CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Tvrtko Kulenović

Casino

Kasino

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Despite the fact that Tvrtko Kulenović's *Casino* (original title *Kasino* translates both as *Casino* (gambling place) and *Cassino* (a part of *Monte Cassino* toponym)) was published in Belgrade in 1987 and written in the Serbian variant of the BCS language, it is widely regarded as one of the first genuinely postmodern novels of Bosnian literature, to whose canon Kulenović's oeuvre belongs both thematically and biographically. Written in the terminal years of Yugoslavia, it inaugurates Kulenović's cycle of war novels, each centered on one of the conflicts that shaped the author's cultural and political reality (the Second World War, the Spanish Civil War, and the Wars of Yugoslav Succession). The title *Casino* is deliberately ambivalent: it evokes both the devastating bombing of Monte Cassino — an act of immense destruction and, at the same time, one of the most futile military operations of the Second World War, serving as a metonym for the general senselessness of war — and the casino as a site of gambling, alluding to history conceived as a grotesque game of chance. Yet the novel's political resonance extends far beyond its thematic focus on war traumas, its explicit critique of war-mongering ideologies, or its overt claims about the futility of war and the absurdity of history. Its greatest force lies in its formal and auto-reflexive dimensions, through which it interrogates not only the nature and the relationship of history and the novel, but also the very possibility of remembrance and testimony, showing how different fragmented, polyphonic narratives can unsettle seemingly coherent ideological constructs by exposing both their fictionality and their blind spots.

Although Kulenović's *Casino* can undoubtedly be classified as a war novel, its storyline contains almost no direct depictions of combat. Instead, it weaves a dense network of reminiscences centered on various (mostly) traumatic and formative moments in the life of its autodiegetic narrator: the child of a Yugoslav resistance fighter executed in a concentration camp, a doctor and former diplomat who abandoned both professions in pursuit of literary ambitions. These ambitions are focused on writing a novel about the Second World War — not about a single episode or series of battles, but about the war in its entirety. At the center of this vaguely conceived and never fully realized project was to stand the titular Monte Cassino: a battle the novel revisits on numerous occasions in various reflections, though never providing a complete account of it.

Several factors make this battle particularly suitable for such an unusual central role. Beyond the stark disproportion between its limited military significance and the immense devastation it produced —making it an exemplary metonym for the futility and senselessness of war—it also, in a tragic and somewhat bizarre fashion, linked Poles and Italians, the two nations that, as the narrator paraphrases his literary role model Curzio Malaparte, were the true losers of World War II. In this context, Polish soldiers were deployed by the Allied Command in the final assaults on Monte Cassino, suffering devastating casualties, while the local Italian population frequently became collateral victims of the fighting. For the narrator, however, these two nations exemplify not only the

complex fissures underlying seemingly coherent historical blocs—one of his recurring obsessions throughout the novel—but also cultures with which he is personally enamored. His lasting fascination with these cultures serves to bridge the cultural circles of the European North and South.

This dense web of cultural references, spanning Europe from the Northeast to the Mediterranean, is of fundamental importance to the very structure of Kulenović's *Casino*. The novel lacks a linear plot; instead, it is composed of seven fragmentary chapters set across five different decades of the narrator's life, arranged non-chronologically, with only one situated during the Second World War. The remaining chapters are anchored in other historical thresholds, such as the Trieste Crisis or the Gdańsk protests, which, however, through rememberance, associations and other forms of contemplation always connect with World War 2, as well as other major European conflicts. Yet even the chapters themselves resist the form of compact wholes: they contain no traditional narrative arc and almost no fully developed novelistic characters.

What the reader encounters, rather, is a mosaic of heterogeneous elements—narrative and anecdotal fragments, essayistic passages, lyrical reflections—structured according to principles of association and montage, and saturated with references to literature, film, history, philosophy, and art. The effect of this discursive collage is twofold: on one hand, it provides a constellation of registers through which the traumatic experience of war is processed and represented; on the other, it sketches a cartography of diverse, often overlapping circles and layers of cultural influence that shaped not only the narrator but also the broader culture to which he belongs.

At times, even the same narrative events are refracted through different registers, as the narrator—scarred by childhood traumas and increasingly disillusioned with the grand narratives (a process that mirrors the novel's own dismantling of them)—returns obsessively to recurring motifs. These motifs shift in their mode of appearance, surfacing alternately as facts, unreliable memories, or echoes of literary and cinematic traditions.

Although it may appear chaotic at first glance, *Casino* carefully weaves a web in which both novelistic narrative and historical account—the two most prestigious modes of representing (and making sense of) the past—are systematically deconstructed. As a novel about the very possibility of writing a novel on the Second World War, and about the form such a novel should take, *Casino* questions every attempt at sutured closure, exposing it as a fictional construct. Yet in doing so, it does not automatically privilege discursive alternatives, such as fragmentary personal testimonies, which it frequently incorporates. For the attentive reader who traces its intentional repetitions, allusions, and mimetic inconsistencies, these testimonies too are revealed as mediated and unreliable, shaped by literary clichés and patterns rather than being the unadulterated product of immediate experience.

It is precisely through this juxtaposition of discourses that *Casino* is able to reflect upon metonymically charged moments from multiple perspectives—ideological as well as discursive/generic. Any stable center that might guarantee the reliability or primacy of a given discourse slips away, and the novel instead produces a genuinely polyphonic fabric. In contrast to monolithic discourses aspiring to totality, this fabric persistently admits minority voices, divergent tones, and disruptive dissonances—whether through the contamination of one ideological position by another, of the historical by the fictional, of immediate experience by literary cliché, or of one cultural sphere by another.

Thus, Kulenović's novel is political not only in mapping the protagonist's disillusionment, which culminates in an ironic undermining of grand ideological narratives, nor merely in lamenting the

futility of war and the senseless contingency of history. It is political also in its multiple violations of representational norms and genre canons, as well as in its self-reflexive interrogation of the very separation of discourses on which conventional understandings of history—and of the world more broadly—depend.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: