

Janez Janša
Slovene National Theatre

“Are you human?”

(Janez Drnovšek, President of the Republic of Slovenia at the time, Ambrus, 2006)

On 28 October 2006 the Strojans, a family of 31 (including 14 children) were forced to leave the Slovenian village of Ambrus under police escort, and taken to a refugee centre in Postojna, 30 miles away. They had been under siege for two days, trapped by a crowd of fellow townspeople who were demanding they leave the town, under threat of death.

The Strojans were not a popular family in the village. Their neighbours accused them of illegal appropriation of land, and dumping rubbish in a nearby waterway. The situation had come to a head a few days previously, when there was a fight and a local man ended up in hospital, in a coma. But it was not a normal grievance between neighbours, by any means. The Strojans are “tzigani”, to use the local word, gypsies. The disturbing story of the family soon became a political case which brought forth the xenophobia of an entire nation, which until then had been viewed as a haven of peace and prosperity in the troubled Balkans.

“Kill the Gypsies!”, “We’ll string you up on a cross!”, “Gypsies raus!”¹ were just some of the shouts from the crowd that formed around the house. At 6 pm the Slovenian Home Secretary arrived, intervening decisively to ensure the “relocation” – a euphemism for deportation? – of the Strojans to Postojna, with the promise of a new house in three weeks. The situation calmed down. “We have nothing against them. We just think they should be found somewhere else to live”², declared the mayor of Ambrus to a reporter from the *International Herald Tribune*, while the Education Minister commented, “I think the standard of living is far better in Postojna”, evidently not understanding what it might mean to live in a house for 60 years and then be forcibly removed from it. But when the human rights ombudsman Matjaž Hanžek observed that the members of the government didn’t even realise they were using discriminatory language, the prime minister Janez Janša accused him of denigrating Slovenia³.

The Strojans never got their new house. On Christmas Day 2006, grandmother Elka, the oldest member of the family, left Postojna in secret with some of the children and tried to return home. As soon as the people of Ambrus got wind of this, they gathered once more, and the government had the brilliant idea of sending in bulldozers to demolish various buildings that the Strojans had built illegally on their land. At this point the Slovenian president Janez Drnovšek got involved. Known for opposing the policies of the prime minister, Drnovšek tried to help grandma Elka, provoking a furore among the townspeople,

who stopped him in the street to tell him to go back to where he had come from.

The months following the “Ambrus incident” saw an increase in episodes of racism, directed especially at the Tzigane community. The xenophobic right increased its power in the 2004 elections. But the most disturbing part of the whole episode was the fact that the aggressive language used by the people of Ambrus, together with the “discriminatory speech” described by Hanžek was – as Blaž Lukan observed – legitimized by the political élite, who took it on and thus normalized it.

It is this very language that the *Slovene National Theatre*⁴ invites us to think about: its harshness, but above all its ambiguities; its open, aggressive racism, with the spectre that conjures up, but above all its latent racism, anaesthetized by political euphemisms. *Slovene National Theatre* (Slovensko narodno gledališče or *SNG*) is a theatrical piece that works on two levels. On the stage there are four actors standing in a row side by side. Wearing headphones, they mechanically repeat what they hear: the declarations made by the mayor of Ambrus, the president Janez Drnovšek and other political figures; the shouts of the crowd and the utterances of others involved in the incident - the members of the Strojan family, police officers, journalists. Fragments of the media storm that blew up around the episode are repeated in the neutral, detached style of the actors of *SNG*. At the back of the stage are five giant plasma screens playing videos in which, against a background of five places that symbolism the ostracism of the Tzigane gypsies, Janez Janša (the artist behind the show, not the prime minister) obsessively repeats the mantra “Tziganes... Tziganes... Tziganes”⁵.

The radical nature of Janez Janša’s approach makes the performance interesting for a number of reasons. In the first place the original event is not represented, as you would expect with a piece of theatre, or reconstructed, as you would expect with a re-enactment. The only thing about the Ambrus episode that is presented, with total fidelity⁶, is the linguistic aspect, as it was conveyed in the media. But the form that this “re-invoicement” takes, with the actors mechanically repeating what they hear in their headphones, strips the original media documentation of any vestige of drama. Or rather, it strips the word of the rhetoric and anaesthetizing slant of the media, and offers it to the spectator bare, without inflection, and as a result, laden with a different kind of drama. At the same time, by detaching these utterances from the media and lending them the immediacy of a live experience, having them spoken by people right there in front of us, Janez Janša brings these words out of oblivion and consigns them to memory. As Blaž Lukan writes: “Much more important is the fact that Janša with this reconstruction and transcription of the documentary material brought back to life a fact, which our political (and media) reality already left behind and forgot about. Trying to keep the memory of the Ambrus case alive and protecting it from the (partly dictated and partly spontaneous) amnesia of

political and media reality, is the essential quality of this piece.”⁷

Secondly, on a more formal level, we have the acute contrast between a highly ‘mediatized’ version of reality – represented on stage by the videos and headphones – and the evocation of a theatrical topos – the historic tradition of the chorus commenting on and accompanying the action. In actual fact, Janša’s chorus does not comment on the action, but is the repository that contains it: it places the audience before the bare facts, and instead of imposing a particular vision, elicits the audience to form their own point of view and value judgement.

In other words *SNG* works with the ambiguous relationship between media and reality in a highly mediatized society. Quoting Philip Auslander, Tomaž Toporišič writes: “whereas mediatized performance derives its authority from its reference to the live or the real, the live now derives its authority from its reference to the mediatized, which derives its authority from its reference to the live, etc.”⁸

These dynamics emerge to the letter in *SNG*. Its point of departure is a traumatic event which reveals the tensions in an apparently peaceful, calm society: an event that is metabolized, digested and expelled without a solution ever being reached, precisely thanks to its ample media presence, leaving evident traces in the language of that society. The media, the principal force behind the episode’s fall into oblivion, is also the main repository of its history, and by recovering the media flow and stripping it of its transitory character, Janša succeeds in rediscovering and restoring the original events, in their full impact.

Domenico Quaranta

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Translated from Italian by Anna Carruthers

¹ Nicholas Wood, “Hounding of Gypsies Contradicts Slovenia’s Image”, in *The New York Times*, November 13, 2006. Available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/13/world/europe/13slovenia.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

² Nicholas Wood, “Roma family’s forced move raises rights issue in Slovenia”, in *International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 2006. Available online at <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/11/07/news/gypsy.php?page=1>

³ Nicholas Wood, “Hounding of Gypsies Contradicts Slovenia’s Image”, quoted.

⁴ *Slovene National Theatre* is the name of Slovenia’s most prestigious theatre company, but as we will see in this paragraph, the use of the name here is linked to the desire to highlight how the “Ambrus case” brings forth some of the salient characteristics of modern-day Slovenia.

⁵ The five places are: the Holocaust Monument in Berlin, Mount Triglav, the Jože Pučnik airport in Ljubljana, a university library and a Catholic church.

⁶ As the introduction to *SNG* explains: “All characters are real people with the same names and titles or functions and all have actually said what is written here. No words have been added, appropriated or changed. The text has not been (grammatically) proofread...”

⁷ Blaž Lukan, “Janša in Ambrus”, originally published as “Janša v Ambrusu”, in *Delo*, 2 November 2007.

⁸ Tomaž Toporišič, “The Political at the Intersection of the Live and the Mediatized”, in *Maska*, vol. XXIII, no. 113–114, Spring 2008, pp. 51 – 55.