

From Nation to Virtual Community: The Ethnogenesis of Cyber Yugoslavia¹

BELGRADE, February 4, 2003 (BETA) - On Feb. 4, Yugoslav Parliament ratified a constitutional charter and a law on its implementation for the future union of Serbia and Montenegro and declared it officially in effect at a subsequent ceremonial session. The vote in parliament has officially marked the end of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was created on April 27, 1992. The new union, which will be called Serbia and Montenegro, will have a ministry of defense, a ministry of foreign affairs, a ministry of the economy, and a ministry of human and minority rights.

BELGRADE, February 4, 2003 (B92) - A new state may have been born, but the citizens of Serbia and Montenegro still have no flag, national anthem or coat of arms. The reason for this lies in the failure of representatives of the Montenegrin and Serbian political parties to reach agreement. There is controversy over whether the flag should be a darker blue as is the Serbian flag, or a lighter blue like the Montenegrin flag.

Introduction

The chapter presented here analyzes Cyber Yugoslavia (CY), virtual entity that became known as the first online nation. More precisely, this study traces the specific ethnogenesis of this online group. Ethnogenesis refers to the process through which 'a people come into being as a definable group, aggregate, or category at some point in history' (Whitten, 1996: 407). CY occurred as a definable group at the end of the twentieth century, but the process of its genesis was considerably longer. It does not take a lot to realize that Cyber Yugoslavia has something to do with "real" Yugoslavia, the country that became a synonym for disintegration; but what exactly? In this study, I outline both historic and symbolic relations between the "real" state of South Slavs (Yugoslavia), which existed for seventy years and formally died while I was writing this essayⁱ, and its virtual namesake. To explain this relationship, I portray the development of the "Yugoslav idea" from its nineteenth century origins to the present times. Such chronicle reveals the symbolic cycle of Yugoslav nation-building. This process started as an idea of national romanticism, then transformed into two unsuccessful political constructs (known as "The First" and "The Second" Yugoslavia), and finally ended up in

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cyberspace. Launched in the realm of imagination, Yugoslavia temporarily existed in the embodied form, and then returned to its original setting. The overall score of this 150-years long process included three (dead) physical states, one (living) cyber state, and numerous victims. The process is undoubtedly interesting enough to be researched, especially considering the fact that it gave birth to the first cyber nation. Yet, it would probably remain a rather local issue, if Cyber Yugoslavia did not turn into a large, international community, which currently consists of 16,573 members from 150 nations. Such worldwide phenomenon certainly goes beyond any parochial idea. Moreover, it urges us to think about the reasons of such striking "Cyber-Yugoslavism". What could have motivated 16,573 persons to become Cyber Yugoslavs? Perhaps it would be easier to grasp a person's wish to become a citizen of *some* cyber nation (novelty is always attractive). But what could possibly inspire so many people to take on such disreputable nationality? Nobody wanted to be Yugoslav in the past decade.

The analysis presented here seeks to answer this question. In the chapter, I argue that Cyber Yugoslavia is not an attempt of constructing Yugoslav or any other national identity on the Internet. Rather, it is an attempt of deconstructing national identity as such. The analysis presented here operates with the concept of virtual ethnicity (VE), which refers to processes of presenting and constituting ethnicity online (Zurawski, 2000). Further, this study is based on Benedict Anderson's (1983) definition of nation as an imagined political community. Anderson explains that a nation is an imagined group 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (p.15). Using such a concept, this study raises the question of the essential difference between communities imagined offline and online and, in this particular case, between the online and the offline nation. Numerous virtual communities and sociomental bonds developed among members of these groups have already inspired us to rethink our "real" communities and their characteristics. Perhaps Cyber Yugoslavia will motivate us to re-consider the concept of "real" nations and to re-evaluate the significance that we attach to these constructs. Once again virtuality could be able to advise us on our reality, if we prove to be receptive enough of such a message.

But, to reach that message, let us go back to the "hard" reality, in the attempt to understand the process that brought forth the first online nation.

“Real” Yugoslavia – Two Attempts to Imagine it as a Nation

Using the concept and terminology of Benedict Anderson, we could say that the first attempt to imagine Yugoslavia – the country of South Slavs - occurred in the 1830s. Until that time South Slavs lived in the same territory for centuries, but had never been united in a state. They inhabited the Balkan Peninsula in the 7th century and began to form sovereign political entities. These, however, were short-lived. The ancestors of the present-day Slovenians were conquered by the Frankish regime in the 9th century. Hungary put an end to the Croatian kingdom in 1102. The Serbian empire survived until 1459, when it had fallen to the Ottoman regime. Zeta (the territory of present-day Montenegro) lasted a bit longer -- it was conquered by the Ottomans in 1499. During the centuries that followed, South Slavs were subordinated to several states. This caused profound differences among them, both religious and secular. Religiously, South Slavs became Roman-Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and/or Muslims. Culturally, those of them conquered by the Ottomans were exposed to the Islamic cultural traits, while other South Slavs were affected by the Western culture. However, the exposure to such different spheres of influence did not alienate them completely. They preserved a level of cultural sovereignty, first of all their language. With some variations, this language was shared by all South Slavs.

This fact gave birth to the idea that South Slavs could, and should, unite and form a sovereign state. The earliest organized expression of this idea was the “Illyrian Movement,” launched in the 1830s. This originally cultural movement was based on the idea that the South Slavic dialects should be consolidated into a common language, which could then become a basis for a common state. The “Illyrian Movement” could be understood as part of the philological-lexicographic revolution, which was a far-reaching and influential idea in Europe at the time. ‘The lexicographic revolution in Europe’ – Anderson explains – ‘created, and gradually spread, the conviction that languages (in Europe at least) were, so to speak, the personal property of quite specific groups ... and moreover that these groups, imagined as communities, were entitled to their autonomous place in a fraternity of equals’ (p. 80-81).

Political community imagined as the state of South Slavs was “entitled to its autonomous place” in 1918. It was named The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians and ruled by the Karadjordjevic Dynasty. After many centuries, South Slavs were independent and united. To stress the newly-achieved unity, the name of

the country was changed to "Yugoslavia" in 1929. But happiness did not last. Only five years after this baptism King Alexander of Yugoslavia was murdered in the assassination organized by the Croatian nationalists. The assassination was an outcome of the previous political, economic and ethnic conflicts. More importantly, it was a serious signal of the events that were to come.

Born at the sunset of the World War I, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia died at the dawn of the World War II. German aviators bombed Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, on April 6th, 1941. Croatia declared its independence only four days later. But this "high-speed" disintegration was just a minor consequence. The major, horrifying ones were to come. The idea of national-romanticism that South Slavs should not live divided transformed during the World War II into the idea that some of them should not live at all, and the ethnic conflicts started. That is what was left of national-romanticism.

But, Yugoslavia was not ready to give up the ghost just yet. World War II was the scene of three simultaneous and equally important processes in Yugoslavia -- German aggression, the inter-ethnic extermination, and communist revolution. Led by Tito and his partisans, the communists were determined to transform former Yugoslavia-the "bourgeois monarchy"-into a proletarian republic. In its entirety. Therefore, on November 29th, 1943 they proclaimed the Federal Peoples Republic of Yugoslavia (the name was later changed to Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). The second attempt to imagine the state of South Slavs took place. And, shockingly enough, Yugoslavia continued to live, in its second incarnation.

Bloody inter-ethnic conflicts from the World War II were forgotten (or masked) in the process of "brotherhood and unity" of the Yugoslav peoples, which was intensely propagated by the regime. Going back to Anderson, imagining the communist Yugoslavia could be understood as the "last wave" of national-building. According to the author, that was the period of world history 'in which it was possible to "model" nation-ness in a much more complex way than hitherto' (p.126). Such modeling, Anderson writes, 'assumes its relevance above all at the moment when revolutionaries successfully take control of the state, and are for the first time in a position to use the power of the state in pursuit of their visions' (p.145). But, apart from the official politics, the sense of unity had started to develop among Yugoslavs spontaneously as well. During the decades of peaceful life, they were travelling, trading, and getting married, so that various social networks were knitted all across the country. Anderson notes that 'so often in the "nation-building" policies of the new

states one sees both a genuine, popular nationalist enthusiasm and a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology' (p.104).

However, the second attempt to imagine Yugoslavia as a nation was ultimately unsuccessful. At the beginning of the 1990s, less than fifty years after the communist Yugoslavia was constructed, four of the six Yugoslav republics declared independence and were recognized by the international community as sovereign states. A kind of reduced Yugoslavia continued to live, embodied in the two remaining republics (Serbia and Montenegro), and it was re-declared as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on April 27, 1992. Unlike their nineteenth century ancestors, South Slavs living at the end of the twentieth century deconsolidated the common language, created five separate national flags, anthems, and coats of arms; in short, they imagined five distinct national communities. Once again Yugoslavia fell apart in a horrifying, bloody way. The aftermath of the disintegration left behind it corpses, cripples, refugees, and emigrants, assuring us that any new attempt to imagine the country of South Slavs would be impossible.

But, South Slavs proved once again that "the spirit of their ancestors was still alive," just as their ex-anthem read. Yugoslavia was imagined for the third time. This time, however, it was *literally* imagined. On September 9, 1999, an online entity called "Cyber Yugoslavia" was proclaimed. And, unlike its "real" namesake, it still exists, in its original borders -- at the web address <http://www.juga.com>.

Cyber Yugoslavia – Constructing an Online Nation

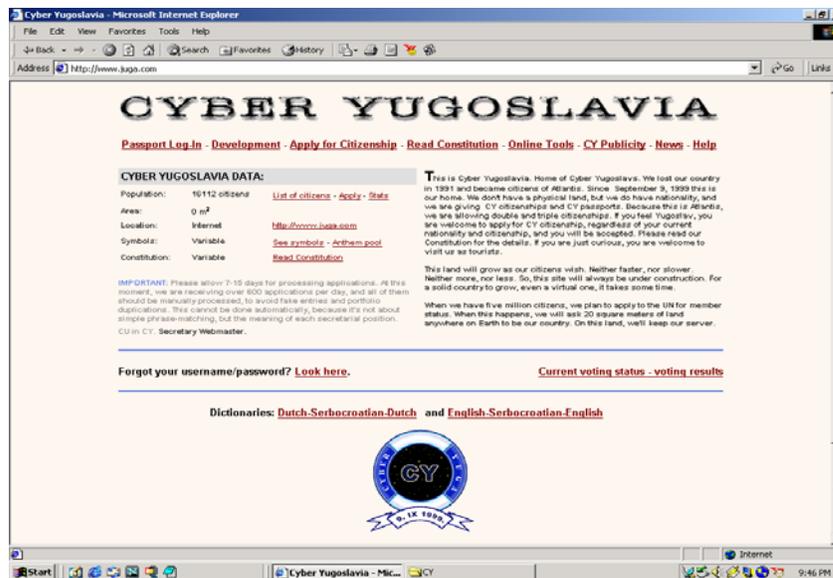


Figure 1

Cyber Yugoslavia is simply defined as the 'home of Cyber Yugoslavs.' It was founded by a group of "real" Yugoslavs who, as they stated, had not had physical land ever since they had lost their country in 1991, but who still did have nationality. 'We lost our country in 1991 and became citizens of Atlantis'—reads the front page of CY. 'Since September 9, 1999 this is our home.'

Unlike other groups established online, CY has a form of a state; therefore, it is considered the first online nation. CY has its emblems, governmental structure, as well as the Constitution, and it issues its own digital passports. However, CY is not the state of South Slavs, despite the name that it took on. The prerequisite for becoming a citizen of CY is not to *be* of the South Slavic origin, but to *feel* Yugoslav, proclaims the front page of this online state. Availability of CY citizenship is guaranteed by its highest Act; chapter 4 of the Constitution reads:

Anyone may become a citizen of Cyber Yugoslavia. This means that everyone has the right to ask for a CY passport, and everyone will get it automatically, unless they are on the "persona non-grata" list ... Applicants may have one or two citizenships already, and the country or nation of their origin doesn't matter. All citizens of the World are eligible for citizenship of CY.

Surprisingly (or not) it turned out that a lot of citizens of the World were interested in becoming the citizens of CY. Today, the first online nation has a population of 16,573 inhabitants, who come from 150 physical states. The CY statistics reveals that 77% of Cyber Yugoslavs come from countries other than Yugoslavia.ⁱⁱ

Consistent with such international structure, CY is a multilingual country. More precisely, its official language is any language suggested by its citizens:

Any suggested language will be accepted as an official language, if it really exists. The initial languages of CY are: Serbo-Croatian, English, Greek, Italian, Macedonian, Slovenian, Russian, French, Dutch, German, Portuguese, Pascal, C, C++, Visual Basic and Latin. (CY Constitution, Chapter 12)

The Constitution of CY also defines its governmental structure. 'The highest body in CY is Algorithm of Social System' – reads Chapter 3. 'The source code for this algorithm is public, and every citizen of CY may inspect it.' The country is ruled by its citizens, who are all required to choose a specific state department and to administrate it. 'Every citizen has to be a Secretary of something' – proclaims the Constitution (Chapter 6). –'When applying for a passport, citizen has to choose his/her Ministry and official title. Secretarial positions may not be superior or inferior in status to any existing secretarial titles.' So, CY has as many Secretaries as citizens, such as: Secretary for Wolves of Ontario, Secretary for good coffee, Secretary of Claustrophobia, Secretary for Toto Calcio, Secretary of easy women, Secretary of Campari Drinking, etc. And while all citizens have such governmental duty, none of them has the right to take any higher position. 'No person can become a President, King, Queen or Prime Minister of CY, nor can anyone impose their personal will on the citizens of CY.' - reads Chapter 7 of the Constitution.

The citizens of CY also collectively build their virtual homeland: 'It is an honor, privilege and right for every citizen familiar with HTML, Java, JavaScript, VBScript, COM objects, IIS filters and ASP applications, as well as music, video and photo digitizing, to participate in building of Cyber Yugoslavia.' (CY Constitution, Chapter 8).

Like every other country, Cyber Yugoslavia has its emblems -- an anthem and a coat of arms. Yet, the anthem is not like those we are used to. Namely, it is variable, chosen on a weekly basis. The CY Constitution provides a detailed explanation:

The Anthem is not chosen by citizens, but by a random-seeded generator driven by the Constitutional Algorithm. The source code of the Constitutional Algorithm is public. A new Anthem is chosen every weekend from a pool of "anthem candidates." The pool of "anthem candidates" consists of citizens' suggestions, using a method a bit different from the Method of Public Vote. Each suggestion has to receive 2/3 of the votes of all citizens in order to enter the pool of "anthem candidates." However, 1/2 of the votes of all the citizens can remove a song from the pool of "anthem candidates" (if a song annoys citizens, it should be easier to remove the song than to accept it). This means that at any given moment there

is a theoretical possibility that CY will have no anthem (if the pool of “anthem candidates” is empty). In that instance, the software will become rebellious and will choose any song that comes to mind, at random, from some of the existing mp3 sites on the web.

(CY Constitution, Chapter 10)

Finally, like every other country, CY seeks international recognition and the UN membership:

When the number of citizens reaches five million, CY will request membership of the United Nations, and soon after CY will request a territory of 20 square meters, anywhere on the Globe, where it will place its server. This will be the official territory of CY, where its DNS entry will be located: <http://www.juga.com>.

(CY Constitution, Chapter 16)

Cyber Yugoslavia – Deconstructing the Offline Nation

To understand better the first online nation, we should take a closer look into the concept of virtual ethnicity. Nils Zurawski (2000) defines virtual ethnicity as a dynamic relationship between ethnicity and the Internet. According to Zurawski, VE refers to different forms of representing ethnic groups on the Internet, as well as to the perception of ethnicity, potentially changed in the information age. Related to the presentational forms of VE, various channels and actors can be identified, from individual users describing their culture to the fellow-chatters, to the official, state-sponsored presentations of a given culture/nation. Particularly prominent are the presentations of suppressed groups, which use the Internet to preserve their threatened ethnicity, and to voice related social ends. Such examples are Assyrians living in exile, who use the Internet to present both their culture and their side of the political story to the world; Hawaiians’ effort to teach their children the native language via the Net; and different “resistance networks” (Chiapas, Burmese, etc.) that utilize the Internet primarily for expressing political goals (Ibid.)

The impact of information technologies on perception of ethnicity, which is the second aspect of VE, is usually regarded as twofold. On the one hand, it is believed

that transnational communication provided by the ICTs will intensify the process of cultural globalization, and result in weakening of primordial ethnic identities. On the other hand, the opposite process is anticipated, based on the fact that dispersed members of ethnic groups, particularly Diasporas, use the Internet to keep in touch with their homeland and native culture, thus strengthening their ethnic characteristics (see: Da Rosa et al; Poster, 1995).

Virtual ethnicity is a useful framework for the analysis of CY, although, in this particular case, the identified aspects of VE have a specific form. The representational aspect of Cyber Yugoslavia could be regarded as being closest to those of the oppressed groups. Obviously, an alternative way of presenting Yugoslavia, noncompliant with the official versions, is at stake. What makes this aspect of VE different in the case of CY is the fact that none of the practical goals are included. CY intends neither to preserve distinctive traits of Yugoslav culture, nor to voice specific political ends. Although the founders of CY relate the birth of their virtual state to the disintegration of their physical state, they do not provide or ask support for any of the parties in the ex-Yu conflict. Neither do they advocate any particular view in that regard. More precisely, such intention is not direct, although it possibly exists, as I will elaborate later in the text.

Additionally, Cyber Yugoslavia cannot be regarded as a form of constructing national identity on the Internet. Rather, it could be perceived as a form of *deconstructing* national identity *per se*. The way in which CY treats the basic institutions of a nation implies such conclusion. Playing with symbols of the state and parodying national emblems, CY undermines the very essence of both the nation and the nation state. The governmental structure of CY is characterized by the complete lack of formal authority and/or hierarchy, which is perceived as the greatest threat to political organization and functioning of the "real" states. Equally apparent is the purpose of parodying national symbols. National emblems have many functions, the most important being to crystallize national identity, to create bonds between citizens, to motivate patriotic action, and to legitimize the authority (Cerulo, 1995). By crystallizing national identity, the emblems facilitate formation of the 'unique collective "self", distinct from any other entity in the international arena' (Ibid., p.15). Further, national symbols enable establishing of mental bonds among citizens, thus reinforcing the process of community imagining. 'National anthems' – Cerulo writes – 'unite citizens every time they are performed, bringing citizens together (albeit mentally in many cases) in patriotic communion' (p.17). In so doing, national

symbols accomplish an additional goal -- they apply a moral authority of individual interests being subordinated to the collective. Consequently, they provide motivation for individuals' acting in the name of the nation. Cerulo notes that anthems are usually chosen exactly based on their ability to motivate citizens; she provides the example of deciding on the U.S. national song:

In support of the anthem [The Star-Spangled Banner], the following arguments were offered on the floor of the Senate: " The veterans of all wars are calling to the Senate now to put its official stamp upon this sacred song which *inspired them to do or die* for the land of the free and the home of the brave."

(p.22; emphasis in original)

The great power of national symbols stems from the fact that they do not just represent a nation but are so inseparably linked with it that they finally *become* a nation. That is why defiling of national symbols, such as burning a flag, provokes strong reactions. The emblems stand for the nation's ideals, its past, and its future. They symbolize its overall existence and continuity, along with continuity of its established values.

The emblems of Cyber Yugoslavia introduce a completely different concept. Instead of symbolizing eternalness, they denote discontinuity, which is the greatest enemy of "real" nations. Clearly, an anthem chosen on a weekly basis and by the Algorithm can neither form the "unique collective self," bringing the citizens in "patriotic communion," nor can it inspire them to "do and die" for their country. The CY's coat of arms sends similar message. In "reality," a coat of arms is usually designed to symbolize the union of territories and peoples (Cerulo, p.19). The coat of arms of "real" Yugoslavia had such function. Six red torches burning together, which distinguished the emblem of the communist Yugoslavia, represented six culturally and geographically varied but still united Yugoslav republics (Hope, 1973: 340). A blue ribbon placed below them displayed the white-lettered inscription "29.XI 1943," which was the date when the communists proclaimed their state. Golden ears of corn that encircled the torches denoted the country's main economic sector and its main economic hope -- agriculture.

The coat of arms of CY was designed as the re-created image of this emblem (please see Figure 2).



Figure 2

The territorial symbolism of the torches was replaced with the territorial symbolism of the Cosmos. The symbol of economic hope was substituted with the life preserver. Finally, the re-arranged ribbon displayed the date when Cyber Yugoslavia had been proclaimed -- the virtual state marked its "Independence Day" just as the "real" one had done.

Created in cyberspace, with the anarchic governmental structure and burlesque emblems, Cyber Yugoslavia represents the nation left without all of its constituting elements: territory, political organization, and symbolic representation. The only element left is -- people. CY was created by the individuals who were willing to imagine themselves as a group. Considering the fact that they decided to do that online, we labeled them as a virtual community. If they had decided to do that *offline*, we would probably categorize them as a nation. 'A nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one' -- concludes Seton-Watson (cited in Anderson, p.15). A virtual community exists when 'enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.' -- concludes Howard Rheingold (Rheingold, 1993: par. 23). Comparing these two definitions and recalling Anderson once again, we can just re-assert his observation that:

all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (Op.cit., p.15)

Such conclusion seems to be one of the main messages of Cyber Yugoslavia, and the basis of the specific form of online activism conveyed through this virtual entity. As already mentioned, CY did not proclaim any specific political end, or supported any option in the ex-Yu conflict. Instead, it made fun of the entire concept that initiated the conflict and served as its base. Therefore, we could say that online activism of CY is aimed rather at general than at specific social and political goals. "Blasphemously" transferring prerogatives of a nation and a state into the realm of virtuality, CY meets its end -- it urges us to think what "real" really is. Does reality exist within 'the controversy over whether the flag should be a darker blue as is the Serbian flag, or a lighter blue like the Montenegrin flag,' or within virtual reality, where an Algorithm chooses the national anthem? What is real? And what is the *essential* difference? Anderson states that one of the main goals of his work is to understand why an imagined political community (that is, the nation) arouses such deep attachments that millions of people are inspired to kill and to willingly die for it. 'What makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history (scarcely more than two centuries) generate such colossal sacrifices?'-- he asks (Op.cit., p.16). Cyber Yugoslavia asks the same question, in its own way. Perhaps "*feeling Yugoslav*," which is the only precondition for becoming the citizen of CY, implies exactly recognizing the imaginary character of the nation, and consequential irrationality of acting in the name of that construct. And perhaps that is the reason why so many people from so many different nations *feel Yugoslav*.

Thousands of CY members, who have chosen to declare themselves as Cyber Yugoslavs regardless of their "real" nationality, urge us to reconsider the established social discourse, that is, the way in which we construct our nations, states, and overall reality. However, to be receptive of such a suggestion that comes from virtuality, we should first recognize that "reality" and "virtuality" represent two complementary and equally legitimate forms of our existence. Instead of endlessly repeating the old dualism, formulating it in the form of hierarchy (which one is "fundamental" -- the embodied or the online phenomenon) and moral evaluation (which of the two is "regular"), we should better assert their legitimate coexistence. Such understanding should be both conceptual and methodological, for our progress in examining both "reality" and "virtuality" will be at a standstill as long as we try to discover which of the two is "valid." 'Instead, let us begin by assuming heterogeneity: both the real and the constructed, the material and the semiotic, the human and the non-human play their part in the production of an event, an account,

a process.' – suggests Mike Michael (Michael, 1999: 58). Only when we recognize such a paradigm shift, which encompasses both the real and the constructed and implies '... the heterogeneity of elements that contribute to the production of certain knowledges' (Ibid., p.59) we will be able to understand and employ the valuable knowledge that "reality" is providing about our "virtuality," and *vice versa*.

Let me conclude this essay with the words of Jean Baudrillard:

Say: I am real, this is real, the world is real, and nobody laughs.
But say: this is a simulacrum, you are only a simulacrum, this war is a simulacrum, and everybody bursts out laughing.
With a condescending and yellow laughter, or perhaps a convulsive one, as if it was a childish joke or an obscene invitation. Anything which belongs to the order of simulacrum is obscene or forbidden, similar to that which belongs to sex or death. However, our belief in reality and evidence is far more obscene. Truth is what should be laughed at. One may dream of a culture where everyone bursts into laughter when someone says: this is true, this is real.

(Baudrillard , 1995: par. 6)

Notes

ⁱ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was officially transformed into the Union of Serbia and Montenegro on February 4th, 2003.

ⁱⁱ See: <http://www.juga.com/list/countrystat.asp>

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