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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# *Happy Days*: Political novel as the practice of reading

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## Abstract

This paper explores *Srećni dani* (*Happy Days*, 2023) by s Serbian author Srđan Vučinić as a paradigmatic example of a political novel conceived through the practice of reading itself rather than through conventional genre criteria. While structurally ambiguous, classified as a collection of short stories yet received as a novel, it engages deeply with political, historical, and gendered themes through its layered narrative and paratextual elements. Central to the novel is the narrativization of the Yugoslav crisis and wars, which are employed as symbolic frameworks for exploring collective identity, memory, and social disintegration. Through grotesque, posthuman, and dystopian motifs, *Happy Days* reconstructed the aftermath of national collapse through bodily and emotional experiences. This analysis focuses on the concept of the "collective body" as a site of political, historical, and gendered inscription. Gender, often seemingly absent on the surface, emerges in the process of reception and interpretation, underscoring the novel's engagement with embodied history, memory politics, and post-human subjectivities. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Happy Days* exemplifies the political novel not as a fixed literary form but as a relational, interpretative space shaped by reader-text interactions.

## Keywords

political novel, literary genre, gender, collective body, reception theory, Yugoslavia, Yugoslav wars

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## Introduction

The invitation to participate in the workshop on the relationship between the political novel, as an open, contested notion, and gender coincided with my freshly read novel *Srećni dani* (*Happy Days*, 2023) by Srđan Vučinić, author from Serbia. As I sat on a jury that just awarded this book *Biljana Jovanović*[2], I decided to test some of the project's proposals on this book, which we found to be one of the best volumes just published in Serbia. Although the decision might seem subjective, this analysis was necessitated by the very character of Vučinić's text. While it could not be quite definitely defined as a novel, it did belong to broadly understood political fiction. Yet, it was even more compelling how it related to the question of gender; as it seemed, it was almost completely ignored. The book was in a way a mirror image of the famous Biljana Jovanović's novel *Pada Avala* (*Avala is Falling*, 1978)[3], only disengaged from her gendered narrative scheme through which she explored the interconnectedness of women's and class emancipation. This by now classic Yugoslav feminist piece of writing, particularly present in a contemporary literary counter-canon, follows interactions of a young female protagonist with the *collective body* of the fellow citizens, predominantly men from the lower social classes, who is asking crucial questions on the possible new forms of sociability, but also the old systems of social repression. Similarly, Vučinić's narrator is fascinated with the collective body as a literary entity through which the political history of Serbia could be fictionalized and explored, although a clear gendered standpoint is omitted. Nevertheless, male narrator who is self-ironic, often even self-ridiculing, eliminates the possibility of a categorical masculinity figure being one who narrates the story. This expressly Freudian mockery of (masculine) identity was inviting and made the decision to analyse this ambiguous text, curious in its articulation of genre and gender issues, unproblematic.

Srđan Vučinić (1970) is a Belgrade based author, recognized as a short stories' writer, essayist and a playwright (of radio-dramas too). Next to writing, he has been involved with cinema, both as a theorist and artistic director of the famous Belgrade Author Film Festival (known as FAF) since 2012. Though the book *Happy Days* is published as a collection of short stories, the jury read it as a novel and awarded it as such. Furthermore, the jury agreed that the text would not attract as much attention if it were read as a collection of short stories. This curiously corelates with the contested genre of a political novel, whose politicalness, I would argue, surfaces in the very process of reading, that is, the process of reception. In other words, a political novel could be described as a type of reading, it develops in the space between the text and the reader. The stress on reception/interpretation could be said to be political owing to its relationship with knowledge about society: "Both the indexical and the general unfolds within the reading process in the dynamic interaction between the reader and the novel. The social knowledge is accessible through the reading of the novel. It develops with every new sentence we read" (2 on page 23). It seems that precisely this unambiguous term *political novel* is what makes *Happy Days* a novel, as the reader is like the "investigator [who] interprets the meaningful surroundings" of literary texts (2 on page 23).

Moreover, being political in this particular way is directly linked to the ostensible lack of gendered aspects in this novel. Dormant at the level of fable and plot, it activates once the interpretation begins, proving the structural importance of the "multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts" (3 on page 14). Gender is in this novel narrativized to show that it is indeed relational and not fixed in identity "templates". It becomes a political topic in the process of this separate parts of interaction, that is, the process of reading/interpretation, which makes, one could argue, one novel political.

## Political making and unmaking of the novel

Political novel as a genre is not part of a standard literary classification, although it occasionally appears to describe works that either criticize society or offer a vision of an alternative society. While political fiction is a more common notion, political novel also intersects with other, more traditional novel genres that engage with social criticism. However, it does not make much sense to overdefine the novel as a genre. One of its constitutive traits is its open structure, also suggested by etymology, which shows its permanent property: it is a new, novel piece of writing that cannot have its own canon (4 on page 664). The novel's most common name in European languages comes from *romance*, which denotes the work in *lingua romana* (4 on page 664), that is, vernacular – people's language. This linguistic and political trait of the novel as a genre is constitutive of the envisioning of Vučinić's protagonist: people as a collective body.

Srđan Vučinić's novel integrates some of the most important traits of the novel as a genre and political novel in particular, like satire and social critique, and relies upon political implications arising from the folk origins of this literary form. However, the primary requirement for the political to be activated is the mentioned zone *in-between*, which the author himself exposes, pointing in the direction of the paratext.[4] Paratext links the text with broader literary and cultural fields by destabilizing its fictional status. It is a liminal space in which reality and fiction come together.

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[2] The prize was shared between Vučinić and Bora Ćosić for his novel *Ruski vrtlar* (*Russian Gardener*). *Biljana Jovanović* prize is awarded yearly since 2006. It honours the life and work of the avant-gardist Yugoslav author, civil rights and antiwar activist Biljana Jovanović (Belgrade, 1953 – Ljubljana, 1996).

[3] Novel was translated to English in 2020 by John C. Cox (see 1).

[4] I refer to Genette's definition of paratext (see 5).

Political develops or occurs at this threshold, as Genette formulates it, threshold space, which is the space of reception, it "constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)" (5 on page 2). Paratextual elements in this novel reinforce the background of storytelling, which is the narrator's private past, but also a more universal phenomenon that has temporal (it passes) and historical (it transforms) principles.

The paratextual appearance of the *Happy Days* immediately strikes the reader: the cover page is a photograph of a heavily damaged bronze bust of Josip Broz Tito, revolutionary, statesman, and lifetime president of socialist Yugoslavia. Sculpture is ready-made by the Belgrade-based conceptual artist Dragan Srdić (Belgrade, 1958) made in 2000. An installation named *The Anatomy Lesson* is an assemblage of discarded Tito busts that the artist found and bought out from waste. It has been exhibited in the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, right next to Tito's grave. The work is a commentary on the status of Yugoslavia as history, which has been predominantly suppressed, but also as an ideology that is currently seen as not only outdated but, in a way, eccentric. Yet, it is also a metacommentary on the body politics produced and practiced in Yugoslavia and revolving around the "body" of Tito as figure of the political cult.

Here is where the work's title signifies the centrality of body politics in the organization of social institutions, as is the case in the eponymous Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*. The central figure of the corpse of a criminal exhibited in a yearly event of a public dissection practiced in the Netherlands is a compelling image of a depersonalised individual. Deprived of autonomy and dignity even after death, the dissected corpse is a sign of societal control of human bodies, but also artistic evidence of a disturbing fascination with the macabre. Anatomy lessons were back in the time social events that Rembrandt painting was endlessly restaging, making us also become the audience of the spectacle of the dead body. Hence, Tito's artistic body points not only to the wavering Tito's cult, but to what comes *after* the period in which this cult was built, and that is thousands of violated and dead bodies in Yugoslav wars.

Another reference is Danilo Kiš's 1978 work of the same name. This book recapitulated the debate and the ensuing persecution of the author after he published an illustrious collection of short stories, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (*Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča*) in 1976.[5] In this polemic book, *The Anatomy Lesson*[6], Kiš articulated the critique of nationalist and conservative conceptions of literature already present at the end of seventies. Becoming paradigmatic by the mid-eighties, when this kind of writing and its authors played a very important role in formulating the platform of Serbian nationalism – though the nationalists from other republics followed – they soon led to war.

Srdić's artwork grasps both history, memory and their dynamic relationship, making the "dishonoured" busts made by some of the most prominent Yugoslav sculptors stand out in our contemporary, apparently eternally post-conflict, post-socialist transition society. A visual quote on the cover is explicated in the author's postscript at the end of the novel, which is another element of the novel's paratextual "equipment".

The postscript "A Few Redundant and Necessary Remarks" ("Par suvišnih i par neophodnih napomena uz ovu knjigu") has been meta-narratively used to integrate Srdić's artwork's symbolic and the novel's narrative, as this "installation is the only visual solution that, beyond any ideology, genuinely befits the content of the book" (8 on page 103)[6]. Nevertheless, the ending remarks disclose other authorial decisions, including the account of the structuring of the text and its broader cultural, literary and political implications. It is worth mentioning the author's restatement of the novel's motto, in itself, the privileged portion of the text. In the beginning quoted in the original, the author offers his own, very free translation of Mandelstam's verse from his poem "Leningrad" (1930): "Petersburg! There're the addresses that I have had / Where I still can find voices of those who are dead" (Mandelstam, "Leningrad", 9).[7] Functioning as a statement that outlines the novel's atmosphere and main theme, these verses disclose the narrative's focus on the dead and/as the past.

Therefore, this liminal space drew our attention to the main themes of the novel, which would be developed precisely in the mentioned reception space. The political character of the text arising from the interaction of the reader and the novel will bring up a forgotten, problematic, and troubling past, but will also tackle the issue of agency. Different individual and collective, male and female, human and non-human, and dead and living bodies will be the figures of the author's narrativization of (political, social) history as an embodied experience.

## Body politics: gender, nation, resistance

The way nationalism in Yugoslavia was forged through the gendering of social structures, their retraditionalization, and various symbolic shifts of conservative gender logic into the sphere of nationalist ideology has been studied extensively since the end of the 1980s. The naturalized link between the

[5] The book was translated to English by Duška Mikić-Mitchell in 1978 (see 7).

[6] "da je ta instalacija jedino vizuelno rešenje koje, se, izvan bilo kakvih ideoloških okvira, suštinski poklapa sa sadržinom knjige" (translations from the novel *Happy Days* are mine (T. M.)).

[7] "*Petrograde! Još uvek imam tvoj adresar,/ po kojem slušaću mrtvih orkestar*." (Emphasis in original; 8 on page 98)

notion of nation and people was operationalized most directly through the promotion of traditional gender roles and heteronormative families, but also through the gendered imaginary of the main nationalist topoi like nation, homeland and people. Analogous to the status of women as less in society, fragile, closer to the natural, and finally having the identity of a victim (10 on page 2003), a symbolic transfer of femininity to the notion of homeland was also activated. The homeland's symbolic bodies are sacred and vulnerable. Yet, the feminization of the nation had not only symbolic but also real consequences, as protecting one's own, and violating the enemy's motherland body was the primary demand of the agents of war. That is why "the rape and violation of individual woman becomes symbolically significant in nationalist discourse" (11 on page 11).

Alongside this gendered, feminized symbolic operation of producing the other, the enemy, the nation is always conceived as a collective, which is a figure with a long tradition in political imagination. The most paradigmatic one is Hobbes' *Leviathan*, which represents the figure of relationship or unity between the people and the (absolute) ruler. Figure of this "contract" is a single body, as depicted in the famous cover of the Hobbes' book with a crowned figure and its body "jam-packed" with people. In the novel *Happy Days* this collective body of society, a local and historical variant of a leviathan, represents a critique of the collective as a body of nonindividuals, though the collective body also appears as the collective of citizens organized in protest against the state.

Novel opens with a prologue in which the protagonist is a "single, hundred-mouth, thousand-ears collective enormous body" (8 on page 9)[8], both human-like and non-human, as it has the life of its own, it "divided and multiplied in a second" (8 on page 11)[9]. This entity is described using traditional societal metaphors of a herd or crowd, but also as an independent gruesome creature, more organ than a body: "this people's musculature" (8 on page 11)[10]. Nevertheless, this entity (of people) is explicitly defined as a single Organism with "magnificent sense of a collective – of one Organism, sense which rather reminds of bees or ants than the atomized human species" (8 on page 11–12)[11]. In the first sentence of the novel narrator "detects" the source, or circumstances which motivate and initiate the formation of such an impersonal public collective social creature: "the magical age of earthquakes, natural catastrophes and general state of emergency" (8 on page 9)[12].

Effectively associating the devastating historic series of earthquakes in Yugoslavia back in the 1960s and the 1970s, which had the real political, economic and societal effects of integration and solidarity, these events also serve as a metaphor for ridiculing the idea of collectivism. The author explicates the idea of a collective body in his postscript as a "hyperbole of socialist collectivism" (8 on page 98). Yet, earthquake is the figure of crisis and besides referring to the economic and political crises which were not rare in socialist Yugoslavia (they were rather constitutive of this novel societal and political state structure), it bears the overtone of future and final Yugoslav crisis, which lead to war. That is why the author, as he explained in the postscript, used excerpts from the war reporting by Dada Vujasinović, a prominent war correspondent and journalist murdered in still not clarified circumstances in 1994, to capture perplexing images that Yugoslav children start seeing. They see "ruins, ashes, smoke coming from every corner… A piece of a ripped off leg… A town without a single house unharmed" (8 on page 16)[13]. *Falling to pieces* was a process that was about to happen to the country, people, and their bodies.

Integrating documentary sources – excerpts from newspapers – continues in the narrative following the prologue, which is the variation of the collective body theme in the situation of demonstrations. The author portrays not only a single political body of people protesting, but also a single temporal body, as he amalgamates the protests from 1977, 1989, and 2023 into a single multifaceted collective motion of bodies and banners in the streets. Although one must be familiar with the facts of political history to distinguish the contexts, the essence of this kind of fusion is again the author's critique of the everlasting collective mentality and the inability to triumph over an authoritarian political system. In addition to the author's critique of the ineffective (though clearly only available) way of political organizing, the figure of the collective "super-body" points at political mobilization, which led to war, and which is a dominant, though often buried topic of the book.

The narrative is titled "New contributions to studying disease"[14]. Instead of studying the past, the narrator contributes to studying the disease caused by viruses, voicing a powerful message about instrumentalization and certain political and cultural fixations in the past. Analogous to the flock/herd from the prologue, viruses advance aggressively, having as their only ambition (and comically, their reason for existence) inhabiting the human body and a triumph over it. Instead of searching for the reasons why a certain group, or collective behaves the way it does in some kind of political decisions, or social interactions, economic conditions, standard of living, culture etc., narrator perceives the main problem to be the problematic "we," "we the people," a tricky collective political body. He mocks this "political entity" as it is arguably still

[8] "jedna, stousta i hiljadouha kolektivna telesina"

[9] "u trenu delila i množila"

[10] "opštenarodnu muskulaturu"

[11] "veličanstveni duh zajedništva – jednog Organizma, duh više pčelinji ili mravlji, svakako ne atomizirane ljudske vrste"

[12] "magična doba zemljotresa, prirodne katastrofe i sveopšte pobune"

[13] "ruševine, zgarišta, dim koji odasvud kulja… Parče otkinute noge… Grad bez ijedne čitave kuće"

[14] In the original the title is a pun on the phrase "studying the past", as it is replaced by the word "pošast" (disease, plague): "Novi prilozi proučavanju pošasti".

the main "political subject" in the post-Yugoslav context: it is a mere consequence of a disease. However, aware that this type of belonging tends to free the agents from their possible role, but also responsibility for the course of events that took place in dissolving Yugoslavia, the narrator emphasizes the phenomenon of the irrational as the main space of political affects and behaviours. Moreover, he discerns the profound bodily and corporeal character of societal interactions and politics, evoking the discourse of biopolitics, which explores how governmental/ruling power operates by managing and regulating the population's body/bodies and lives.

## From political to the genre bodies: (un)dead, machines, posthumans

Although political and historical contexts are decisive for the conception of the collective body, its steady quality is that it represents the body of a collective, be it a nation or demonstration; it is a single entity *amassed* by the actual people and their bodies. The collective body always denotes individuality: its absence (leviathan nation) or augmentation (resistance movements). It is directly linked with the agency or its lack; it is clearly political. However, it is also constituted on real bodies. In the following chapters, the narrator focuses on "non-bodies," further expanding his grotesque literary reality but also goes beyond referential historical reality into the realm of genre, the phantastic and dystopian. Social criticism translates into literary genres that deal with non-bodies, or more precisely, non-human bodies, from spectres and the undead to machines and posthumans.

"In Another Dimension" ("U drugoj dimenziji") is an account of a seemingly ordinary visit of the narrator's neighbour, which slips into neighbour's phantastic transformation. The peculiarity of the situation is suggested by various genre signals: the time of the story is after midnight, the narrator feels sleepy, suggesting the possibility that the whole event might be a bad dream, and while the neighbour's eccentric behaviour could be explained by his alcohol addiction, he acts as a kind of a strange night visitor. Two neighbours do not manage to start a proper conversation before the neighbour mysteriously starts dripping, "drop-by-drop" (8 on page 40)[15]. Yet, the characteristic E. A. Poe's uncanny ambiance is imbued with the comic, as the narrator decides to go to the bathroom and take a cleaning cloth and water backet to "clean the ugly greasy puddle formed from him and his tissue and spreading all over the floor" (8 on page 41)[16]. Quite literal decomposition of the neighbour's body is countered by the narrator's vision, the result of an alcohol-induced delusion, mere nightmare image, or a mark of a twisted reality. He recognizes his neighbour's face in the African mask hanging on the wall, then in a night butterfly, a genre signal of the proximity of the dead, or the vampire. In the end, they find themselves in the original setting imperceptibly, but the grim gist remains. The neighbour asks out of the blue: "hey, neighbour, could you, you know… Like, imagine me in some other dimension? What do you say?" (8 on page 43)[17]

A variant of a metempsychosis narrative, this eerie episode is followed by a "dysutopian" or, one might call it, optimistic dystopian chapter "ViVan" ("ŽiVorad"), in which the relativity of the bodily is further explored. The narrator is a 90-year-old pensioner who is sent a pet-android by a local medical centre. He names his new pet ViVan, and the two new friends, only members of the household, start spending their time together. We soon find that the old man's family emigrated, following the example of other people from the country (implicitly Serbia), but also the general trend of migrations to the Global North: "The Arabs and the Black unanimously rush towards the north in fear of drought and new wars" (8 on page 47)[18]. While one group of people migrates, the other is left behind to die alone, or at best, in the company of robots. In addition to this almost light episode about an old man and his new pet, which made him feel less lonely, the chapter is a critique of the exploitation of resources and continuous widening of the gap between the capitalist centre and periphery. The gloomy future displays the image of the Earth as a place without humans, inhabited by robots who will be the only remaining *creatures* to "wait for the heavenly fugitives to return to the Earth" (8 on page 47)[19]. A paraphrase from the orthodox Confession of Faith ("I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the age to come")[20], the last line suggests a synthetic vision of reality "after the Physics" (etymology of the word "metaphysics"). An apocalyptic future means a world without humans, but also the materialization of the metaphysical.

"Mixed media clinical picture" ("Klinička slika u kombinovanoj tehnici") is the last fictional episode, composition-wise before the autobiographical epilogue "I Look for the Resurrection of the Dead" ("Čekam vaskrsenje mrtvih"). Condensing the most important motifs of the novel, this chapter represents a depiction of the narrator's visit to a hospital in search of the remains of his comrades. Going back to the original narrative of the disease that develops after people get infected with a virus, the hospital, that is, the hospital depot, is the most adequate site for the narrative ending. Nevertheless, not only oneiric atmosphere, but some clear narrative clues unveil the space of hospital as a figuration of The Last Judgment. Time is not anymore linear: "am I walking on the pebbles from some bygone days, or is this a fraction of some future moment?" (8 on page 68).[21] Similar to the biblical event of the Second

[15] "kap-kap-kap"

[16] "ne bih li obrisao tu ružnu masnu baru koja se od njega i njegovih rastopljenih tkiva širi po podu"

[17] "komšo, bi l' mogo ti, onako… Onako, zamisliti mene u kakvoj drugoj dimenziji? A?"

[18] "Dok Arapi i crnci u strahu od suša i novih ratova složno hitaju ka severu"

[19] "I čekaće odbegle nebesnike da se zemlji vrate."

[20] English text of The Confession of Faith available at: https://www.imoph.org/pdfs/2015/10/29/E20151029aOmologiaPisteos/E20151029aOmologiaPisteos.pdf (accessed 25 January 2025)

[21] "koračam li po kamenim kružićima iz moje davne prošlosti, ili po nekom odsečku budućeg vremena?"

Coming, when all the people who ever lived are judged, the ancient clinic "keeps all years and names, all diagnoses and anamneses. There is no single name, written in birth records and certificates, which was not recorded here too" (8 on page 68).[22] The apocalyptic vision from the previous story spreads, making the end of the world and a historical narrative blend in the narrator's private (autobiographical) memories.

Varying the tragic destiny of his generation of young men who were forcefully drafted to Yugoslav army in the 1990s throughout the novel, in this closing chapter narrator draws attention to the consequences of local politics, narrativized in the opening scenes, but also of global politics which leave behind *organs without bodies*.[23] He is first shown jars with ash and easy-to-read labels *Chernobyl bud*, *Brotherhood and Unity*, *Diseases*, *Floods*, *Fires* (8 on page 73). Yet the list of his friends names is missing (as a telling commentary on the post-Yugoslav memory politics) and he only sees organ jars, wandering if some of the preserved body parts belonged to his friends, among others: "Is this strong sculptor's hand that is waving at me a hand of my good friend L., who was blew off by a land mine in a muddy little town of Nijemci in the first wave of Yugoslav wars?" (8 on page 74).[24]

The narrator's own body eventually transforms, perhaps signifying his identification with his dead friends but also the impossibility of grasping the meaning of history and our individual lives in it. Instead, in a hospital that abides by regular temporality, he first sees a vision of his bright future as a young boy and then himself as a strange patient in the same hospital, more plant than a human whose limbs resemble leaves and nodes rather than human flesh. A figure of a *baby wise old man* ("forehead of a hundred-year-old baby")[25], both religious and a science fiction motif which comprises exactly the mystery dynamic of physical time and eternity, alters into an image of a decomposing body, not any longer grotesque but rather communicating the natural circle of life. As an idiosyncratic image of a posthuman, he sees the grass growing from his tongue, but also: "bushes' branches spread out, in my loins and stomach moles are paving their way. Fertile field bursts up my bed" (79).[26]

The unbearable realities of recent history are in the autobiographical epilogue "I Look for the Resurrection of the Dead, " in contrast to the narrator's memories of the past, as he turns the pages of his old address book recovering his long-gone acquaintances, family members and friends, as it was in flesh and blood. Until now, merely an entry in his address book, they materialized into vivid images from his memory, corresponding to Mandelstam's quote. In the place of non-bodies, in the void caused by history, the dwellers of his address book arise in their full individuality, explicating the author's writing project and his literary exploration of corporeality.

## Resolution: Who is "homo ex machina"?

Yet, in the proximity of absent bodies and death in the hospital narrative, sexual intercourse is shown, suggesting the Eros and Thanatos dynamic as part of the narrated reality. Death drive and libidinal drive connected with creativity, regardless of their considerably comical narrativization reveal one strong, albeit stereotypical, female presence. A femme fatale, the narrator's first girlfriend and an extremely sexualized woman named Neimada, works as a nurse at the hospital. Exemplary sexual phantasy, which is also indicated by her name meaning "never had her," points at common sexist literary depictions of women, but also her ghostly presence (name and liminal character of a villainous femme fatale). However, the comical prevails, and the narrator describes himself as a mere object of her lust. Bodily is, thus, despite preserving its ambivalence, narrativized also as sexual pleasure, while the transgressive and funny nature of their sex act exposes corporeality as sight of playfulness and joy.

Another compelling female character, also a villainess, but assuming the status of a protagonist, is a witch from another episode combining political thriller motifs and phantasy.[27] It tells a story of corrupt politics and the actual failure of democracy, involving the so-called great powers who conspire with the female Mephistopheles, exchanging their souls for the demonic favours she is willing to do for them. Representative of the immoral political sphere, the witch is also a politically incorrect critic of the democratic system in which people (a group of sheep, jackals and wolves) are seen as responsible for their reliance on the authoritarian state structures.

This reading in reverse, or inwards, from the end towards possibly central point of the book, story-chapter "Homo ex

[22] "čuva sva godišta i imena, sve dijagnoze i anamneze. Nema imena upisanog u krštenice i matične knjige koje i ovde nije ubeleženo"

[23] The author's conceptions of the body/bodily/organism correspond to some extent to the well-known Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *body without organs* (often also abbreviated: BwO) from their two-volume study *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (*Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, see 12,13). Though it is considered to be a "misnomer, because the BwO is not so much a body deprived of organs as an assemblage of organs freed from the supposedly 'natural' or 'instinctual' organ-ization that makes it an organism" (14 on page 94), this concept allows discussing materiality beyond structures, and organization, which is why it might be useful in the interpretation of body politics and the figure of the collective body. Though the authors' conceptualization of the BwO is not without contradictions, it does relate to individuality: "Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It's a question of life and death, youth and old age, sadness and joy. It is where everything is played out" (13 on page 151). Finally, this playing out, happening, is what could be said to "expresses the pure determination of intensity, intensive difference" (13 on page 164) as an extreme opposite to the "organs without bodies" as emanating zero intensity, absence of life.

[24] "Maše li mi to snažna vajarska šaka mog dobrog druga L., raznetog nagaznom minom u blatnim Nijemcima, u pravom talasu jugoslovenskih ratova?"

[25] "čelo stogodišnje bebe"

[26] "niče trava, žbunje se šireći raspliće, a u slabinama i trbuhu krtice prave sebi put. I plodna njiva navire uz moju postelju"

[27] Difficult to translate, the title "Ni o trn ni o grm" is a phrase used in sorcery rituals known from folk tradition.

machina", a cyberpunk romance, should underline the importance of the process of reading, and point at the narrative and political meaning which is formulated in this interactive space. The title refers to the classical literary device deus ex machina. Its origin is in Greek theatre, in which the actors playing a god would appear on the stage on a type of machine, a crane. It is used to advance the plot, though often in a way that is not only unexpected but also implausible. Hence, not only does its etymology relate to a machine but it also preserves a mechanical plot shift as a literary tool. This is, therefore, at the same time the story about human machines and humanoid robots, but also a commentary – similar to the intentional usage of female literary stereotypes – about a dull, mechanical production of the text. Genre, in other words, should not be a clichéd text that combines stereotypical characters with a predictable plot. That is why it is not a god who appears and solves the problem, but a man or a human (Latin *homo*, *homini* means man, but also human).

The plot revolves around the (same) first-person narrator, now an android in need of the renewal of his *VIVAT*, a kind of a chip one can purchase or exchange, which, together with granting the owner longer duration, grants him or her the past of the previous owner, his or her memories. A type of illegal microchip market is a bar of the telling name *Lux Aeterna* (making the space of the bar a cyber travesty of a temple),[28] where the narrator encounters a mysterious woman, aged, and unattractive. However, the hazy cyberpunk atmosphere bar is an unmistakable genre signal of a (tragic) romance. Though remaining unknown to the two protagonists, the readers find out that the woman is his old girlfriend, as the memories she keeps on the chip she would give him are his own. Though none of the remembers they were a couple, his memories prove the opposite: she gives him the chip and prolongs his life cycle. Former lovers and now alienated cynical strangers still meet in a bar, as if pulled towards each other by a mysterious law of attraction.

Although the apparent homo ex machina is the android protagonist who survives because of his prolonging of the expiry date, continuing his life by using chips, it could be argued that the mysterious-familiar lady is a true homo (human) from the narrative machine who appears to grant the narrator his life. His open dislike for her can also be read as a genre convention for antagonist lovers. Whichever possibility the readers might choose, it remains a firm fact that the women gave up some of their lifespan to their former lovers. On the verge of being intolerably heart-breaking or even tacky, it is genuinely "analogous", if not completely human act of empathy and sacrifice. That it occurs without knowing the two protagonists proves that the immanent strength of love is the most noble of human emotions.

In the same vein, conclusions about the collective body of a loving couple can be drawn. Another compelling paratextual import comes from the title of the novel, which is a direct reference to Samuel Beckett's play from 1961 *Happy Days*. Beckett's text on the absurdity of being human deals with the automatized everyday routine and seemingly endless solitude, also expressed by the way the story is staged. The only protagonists are a couple, Winnie and Willie. While Willie remains mostly hidden, his wife Winnie, who is half-buried, then buried up to her neck, keeps on repeating tenderly and optimistically: "Oh this is a happy day, this will have been another happy day. After all. So far"[15]).

However, absurd produces a vacuum in which it is difficult to discuss politics, including categories and capacities of gender. We should go beyond the absurd ambiance and focus on the obvious, again, and almost discomforting. Alain Badiou singles out this drama to expand on his idea of "the obstinacy of love" (16 on page 82). Unlike the common romantic topic of an encounter and the closure of a love story by it (motif of a wedding), Badiou insists on the persistence of love, claiming that Winnie says her line "because love is still there. Love is a powerful, unchanging element that has structured her apparently catastrophic existence" (16 on page 83). Finally, love is enduring without covering the aging of (their) bodies, or "growing difficulty with sexuality" (16 on page 83).

This "amorous" interpretation of the concept of a collective body, which instead of a static entity transforms it into a relational/relationship process, in a way brings to light buried (in Beckett's text quite literal) agencies which *drive* the readers to read the text differently, or, more directly, to read it politically. Political novel as the practice of reading/interpretation *becomes*[29] by deciphering its latent contents and codes; in the case of novel *Happy Days* this meant being able to engage with the disruption, which is historical, bodily, and gender/ed.

## Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

## Data availability

No data associated with this article.

[28] Refers to an "eternal flame" in the altar lamp, but also a verse from Mass for the Dead, calling attention to the ambivalent status of the android protagonist, who is a futurist version of the undead.

[29] Again, in Deleuze and Guattari's sense.

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# Open Peer Review

## Current Peer Review Status: ? ✓

**Version 1**

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✓ **Joseph Andrew Darlington**
Futureworks Media School, Manchester, North West England, UK

This is a solid paper, filled with original insights and covering a lesser-discussed novel with depth and acuity. Theoretically, it pulls out themes of nationhood and gender with a carefully balanced meticulousness that avoids overstatement and thus leads ultimately to a very perceptive and convincing reading. It is well-written, balancing readability with depth, and sufficient background is given into the historical and authorial context to provide grounding and relevancy without this factual matter overtaking the interpretative apparatus. An interesting, informative and astute paper.

**Is the work original in terms of material and argument?**
Yes

**Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?**
Yes

**Is the work clearly and cogently presented?**
Yes

**Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?**
Yes

**If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**
No source data required

**Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?**
Yes

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.

***Reviewer Expertise:*** Contemporary literature, experimental literature

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.**

Reviewer Report 20 February 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.22497.r69043

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?

**Lana Molvarec**
University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

The paper by Tijana Matijević offers an interesting interpretation of Vučinić's *Happy Days* through the prism of politics as a bodily experience—individual, collective, national, class-based, and gendered. The author interprets the basic premise of Vučinić's text, which concerns the collective bodily experience of war, injury, natural disaster, or contagion, as a painful, repressed memory of the (post-)Yugoslav past. A particular role in this is played by the body either as a supporter of authoritarian practices or as the body in action in an act of resistance.
The author has a strong initial idea and a text that appears well suited to this type of analysis. The analysis itself would function successfully if it focused more consistently on the stated aspects, with particular emphasis on the central thesis of the corporeality of politics, and if it were deepened through more systematic theoretical insights. I believe that the initial part of the paper, in which the genre of the political novel is problematised, requires further revision.
The author defines the genre of the political novel as a mode of reading or reception, whereby politicalness/political emerges in the space between the text and the reader. She applies key theses on the social knowledge of literature to the interpretation of the political novel, which would be acceptable were this not the sole feature through which she defines the political novel. Politicalness/political is certainly an important dimension that can be used in reading a literary text; however, it both exceeds the genre of the political novel itself and cannot be unequivocally equated with the social knowledge of literature.
Namely, every interpretation necessarily presupposes an interaction between the reader and the text. Therefore, politicalness/political as a mode of reading and interpretation cannot be a distinctive feature of the genre of the political novel because (1) politicalness/political is not a feature specific only to the political novel, and (2) genre as such cannot be based solely on the interaction between text and reader, since almost every type of literary interpretation arises from that interaction.
Can every genre be defined as a mode of reading or reception? If not, why should the political novel be an exception? If so, are there nonetheless textual signals or structural features that enable entry into the very process of reading and interpretation?
If one enters into a discussion of the genre of the political novel, it should be both broader and deeper. It would be necessary to offer a range of different theoretical approaches and to argue

why the author has opted for the chosen one as the most methodologically appropriate. I understand the author's reluctance to define the political novel in rigid terms; nevertheless, it is certainly necessary to strengthen the argument as to why *Happy Days* is a political novel, if such a thesis is being advanced.
In the subsequent analysis, the author identifies features of other genres in *Happy Days*, such as science fiction, dystopia, and romance, which she reads through what she herself calls genre signals. I therefore return to my initial remark that a thorough discussion of genre is needed: why does the author recognise clear genre signals in these genres, while for the political novel she highlights only the relationship between text and reader? It would be necessary to clarify how these genres enter into dialogue with the genre of the political novel—whether and in what ways the politicalness of the text is deepened through the use of other generic patterns.

**Is the work original in terms of material and argument?**
Yes

**Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?**
Partly

**Is the work clearly and cogently presented?**
Yes

**Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?**
Partly

**If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?**
Yes

**Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?**
Yes

***Competing Interests:*** No competing interests were disclosed.

***Reviewer Expertise:*** contemporary literature, sociology of literature, space and displacement, children's literature

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.**