faire* disposition towards violence: since it is a part of the (insignificant) narrative, it should not overshadow the style. Neither the film nor the book invites one to bemoan the fate of the victims or contemplate the unjustness of the wrongdoings. That is because "Camp and tragedy are antithesis" (Sontag 287). Moreover,

[t]he whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to "the serious." One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious (Sontag 288).

One finds precisely this approach to serious in Babel and Kusturica's works. "Babel's narrator treats and reacts to violence lightly, even humorously. [...] In Babel's stories, violent events always conclude with triumph and celebration" (Briker 128).

The brutal beating of Tsudechkis in *Justice in Parentheses* is tempered by the cantankerous appeals of his wife to cease the violence:

- Мосье Крик, за что вы обижаетесь на моего Цудечкиса? [...]
- За что сердать на моего Цудечкиса, – кричала она, стоя на кровати, и я, корчась на полу, смотрел на нее с восхищением, – за что бить моего Цудечкиса? За то ли, что он хотел накормить девять голодных птенчиков?⁶

The verbose soliloquy in defense of "her Tsudechkis" is unfathomable in a story exploring human brutality. Instead, the familiar theatrical elements predominate here, suppressing any incipient compassion a reader may develop for poor Tsudechkis. With pathos ("nine hungry chicks") and histrionic fervor ("she shrieked, standing on the bed"), Mrs. Tsudechkis dispels a grave situation into a farce.

By juxtaposing the gruesome and the comical Kusturica achieves the same effect. This is evident in the grim scene of the customs officer murder. He is hanging on the pole with a bullet wound, his corpse oscillating in the wind. The next shot shows the hapless scrawny protagonist, who tries to get to the body (or rather the briefcase that is tied to the corpse), performing exotic moves and devising more and more ingenious maneuvers, escalating in their complexity, in order to reach for the desired item. Matko integrates a fair share of profanities and spitting into the process. The circus-like aftermath of the homicide diminishes the seriousness of the crime. What ought to be horror-inducing emerges as hilarious.

The obviously absurd and preposterous depiction of the deaths of the grandfathers lampoons existing ideological and cultural norms. Numerous gags associated with handling of cadavers remove any potential for the distress normally associated with passing away. Death, the quintessence of serious, becomes a vexing matter to deal with or to laugh at. To begin with, Zarije wills himself to die to preclude his grandson's nuptials. This alone paints death as *Balkanistica* 28 (2015)

something of a pragmatic convenience rather than a somber occasion to be mourned. Upon discovering that his father passed away, Matko scolds his parent for the infelicitous timing and laments the future funeral expenses. Dadan refuses to accept the facts, since this unexpected departure conflicts with his plans. His witty rationale is not without merit. After all, if natural death can be willed, it “does not matter when to die – on Wednesday or on Friday.” While Zare shows some fleeting signs of distress, he willingly aids his father in removing the deceased to the attic, entirely unvexed by the lack of deference in treating the body. Even death itself is not construed as something final, irreversible: miraculously the corpses come back to life and immediately join in the celebration.

In both texts the black humor bound ever so tightly with the grotesque renders the viewer emotionally dissociated from the characters. Coupled with the pronounced caricatural interpretation of the protagonists, who are presented to the viewer to gape at rather than identify with, this produces something akin to a Brechtian alienation effect. The distancing between the audience and the (anti)heroes, accomplished via stylistic means, is replicated in the social dynamics surrounding the plight of the minority groups. Deficient in empathy and understanding, the dominant ethnicity is, at best, indifferent, at worst – aggressive towards them.

This extra-narrative layer is ostensibly present in the film and the short stories, which, with the lightness characteristic of Camp, pursue issues associated with the Roma and Jews, the historically ill-treated minority populations in the Balkans and Russia. Ostracized, subjected to recurrent pogroms, denied access to education and employment, restricted in every human right, and universally abhorred, the Jews in late Imperial Russia can compete in their misfortunes only with Gypsies:

Throughout much of Europe, Roma are among the most hated, misunderstood, and mistreated of people. Their renown as musicians, dancers, and palm-readers is surpassed only by the near-universal belief among the [...] non-Roma that Gypsies are also liars, thieves, and cheats (Goldstone 146).

Dobreva observes that the characters of *Black Cat*, *White Cat* are isolated: their interaction with “mainstream” outsiders is limited to (illegal) business transactions (146). It is not hard to see that the same undertones accompany Babel’s stories: his protagonists, too, are disconnected from the dominant ethnic groups, with whom they engage only to acquire contraband. Though no overt oppression or maltreatment is manifest in either source, the underlying sentiment is discernable:

[Certain] attitudes are expressed with the same strength and just as unmistakably [in *Black Cat*, *White Cat*] as in *Underground*. Only this time the framework for sharing these feelings with his audience remains a comedy most of the time, instead of turning into tragedy as do Kusturica’s previous features (Caviglia 51).

One may infer that, perhaps, the dubious occupation of the protagonists is precisely due to the social disparity to which the characters are subjected. But, of course, even in those circumstances, they manage to persevere and excel:

[Babel did not mean] to deny the sufferings of the Russian empire’s Jews during the war years. Babel, of course, knew the extent of that suffering, but he chose to accentuate something else in his story – not destruction, but survival (Safran 271).

In a similar vein, Goran Gocić points out that the film is a “celebration of a ‘successful’ and spiteful resistance of the locals under [...] economic sanctions” (59).

Kusturica and Babel deliberately eschew a one-dimensional focus on their characters’ victimhood. Instead, they emphasize the vivacity, the zest for life, the gaiety and the ebullient tenacity of their protagonists: Babel “challenges the notion that Jews were victims, in need of public pity” (Safran 270) while Kusturica “immerse[s] himself in the local experience of Gypsy life”... and ultimately reveals “the poverty of any formulaic reductions of [Roma] life” (Kuzmanovich 267). As Babel and Kusturica broach ostensibly serious topics, they do so in a distinctly Campy manner. Their stylistic apparatus, in effect, serves to underscore rather than obscure the social predicament and isolation of their heroes.

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2.4. *The Elements of Epicene*

“Camp is the triumph of the epicene style” (Sontag 280). Though, perhaps, not to the extent envisioned by Sontag, who defines “epicene” not only in terms of gender role reversal, but also in terms of “convertibility of *person* and *thing*” (280), the epicene is nevertheless present in *Black Cat*, *White Cat* and *Odessa Tales*.

Babel combined masculine and feminine, victim and *débrouillard*, in order to create a compelling new image of the Jew. [...] Indeed the interests of [Babel’s] men – marriage, children, astrakhan jackets and food (sardines) – seem as classically feminine as masculine (Safran 264).

Kusturica’s male characters are equally obsessed with their relatives’ marital situations. Grga’s insistence on Grga Veliki’s end of bachelorhood competes with Dadan’s frenzied urgency to arrange his sister’s nuptials.

Dadan, a psycho gangster, is caught in a hot tub, surrounded by his “ladies in waiting,” who are preoccupied with fixing his nails. Later he appears with hair curlers in preparation for the wedding celebration. Always carefully dressed, the man obviously expends an inordinate amount of effort on his appearance. This stereotypically feminine proclivity is dissonant with his role as a tough goon.

The reversal of gender roles is glaring in “Ljubka Kazak.” Old Tsudechkis is the person, dealing with the crying infant. He cradles little Davidka, sings to him, marvels at his cuteness, assuages him, and, ultimately, weans him. In the meantime, Ljubka, the infant’s mother, assumes a masculine role:

[...] мамашенька его скачет по своим каменоломням, пьет чай с евреями в трактире “Медведь,” покупает в гавани контрабанду и думает о своем сыне, как о прошлогоднем снеге ...⁷

Ljubka is tough and abrasive. She manages her affairs with an iron fist (not hesitating to use said fist quite literally if something is not to her liking):

Любка Шнейвейс, с кошельком на боку, била пьяного мужика и толкала его на мостовую. Она била сжатым кулаком по лицу, как в бубен, и другой рукой поддерживала мужика, чтобы он не отваливался.⁸

She is completely on a par with men, who eagerly conduct business with her and include her in their circle for celebrating the felicitous outcome of negotiations.

The reassignment of gender roles in *Odessa Tales* and *Black Cat* serves to emphasize the dichotomy between “the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice” (Sontag 281). Dadan’s pursuit of beauty is an artifice unexpected in a gangster. The masculine traits of Ljubka are so amplified (and her feminine traits are so attenuated) that one begins to question their authenticity. The marriage *idée fixe* of the male protagonists oversteps the bounds of normal concerns for the continuation of the family. And so, again the hyperbole takes over the narratives inducing an effect of Camp.

3.0. Conclusion

The elements of Camp pervade the 1990s Kusturica film and 1920s Babel's short stories. The bizarre, the spectacular and the outré burst from every scene and every page. It is this despotism of style, accomplished through the exorbitant visuals and picturesque language, that mandates all the other elements.

The plot, the intrigue, even the characters become secondary, yielding the spotlight to the peculiarity of the idiom or gags of questionable taste. The protagonists’ presence is often required to accentuate the expressive element and nothing more.

The morbid metamorphoses into the comical in full compliance with the principle of Camp, which “incarnates a victory of *aesthetics* over *morality*, [...], of irony over tragedy” (Sontag 287). It is not the nature of ideas conveyed in a work of art that defines Camp (they can be quite serious, Sontag maintains), rather it is the way they are expressed. Here we are again led to conclude that the tone of the narratives, its style, dictates its way.

Similarly, the treatment of gender roles gives rise to the impression of the over-the-top. The reshuffling of traditionally prescribed gender behaviors induces this sensation of an artifice, of a gimmick, which is, after all, the main tool in the arsenal of “style.”

These stylistic formulae are not a mere exercise in embellishment. The macaronic, polyglot aspects of the texts, the peculiar rendition of the characters, the black humor, the grotesque and the absurdity – all these Campy elements carry a certain ideological function. In choosing to interpret reality this way, the author and the director accentuate just how detached the society at large is from the groups they bring into focus, whose exoticism, extravagance and idiosyncratic (sometimes even incomprehensible) idiom serve to underscore the “otherness” and isolation.

Notes

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1. Brother, when you have a problem and you can't solve it with money, you solve it with lots of money!

2. Father, [...] let you not be worried about this silliness.

3. The term *Ornamental Prose* here refers to the dominating style of Soviet prose in 1920-1925. For an in-depth discussion of the phenomenon, see cited work and references therein.

4. Iordanova compares *Black Cat, White Cat* with Kusturica's earlier film *Time of the Gypsies (Dom za vešanje)*. Both explore the same topic – the life of Roma – but from radically different perspectives and, as a consequence, exploit radically different devices.

5. While I argue here that this scene is introduced to enhance the effect of theatricality, it also serves another important purpose. Kusturica's film is replete with folkloric motifs. As such, it relies heavily on the devices commonly exploited in the genres of folklore. One such device, according to Shklovsky, is repetition: Sujka's nuptial negotiations reiterate the agreement, previously reached between Dadan and Matko. For a systematic exploration of the issue see also Gocić.

6. – Monsieur Krik, why are you upset with my Tsudechkis? [...]

– Why are you angry with my Tsudechkis? – she shrieked, standing on the bed; and I, squirming on the floor, looked at her with admiration. – Why are you beating my Tsudechkis? Is it because he wanted to feed nine hungry chicks?

7. [...] his mother runs around her quarries, drinks tea with the Jews in the tavern “Bear,” buys contraband in the harbor, and thinks about her son as much as about the yesteryear's snow ...

8. Ljubka Shneiveis, with a purse on her side, was beating a drunk man and kept pushing him on the pavement. With a clenched fist she was hitting his face, as though it was a tambourine; her other hand supported the man so that he wouldn't fall off (*Father*).

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