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Mobilising Unbriable Life: The Politics of Contemporary Poetry in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Humanism – yes, but from a mass grave

I have to begin at the edge of a ditch, at the opening of the mass grave, if I want to bear witness to anything resembling a human. To speak of the human, I have to confront its limit-experience and the gaps such limit-experience leaves in the lives of people and in the landscape. To speak of, to bear witness to any kind of humanism that still invests in the possibility of a just future, I have to speak of, to bear witness to, genocide.

I am aware, just like any storyteller after Walter Benjamin,¹ that death sanctions my story, but, in this case, such sanctioning is not enough. I also want to evoke the unpleasant corporeal remainder that, after genocide, stays with you, one which resists all the ideological mechanisms of quantification, identification, burial and sacralising – the excess of scattered bones, the dead-but-alive organic matter, whose smell builds up like a thin residue and clings at the rooftop of your mouth. This remainder itself is expressionless and yet I want to evoke it and bear witness to it.

And if, to tell a story, I borrow authority from death, I also want to borrow authority from the life that is left after genocide, because such life is also an expressionless remainder – that which cannot be integrated in society, but is confronted by the demands of society for closure, further prolonging injury through the mundane violence against this left-over life.

Life after genocide is thus: in a photo, a woman is holding a framed picture. In the framed picture, there are three figures: the woman herself, a young man in uniform and a young girl. The young man in uniform is the missing husband of the woman who holds the picture. The image of him – her most beloved image of him – is one of him wearing the JNA uniform, the uniform of the Yugoslav People's Army,

the same army which took him away, killed him and buried him in a clandestine mass grave. The teenage girl, standing next to her father in the picture, is their daughter, who was just one or two years old when he fled to the woods and she and her mother were expelled from the Srebrenica region by that same army who then went after him in the woods. This image of him, digitally inserted into the relatively recent image of mother and teenage daughter, is how the woman and the young girl remember him – the husband and the father – as they wait for him to be located, excavated, re-associated, identified and then buried, this time properly buried by these two women. And this is when the family, as a family, will be physically present once again, when these two women are reunited with the bones of the man.

The woman, the young man and the teenage girl in this picture are a Frankenstein family – the family that never was, never could be like this and never will be – patched together in the work of mourning. In this collage of disparate elements, idealised in the idyllic surroundings provided by the background setting, the figures are digitally combined, like the disparate parts of Frankenstein's monster. It is the result of the woman's desire – the desire of a mother and of a wife – to assemble and re-create the long-gone family and the long-gone man. The picture is the only monument the woman has, both to him and to the family. The picture is an image through which the teenage girl can remember her father – that and her mother's stories.

The theatre of literature: where history meets justice

'Witness'²

Trucks with the corpses passing through the
misty morning I didn't see
I closed my eyes hard could only hear the humming
of the engines and the drumming of light rain

Didn't see a thing
took no part in the loading too weak for that
the other guy the crazy one from the village did it I went for a walk
further off beyond the houses beyond

the twigs cracked under the soldiers' boots
didn't see a thing
don't know who they were
they didn't shout, they didn't speak

Poetry after genocide provides 'a unique experience with the past' (Benjamin 1999, 'Theses', 254). In this mode, it wrenches the memory of the collective away from the anaesthetic miasma of conformism, reads and constructs it 'against the grain' of the dominant, and so contemplates a new politics. It possesses, as Adrienne Rich puts it:

the capacity to remind us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future: a still uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession, the subjection of women, outcast and tribe, but on the continuous redefining of freedom – that word now held under house arrest by the rhetoric of the 'free' market. (Rich 2006, 3)

Poetry after genocide has the capacity not only to tell us how 'un-free' we are, but also to shift the criteria of possibility of our freedom. Poetry that bears witness to the expressionless remainder brings about 'a real state of emergency' (Benjamin 1999, 'Theses', 248–9), reminding us that the struggle for dissociation between truth and power in history is a fight for the assertion of the 'material force of the idea': not only in relation to the 'production and the practice of possibility' (Williams 2005, 273), but also in relation to the 'possibility of possibility' (Badiou 2010).

Bringing about a 'real state of emergency'

| | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 'The unidentified' | 'Neidentificirani' |
| ... <i>It is a particular question</i> | ... <i>Posebno je pitanje</i> |
| <i>From what will we reassemble ourselves</i> | <i>Od čega ćemo se mi sastaviti</i> |
| <i>If again</i> | <i>ako se ponovno</i> |
| <i>we decide to love one another ...</i> | <i>odlučimo voljeti ...</i> |
| | (Dautbegović 2003, 271) |

I first started writing on this subject over a year ago in an effort to highlight the ways in which some contemporary poetry in Bosnia and Herzegovina imagines alternative modes of belonging and identification in solidarity with the excluded and, in doing so, argues for a more equitable societal transformation. Despite the time-gap, I continue my original effort, with some crucial events having taken place in the intervening time since August 2008 – crucial, that is, to understanding *what this equitable societal transformation actually means in everyday life*. These events have clarified for me how poetry can and does disturb the comfortable and dominant consensus between those who support historical revisionism and those who use the ban on hate-speech to propagate

oblivion in Bosnia and Herzegovina today. It is these events that have also helped me discover what I consider to be politically relevant and enjoyable in such poetry. In other words – why and how it continues to give me hope that things can and do change for the better.

This chapter therefore builds from a situation that is occurring in everyday life, from a concrete practice, wherein, when it comes to bearing witness to war and post-war transition, poetry has the power to disturb a dominant political consensus. However, the strength of this poetry lies not only in its capacity to disturb and provoke, but also in its openness about the *type of universal normativity* it claims and on behalf of which it speaks. This poetry speaks loud and clear about injustices, but from the position of mobilising and fostering such life whose *sine qua non* is that it refuses to be drawn into the sticky web of the transitional political economy, in which, whatever the cost, the name of the game is the chase after bloodied capital. This is the universal normativity of what I entitle *unbribeable life*, by which I mean life that refuses to be bought off in the face of a politics that aims to desensitise it in relation to the workings and effects of the terror of inequality. It is a life that enacts its refusal to be bribed in its demand for and its insistence on the politics of equality for all.

The International Day of Missing Persons

The date of 30 August 2008, as the International Day of Missing Persons, was marked in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a day which was to make visible and encourage the idea that the problem of missing persons – at that point, 13,500 of them, still buried in clandestine mass graves – is the responsibility of us all. At the time, I coordinated the activities of the Department for Civil Society Initiatives at the International Commission of Missing Persons (ICMP) in Sarajevo. Together with other colleagues in the Department, I wanted to encourage and support practices in which solidarity with the families of missing persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina is based on such responsibility. My aim was to confront both the ethno-national mythologisation of missing persons and political point-scoring by the dominant political elites (some of whom know the whereabouts of these clandestine mass graves). I also wanted to confront all of us living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the majority of whom, although haunted and overwhelmed by an ever-shapeless future, see missing persons as just one of so many problems. Missing persons, however, insist on being found: through their surviving families; through those who executed, buried and subsequently relocated and hid them in clandestine mass graves; and through those who claim that what we term as the way ahead, out of the predominant feeling

of paralysis, will not happen unless we start openly requesting that those responsible for the execution, burial and hiding of those who are now missing must be named.

The 30 August 2008 public initiative was entitled 'I have the right to know' and it focused on the right of families of missing persons to know where their loved ones are buried. The initiative was jointly supported and carried out by the ICMP and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As part of the initiative, the state Parliament was committed to convening a special session to declare publicly its commitment to resolving the fate and whereabouts of missing persons as well as to assist the families of missing persons with their basic socio-economic rights. The initiative was widely supported by the media and also by a number of poets. As an act of solidarity, each poet contributed a poem to accompany works by families of missing persons which, collected together, were to be displayed at the entrance of the Parliament.

Just hours before the preparations for the marking of 30 August were completed, ICRC representatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina made known their strongly antipathetic reaction to some of the poetry that was to be offered – to be more precise, to two poems: 'Three cigarettes' ('Tri cigare') by Marko Vešović (Vešović 2004, 82) and 'Srebrenica, Potočari, 9.5.2004' by Šejla Šehabović (Šehabović 2008, 14):³

'Three cigarettes'⁴

At day's end, I went outside to right myself
in black and white. The sun, a coin descending
onto a dead man's eyelids. My God, the speechlessness
all round me, harder to pierce than tank armour.
Life's as brutal as the nightly sound of bootsteps
in the *logor*, the Serbian camp, announcing to
the Muslim captives that a squad of thugs is coming.
I light a first cigarette, so my eyes can briefly wander,
screened by its smoke, out of this *logor*.
Last night's dream came back again: my hands held a thread,
tied to the hawthorn growing from my father's grave
in the Sandžak, in the gorge called God-Never-Seen.
A thread which can guide you out of hell.
I light my second. So my soul can float away on its smoke
towards the ghosts from a deaf and grizzled past.
Which whisper to my soul: a single stride between
never-seen and nevermore, that's all there is to your life.

And the world's as grim as the guffaws of laughter
from the blinded in Canto 2 of Kovačić's *Pit*.
And then I light the last. So I can hold, for a moment,
a star between my middle and index finger. An evening
star. And to give me, through its bluish veil,
a clearer insight into Karadžić's universe
whose *Logos* is the *Logor*.

'Srebrenica, Potočari, 9. 5. 2004.'

From under the scarves their hair was sticking out.
One of them had covered herself with two scarves;
the second scarf lying over her shoulders.
The colours did not match
She smelled of soap
The second scarf hung over her silk blouse with its gold sheen
Holding scarf-ends, her hands were clasped over her stomach
Another of them wore lipstick.
We had brought a group of Dutch teenagers
Translating into two languages
Did you travel well?
the women enquired
How are you?
they asked
at the entrance to the cemetery
These youth look so lovely!
Their looks dwelt on each of them in turn
Later, they said:
Come over!
They wept, one by one;
they all showed albums with photos
of their dead
We stood in a semi-circle, as if sitting on a corner sofa
They were in the middle
with hands clasped over their stomachs
Hospitable.
They offered
To take us
To the Oak tree
(*Standing there you can see the places where people were led to the slaughter!*)
And to the battery factory

where they were kept tied up for three days.
 The sons were taken later, all hungry.
 They offered
 to show us
 how UNPROFOR soldiers gave their uniforms to Chetniks
 as if offering food and drink to a traveller.
 On departure, I hugged them, one by one.

They hugged me back, like aunties hug
 their guests when they see them off
 from the doors of their homes.

I was informed by a representative of the ICRC, in a phone call, that these two poems could not be displayed in the Parliament. The reasons given were that this was 'not good poetry' because Vešović's poem mentions 'concentration camps' for Muslims and, in her poem, Šehabović uses the word '*četnik*'. At the end of the call, I was told that the ICRC was covering part of the expenses of the initiative, therefore implying that it had the power to determine of what the event would or would not comprise. The phone call turned into an altercation, after which I rang Marko Vešović and explained to him the details of what was, for me, a clear case of censorship and a confiscation of the right to remember. I then forwarded Marko an email with all the details surrounding the poetry selection, including with it a copy of Šehabović's poem. Vešović reacted publically, publishing a piece in *BH Dani* in the 29 August 2008 issue of that magazine. A representative from the ICMP acquiesced to the ICRC demands, with the result that the two poems were not displayed or spoken in the Parliament. Shortly after, as I was de facto suspended for having facilitated a public reaction against the censorship of pertinent, contemporary Bosnian poetry, I left the ICMP.

The driving force in the '30 August' case is the politics of those representatives of the international community, who not only dictate and set conditions as to how missing persons ought to be remembered in the public discourse, but, more insidiously, deny any right to citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to make universal analyses and draw universal lessons from the war and the genocide. Ultimately, this is a denial of and a gag on the politics of *unbriable life* – life that claims that *Logos* cannot be *Logor* (camp), as in the final line of Vešović's poem.

What is at stake in such universal lessons and analyses? A witness who is drawing on such lessons is locked in the complex dynamics between political community and trauma with respect to survivors and their

need to speak and act. The tension between the urge to bear witness and the impossibility of representing trauma enables 'radical repoliticizations of the violent exclusionary political and social deadlocks around us' (Husanović 2009, 103). The very title of Šehabović's poem engages with and intervenes in the complex dynamics between political community and the trauma of the Srebrenica genocide. Such dynamics are characterised by the ideological struggle to foreclose the meaning of the signifier 'genocide in Srebrenica', ranging from denial, through ethno-nationalist mythologisation and medicalisation to post-conflict management. In other words, in its very title, what the poem bears witness to are a concrete crime (genocide in Srebrenica) and the effects of the genocide (the cemetery at Potočari), and it subsequently testifies to what both 'I' and 'we' (speakers of the poem in first-person singular and plural) have done with such a crime in the years after it (the temporal reference to 9 May 2004 which also evokes the day of victory over fascism).

The poem opens up by focusing on women survivors who are caught in the gap between what, for the mourner, has become an enactment of everyday life and the act of receiving guests with its particular habits and norms. The tension of the gap that opens up between their mourning and their welcoming of guests is evoked in the excess of scarves, with their mismatched colours, and the discrepancy between the everydayness of the scent of the soap and the festiveness of the 'best' silk blouse with its gold sheen: 'the second scarf lying over her shoulders. The colours did not match/She smelled of soap/The second scarf hung over her silk blouse with its gold sheen.' The tension is further heightened in the discrepancy between the content and the location of the utterances of these women – the homely, welcoming inquiry taking place at the cemetery: '*How are you?/they asked/at the entrance to the cemetery.*' The surviving women inhabit and structure their lives in the gap between societal demands for the foreclosure of trauma and the insistence of their memories, wherein domesticity is relocated to the cemetery. The intimacy of such identifiable hospitality taking place in a cemetery is a poignant testament to the prolongation of war injuries in which these women still suffer the violence of war and its effects. In their collective urge to bear witness to crime – genocide in Srebrenica – and the societal demand for the foreclosure and normalisation of trauma, these women themselves, by their very request for justice, become defaced and excluded.

The shifting of the speakers in the poem between 'we' and 'I' relates to a broader uneasy personal and collective attitude towards the suffering of these women. Both 'we' and 'I' are guests in the suffering 'home' of

these women, but both 'we' and 'I' are already also complicit in the prolongation of the injury. For this is also crime in perpetuity – how 'we' and 'I', collectively and personally, are responsible for allocating a fixed position to these women, thus further imprisoning them within the geography of their tragedy. However, the poem insists on singling out and emphasising our far-too-easy individual and collective assumption of a ready-made attitude towards these women. In relation to these women, through this splitting, both 'we' and 'I' are revealed to be deprived of subjectivity in the sense of having no other kind of ideological position to assume other than the one proscribed by the dominant ideology. As a powerful reminder, after Felman, 'the language of infinitude' of the poem is the language of an infinite loop of trauma, which always bounces off any attempt at normalisation. Indeed, this language dislocates everyday custom to draw attention to injustice and injury and, in doing so, insists on the need for justice.

Marko Vešović's poem makes direct claims on poetic language to bear witness to the expressionless. In the very opening of the poem, the speaker merges writing with his very existence and in doing so affirms the unequivocal stance of the witness: 'At day's end, I went outside to right myself/in black and white.' Writing thus enables a language through which reflection and affirmation of the unequivocal stance of the witness are possible. This reflection contemplates the limit-experience of humanity, portrayed, in this poem, at the moment of being silenced and "petrified as if spellbound in a single moment" (Benjamin, in Felman 2002, 38). The speaker pronounces humanity as dead and, in the face of that, death creates the act of witnessing as an act of extreme solitude. Following Felman, it could even be claimed that the ethical impetus and necessity of writing originates from such aloneness (Felman 2002, 39). Writing as witnessing also enables a work of memory, whereby the images of the past and their relevance to the present are recognised by the speaker. Unlike the wisdom of resignation, reduced to a proverb by the 'ghosts from a deaf and grizzled past' for whom life is 'a single stride between/never-seen and nevermore', the witnessing speaker insists on specifying and naming the source of this particular injustice, in which life is 'brutal as the nightly sound of footsteps/in the *logor*, the Serbian camp, announcing to/the Muslim captives that a squad of thugs is coming'. The present injustice of the Serbian camp is connected with the past injustices and crimes carried out by fascist collaborators, through the intertextual reference to Second World War partisan poet Ivan Goran Kovačić's poem *Pit*, in which 'the world's as grim as the guffaws of laughter/from the blinded'.

The speaker is driven to draw attention to and critique the terror of injustice and inequality – a continuous and lasting fascism – that imposes its norm and claim over the very definition of what it is to be human. It is unbribable life itself – writing as witnessing as being – that is affirmed in the poem. The intertextual reference evokes the 'tradition of the oppressed' as the anti-fascist tradition, on behalf of which unbribable life fights against fascism and the terror of inequality in all its forms. *Logor*, the legacy of fascism, cannot be the norm or structuring principle of life, the speaker asserts in the final line. And this is how this poem announces its hopeful politics: after Benjamin, our task is 'to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism' (Benjamin 1999, 'Theses', 248–9).

The censorship by the international community representatives came in the guise of the 'protection' of multiculturalist discourse and the ban on insulting language and hate-speech. What is interesting in this case is the perspective from which the content of the poem was recognised as problematic. Marko Vešović was censored on the grounds that his poem mentions concentration camps for Muslims and Šehabović because her poem mentions the word *četnik*. In their close reading of the poems, the international community members assumed the perspective of an imagined member of each of the three ethnic communities, predicting what one or other of them might object to and, on that basis, 'cleansing' the poetry along ethnic lines. What is this if not a prime example of how the bureaucratic terror of the international community operates? Poems are scanned for shibboleths and the speaking subject is given permission to speak only in a language cleansed of what is deemed to be inappropriate content from an imagined ethnic perspective.

Furthermore, in claiming that it occupies a neutral position, the international community simultaneously maintains a cynical distance from it: it knows very well that the problem of the poems is not because they mention what is deemed to be inappropriate content (and for that matter it knows really well that both the concentration camps and the *četniks* did exist). The far greater problem for the international community is that the speakers of both poems do not accept the bounds of a false distinction between private and public language in relation to all those who have been executed and sacrificed in the chase for the capital that was stolen through the blood of war and genocide, and the post-war legacy of everyday violence. In other words, the speakers in both poems do not accept the view that suffering is a purely private event. In doing so, they assume and uphold a position that an adequate,

expressive public language already exists through which suffering can be communicated and that poetry can and does provide such a language.

Therefore, the censorship of these two poems on the grounds of 'insulting content' is a downright lie. Ideologically speaking, such censorship sets multiculturalist parameters for the reading of these two poems, reducing social conflict to a friction among ethnic identities. Within these weak, depoliticised parameters, cultural, religious and ethnic differences are recast, to recall Wendy Brown again, as sites of conflict, which have to be managed through the politics of tolerance (Brown 2006). This scenario further supports the ethnic element as the dominant reference of political collectivity, which then leads to a retroactive re-inscription of the war as a conflict between three ethnic groups. Such levelling politics by the international community is part of the dominant consensus rather than part of its solution.

Most importantly, the true reasons for censorship lie in the total opposition of those who comprise the dominant consensus in Bosnia and Herzegovina today to the position insisted on by those who have survived and who are striving to produce a hopeful future that breaks the bounds of the everyday horror of transition. Such a position maintains two important premises: the first is that suffering, which results from war and genocide, is the effect of societal injustice and is, as such, a *par excellence* public matter; the second is that, in relation to this suffering, the emancipated process of becoming a subject can only take place when freed from the shackles of a victimised position or any other position that is merely focused on the interests of any particular identity. It is through the espousal of claims for a more equitable sociality for everyone that the concept of unbribable life is mobilised.

Of love and of reassembling ourselves

'The unidentified'
Like in a mass grave,
everyone has died of one's own
death,
apparently,
love
of the same cause

'Neidentificirani'
Kao u zajedničkoj grobnici
svatko je umro od svoje
smrti
navodno
ljubav
za istu stvar

What is his collar bone doing
being next to this frontal bone
And what will he look like

Što radi njegova ključna kost
uz ovu čeonu
I na štoće dotični nalikovat

Reassembled from different
parts
When the day of resurrection
comes

It is a particular question
From what will we reassemble
ourselves
If again
we decide to love one another

sastavljen od različitih
dijelova
kad dođe dan
ustajanja

Posebno je pitanje
Od čega ćemo se mi
sastaviti
ako se ponovno
odlučimo voljeti
(Dautbegović 2003, 271)

As for the dead – 'the dead are dead, why didn't you give them a hand when they were alive?', as Damir Avdić asks.⁵ Today in Bosnia and Herzegovina, supported by the international community, the comingled remains of the dead from mass graves are put through a juridico-scientific-religious process of re-association and identification of 'missing persons'. Retroactively re-inscribing the war as a war among ethnic identities, victims are re-associated and identified as ethnic victims. Paradoxically, the perspective taken in the process of this re-association is the perspective of the original perpetrator of the crime: like the original gaze that looked on the remains of those who were executed, this gaze puts them together and names them, assuming the perspective of the execution's perpetrators, for it is in the fantasy of the perpetrator that the executed person is the ethnic other.

If 'the dead are dead' and if we never decided to give them a hand, what about the living? Paraphrasing Jozefina Dautbegović's poem 'The unidentified', we might say that the post-war transition itself resembles a mass grave. The collectivity of those who have survived is comprised of those who are 'alive but dead'.⁶ One should read this not as the 'living dead' but, literally, as the most alive bit of the dead – unbribable life itself – as that which insists on justice and equality, and demands such societal transformation as will break through the mortifying isolation that is brought about by the allocation of segregated identities. This is precisely what the title of Dautbegović's poem refers to – the unidentified are not just those who are buried in clandestine mass graves or those whose remains are currently on tables in the re-association centre, but, more importantly, it is this 'we' for whom we still have no name. 'We' will have to assume the position of the unidentified, 'if again/we decide to love another' and, in doing so, claim a universal norm for who 'we' are and what the world

is. If love is a matter of decision, it is also a matter of recognition of the loved one who answers my question – ‘who am I?’ (Miller 2009). This community of unbribable life will recognise the answer to this question and will not under any circumstances uphold the gaze of the perpetrator. It will also have to go beyond the territorial, but in such a way that it does not give up on the right to define the territorial. This new definition of territory will be one of love and soil, one that goes beyond the mass grave of the living and is a *res publica* of unbribable life.

Notes

1. See Benjamin’s ‘The Storyteller’ in Benjamin 1999.
2. Stupar-Trifunović 2008, ‘Svjedok’, 29. All poetry translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
3. Both poems were published in *BH Dani*, 29 August 2008.
4. Translation by Francis Jones. My enormous gratitude goes to Francis Jones for making this translation for this chapter.
5. I am quoting here a poet-performer Damir Avdić and his poem-performance *Mrtvi su mrtvi*.
6. This is again with reference to Damir Avdić’s poem-performance *Mrtvi su mrtvi*.

10

HUM (-an, -ane, -anity, -anities, -anism, -anise)

Mark Robson

I

To hum: to make a low continuous murmuring sound like that of an insect, such as a bee; to make a low inarticulate vocal sound, especially to express dissent or dissatisfaction, more rarely for approbation and applause; to sing with closed lips, without articulation, as if to oneself; to make an inarticulate murmur in a pause in speaking, arising from hesitation, embarrassment, etc.; to give forth an indistinct sound by the blending of many voices, the sense of humming perhaps an effect of distance; a hum is also a rumour, the buzz, one might say; to make something hum is to see it as busy, to make it a hive of activity (to continue a metaphor); in electronic terms, hum is the noise produced in a loudspeaker as a kind of interference, most often as an effect of the alternating current of the mains supply. Hum in this sense is the signal that accompanies the signal (or, better, that in the signal which is not recognised as of the signal); it is that which emerges from the speaker without being that which is spoken. All of these senses are to be found in the definitions provided in the *OED*.

Hum is poised, then, in ways which might lead us to wonder how secure such dictionary definitions are: it is the sound of one who remains on the edge of articulacy; alternatively, it is the sound of the many who, in the intermingling of their voices, seemingly produce a single noise; it is a song without words, in or for which words are deemed unnecessary, are forgotten or recovered (perhaps only recalled in brief snatches) or else are never known at all – what is produced is an approximation that uses melody alone; or it is the inhuman hum of the machine or of the multitude (here the drone of the machine again enacts the metaphor of the bee-become-swarm, the buzzing mass). Hum is continuity and