

# The remembered future: Macedonian pop icon Toše Proeski and musical life after death

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## Abstract

*When an iconic pop star dies, agency regarding that artist's persona and work is distributed in ways that transform the artist's significance and reveal much about the societies in which the artist participated. This article examines Macedonian pop singer Toše Proeski, an iconic star celebrated throughout former Yugoslavia who died in 2007 at age 26. For Macedonians and people throughout former Yugoslavia, Toše represented ideals of a moral alternative to corruption and violence, and of international recognition of Macedonia that could engender economic and political stability. The article argues that, after the death of Toše, such ideals that are distant from reality are displaced to a 'remembered future', a future that would have occurred had he lived. The agency of the living transforms a dead artist into a nostalgic bridge to a remembered future, producing a cathartic, if temporary, satisfaction of longings for unattainable ideals.*

## Introduction

Death transforms. The death of a popular musician, beyond transforming a living body into a dead one, can initiate processes of cultural production, shifts in musical meaning, changes in a musician's fame and fan base, developments of new cultural resources, and new configurations of agency with regard to the musician's work. Death also reveals. In the case of a popular musician, the ways that the living mourn and remember the life of the deceased (and interact with the dead body) can reveal and clarify cosmologies, identities, desires, political ideologies, economic processes, and even secrets that had been guarded closely by the musician in life. Scholars have taken a variety of approaches in the growing literature on the death of popular musicians. Building on broader literature on mortality and culture (e.g. Bauman 1992) and writings on the popularity of dead stars by music critics (e.g. Marcus 1991), scholars have devoted large-scale studies to the posthumous fame of stars such as Elvis and Selena (Rodman 1996; Doss 1999; Paredez 2009), situated dead pop stars in the context of larger discourses about death in popular music (Partridge 2015) and produced collections on

the myriad ways dead pop stars remain present after their biological bodies cease to live (Jones and Jensen 2005; Strong and Lebrun 2015). Some have also convincingly argued that recordings play a role in the dead continuing to perform social functions after life (Sterne 2003, p. 12) and that audio and visual recordings make possible complex rearticulations and interactions involving the images, voices and performances of deceased musicians (Stanyek and Piekut 2010).

In this article I focus on particular aspects of the social afterlife of dead pop artists related to the agency deployed around and with them, namely the broader social resources and structures that the death of a pop artist can engender, shift and illuminate. As a case study I examine the transformations and revelations of the death of the Macedonian popular singer Todor 'Toše' Proeski (1981–2007), an artist who, by the time of his death in a car accident at age 26, was considered a pop icon both nationally in Macedonia (which is now called North Macedonia after the country changed its name in 2019) and throughout former Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup> Toše rose to prominence in Macedonia as a teenage pop solo artist in the late 1990s and began to enjoy fame across former Yugoslavia when he began to release recordings in Serbian and conduct promotional tours around the region in 2002. His icon status spread across age and other demographics through recording and performing arrangements of traditional songs alongside his pop repertoire. Admired for his well-known commitment to humanitarian causes, he was also known as a devout Orthodox Christian and for his public image as a pure, clean-cut celebrity who was neither a playboy nor tainted by involvement in corrupt business practices or political dealings. During his life he was referred to as the 'Balkan Elvis' (Burbank 2007) and was widely revered for his charisma and his vocal abilities across pop music, traditional music and operatic styles.

I approach Toše and his music during and after his biological life as a constituent part of the broader socio-political experience in 21st-century Macedonia (North Macedonia after 2019), and in former Yugoslavia more broadly. By teasing out the political and social particularities of the worlds in which Toše and his music lived (and still live), I argue that the death of an iconic pop star – especially when the star dies young – can mobilise what I call the remembered future, often experienced in notions of 'what might have been'. The remembered future is a temporal space that becomes salient when individuals or groups look to the past and recall yet-unrealised circumstances that, at the time, seemed possible or even probable, but are no longer likely to occur. I draw on early literature from the anthropology of consumption to suggest that this often nostalgic 'future of the past' temporal space is one location (among others) where meanings and ideals associated with Toše and his music have existed since his death, relocated there as a strategy by which Macedonians and others in former Yugoslavia have dealt with discrepancies between the real and the ideal (McCracken 1988). When an iconic pop star dies young, the possibilities for how an artist – and, more importantly, what an artist signifies – can exist in the remembered future can be particularly powerful, in part because the artist is always (and only) remembered as young,<sup>2</sup> and in part because it

<sup>1</sup> I refer to the country as Macedonia when discussing events before its name was changed from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia in February 2019, and as North Macedonia when discussing events and perspectives since then.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, music icons who live long lives leave a plethora of material behind, and their posthumous mediation is selective, often celebrating them in idealised forms of youth (Bennett 2015).

is feasible to imagine many un-lived years of life and meaningful musical productivity. Death also always brings about a transformation of how agency around a pop artist is distributed (Enfield and Kockelman 2017), the key shift being the absence of the artist's embodied personal agency after death. After an artist's death, social actors can appropriate the artist's persona and body of work towards various ends, all of which contribute to what an artist and his or her work can signify about a remembered future.<sup>3</sup>

Toše's relevance to the remembered future and the redistribution of agency concerning him after his death are crucially interrelated with two issues: in Macedonia, the country's struggle for international recognition as a distinct nation-state under its constitutional name; and across former Yugoslavia, ongoing political corruption, widespread economic struggle, and ethnic tension and violence. In the course of the article, I show that, while Toše's death transformed his significance in Macedonia and former Yugoslavia, it also revealed much about the desires, longings, pain and loss of the living who remained after his passing. These revelations relate to Toše, and they extend beyond him and his music. He, the dead pop icon, serves as a vehicle not only for the expression of desire, longing, grief, pain and loss, but also for their cathartic, though partial, resolutions.

### **Macedonian nation building and the uncontested national symbol**

North Macedonia is a small country of 2 million located in southeast Europe. It became a nation-state as the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 when it declared its independence and, unlike other successor states, peacefully separated from the dissolving Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The majority (about 64%) of its population comprises ethnic Macedonians. The remaining population consists of ethnic Albanians (25%), Turks (4%), Roma (3%), Serbs (2%) and other groups, which include Vlachs and Bosnians (2%).<sup>4</sup> The existence of a distinct Macedonian language, ethnicity and nation has been the subject of much political debate since the 19th century.<sup>5</sup> Macedonia first received international recognition as a republic in the Democratic Federation of Yugoslavia in 1944. Under the SFRY (1945–1991), a Macedonian ethno-national identity was fostered that was based on histories, symbols, religion, language and folk traditions (including musical ones) associated with a Slavic-speaking Macedonian people. Orthodox Christianity is the predominant religion of ethnic Macedonians, and during this period the modern Macedonian Orthodox Church formed as distinct from the Serbian Orthodox Church (Risteski 2009). Throughout this period, Greece and Bulgaria both denied the existence of a distinct Macedonian ethnicity and language, maintaining that both were artificial creations, derivative of the Bulgarian ethnicity and language. In addition, many historical figures and symbols associated with Macedonian

<sup>3</sup> Toše's death and the public's responses to it are not necessarily atypical; many pop singers who died young have been heroised. Lada Stevanović (2013) groups Toše with Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain and Michael Jackson as she uses examples from responses to Toše's death to examine the general phenomenon of the immortalising mythologies (such as the '27 Club') that often follow the deaths of artists who die young, 'before their time'.

<sup>4</sup> Population figures according to the 2002 census (Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia 2005).

<sup>5</sup> A more complete history of ethnic Macedonians and the current geographic area of North Macedonia can be found in several sources (e.g. Friedman 1975, 2000; Danforth 1995; Poulton 1995; Roudometof 2002; Brown 2003; Rossos 2008).



Figure 1. Macedonia's national flag (1991–1995) featuring the Vergina sun.

national identity were and are also claimed as national by either Greece or Bulgaria. These include Alexander the Great, Philip II of Macedon (father of Alexander) and related symbols such as the Vergina sun, associated with Alexander and also claimed by Greece as the Vergina star (see Figure 1). Other contested figures include Goce Delčev (1872–1903) and other heroes of the 1903 Ilinden Uprising, a significant event in Macedonian national history that occurred in the town of Kruševo, the hometown of Toše Proeski.

Since the Macedonian nation-state declared independence in 1991, one of its principal challenges has been the ongoing contestation of its name and other national symbols by Greece, whose northernmost province, also called Macedonia, includes Slavic-speaking inhabitants that identify as ethnic Macedonians. Initially fearing Macedonian land claims on its northern province, Greece in the 1990s placed a number of barriers to the establishment of Macedonia as a legitimate nation-state, including a trade embargo and a refusal to admit Macedonia to the UN or any other international body under its then-constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia. The 1995 Interim Accord between the two nations ended the embargo and required that Macedonia use the placeholder designator 'the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' (FYROM) in international forums. It also required the removal of the Vergina sun symbol from the Macedonian national flag and the elimination from the Macedonian constitution of any hints at land claims to Greece's northern province. Greek contestation of the Macedonian name presented barriers to EU and NATO membership processes, and continued until 2018, when Greek and Macedonian governments agreed to an official change of Macedonia's name to the Republic of North Macedonia, solidified by changes to the Macedonian constitution in February 2019.

As an ethnographer conducting research in Macedonia periodically since 2011, I have witnessed various responses to the contestation of Macedonian ethno-national symbols. For example, one of the central initiatives of the right-leaning VMRO-DPMNE<sup>6</sup> government (in power 2006–2016) was 'Skopje 2014', a project

<sup>6</sup> *Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija–Demokratska partija za nacionalno edinstvo* or Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for National Unity.



Figure 2. A statue of Toše Proeski on the Bridge of the Arts, Skopje, North Macedonia. Photo by the author.

involving the complete reconfiguration of the central public space of the capital city Skopje. As a result of this project, Skopje's square and city centre now feature dozens of statues of Macedonian historical heroes, many of whose Macedonian identity is contested by neighbouring states. The centrepiece of the project is a fountain featuring an enormous statue of Alexander the Great on his horse, which is notably larger and taller than a similar statue in Thessaloniki, the capital of the Greek province of Macedonia (Graan 2013; Mattioli 2014; Wilson 2019). Aside from the adamant reassertion of cultural ownership of such symbols evident in the Skopje 2014 project, VMRO-DPMNE also supported a fantastical reframing of ethnocentric Macedonian identity as pre-Slavic and thus more directly connected to Alexander the Great and Philip II (Neofotistos 2011; Wilson 2015, pp. 36–7). I also witnessed how an environment of continual external contestation of cultural uniqueness and legitimacy can also stimulate the development of new symbols whose ownership cannot be contested. During his life, Toše Proeski was ideally situated as such a symbol, and he embraced his position as a national signifier of Macedonia. Indeed, the 'Bridge of the Arts' over the Vardar River in Skopje's city centre, completed in 2014 as part of the Skopje 2014 project, features a statue of Toše Proeski among other statues of historical figures in the arts (Figure 2). His signification of Macedonia was not unambiguously ethnocentric, however, as it was well known that he was an ethnic Vlah, the dynamics of which I discuss below.

New, uncontested national symbols become new cultural resources for the assertion of identity, even as they participate in nationalist processes of shaping myths to serve narratives of a nation's future destiny (cf. Smith 1988, pp. 207–8).

In the relative absence of Macedonian national heroes unclaimed by other nations, Toše Proeski, during his life, began to embody the hopes of Macedonians that they could have such a hero, known as a Macedonian on the international stage. After his death, these hopes were transformed as Toše seemed to quickly become part of the past, available to be reinterpreted, repositioned and mythologised as a celebrated hero. His life and work have thus continued to serve Macedonian nation building and other ideological aims and processes. Before I more clearly frame how these processes shifted after his death, I first examine how Toše and other music industry actors, alongside increasingly positive public reception of him and his work, developed Toše's persona and music during his life.

### **The contradictory path to becoming a national symbol**

Toše's biography and music shed light on how he became a national symbol in Macedonia and widely celebrated throughout Yugoslavia, as well as on the ways he continues to serve as a bridge to ideals that have been relocated to the remembered future. He grew up in Kruševo, a small town of around 5,000 inhabitants in a mountainous region of southwest Macedonia. Kruševo's significance as a symbol of an autonomous Macedonian nation is grounded in the 1903 Ilinden Uprising, a small armed revolt against the Ottoman Turks. Although the uprising was short-lived and ultimately failed, it is still celebrated annually on 2 August in Macedonia to celebrate the symbolic birth of the Macedonian nation. Macedonian and Yugoslav elites have consistently drawn on Kruševo's history to commemorate (and construct) the Macedonian national past through building monuments, holding ceremonies and making speeches in Kruševo on 2 August, and endorsing a notion of a long and continuous Macedonian national heritage in the town. By virtue of his birth and upbringing in Kruševo, Toše is directly associated with a locale that holds great significance in the nationalist narrative of a distinct and independent Macedonian nation.

However, Macedonian national narratives regarding Kruševo are anything but straightforward, especially when accounting for shifting conceptions of ethnic and religious identity through the years (see Brown 2003). For example, Kruševo's significant historical and current Vlah population, of which Toše Proeski was a part, is well known throughout Macedonia. Vlachs are a transnational, non-state-forming ethnic minority present throughout southeast Europe, descended from Romanians and speaking Aromanian, a Romance language. The Vlachs have a nomadic history, do not display uniformity in self-identification across the region, and have assimilated to dominant languages and cultural practices variously (Winnifrith 1987; Friedman 2001; Kahl 2002). In North Macedonia today, Vlachs typically identify as Orthodox Christians (like ethnic Macedonians), are native speakers of Macedonian and are largely assimilated into ethnic Macedonian life, even when they continue to speak Aromanian among family. This distances Vlachs from Albanians, Turks and Roma in Macedonia, who are almost always Muslims and for whom Macedonian is not their first language.

Toše's ethnicity as a Vlah is the first of several apparent contradictions for him as an unequivocal symbol of the Macedonian nation. Because of his typical shared cultural practices (including his status as a baptised and devout member of the Macedonian Orthodox Church) and high level of assimilation with ethnic

Macedonians, he is not precluded from participating in the Macedonian ethnicity. He never hid his Vlah ethnicity, although he did not emphasise it, rather positioning himself as Macedonian in a manner consistent with other Vlachs. His collaboration with Esma Redžepova (1943–2016), arguably the world's most well-known Roma singer, is illustrative. Esma, who lived in Macedonia her entire life, is featured in the song 'Magija' (Magic) from Toše's third album, *Ako me pogledneš vo oči* (If you look into my eyes, Award Entertainment 2002), and in its music video. The recording and its music video employ familiar musical and visual tropes of Gypsy orientalism and exoticism to represent Esma as an ethnic 'other', whereas Toše, although representationally located firmly in the normative world of middle/upper-class ethnic Macedonians, is able to traverse the boundary between the real world and the fantasy 'magical' world occupied by Esma (Silverman 2012, pp. 2017–18).

Macedonians are proud to claim Esma as an international star from their country, although she does not represent the nation in the same way that an ethnic Macedonian could or would. While both stars benefitted from the collaboration, part of Toše's benefit comes from being positioned *against* the ethnic other, reaffirming his persona as a typically assimilated Vlah. As such, Toše could be celebrated as a symbol of Macedonia without challenging the ethnocentricity typical of Macedonian musical nationalism (Wilson 2019). Even though he (like Vlachs in general) was in a sense 'adopted' by the dominant population, his official status as a member of an ethnic minority (i.e. *not* an ethnic Macedonian) made him more amenable to other minority groups, since he did not fall neatly into a dichotomous category of a dominant or marginalised group. Also, because Vlachs have not been politicised or constructed in Macedonia as an 'other' as Albanians and Roma have, Toše's technical minority status does not preclude him from being embraced by ethnic Macedonians, and can even enable Macedonians to claim, sometimes disingenuously, that by embracing Toše they demonstrate ethnic tolerance and an absence of prejudice.

My initial encounter with Toše Proeski as a public figure in the Republic of Macedonia was in 2002. I had just moved to Skopje to begin work for a non-profit organisation, and was in a new, unfamiliar environment whose cultural symbols were largely meaningless to me. However, over and over, on billboards, walls and bus stops and in shop windows, I kept seeing advertisements featuring a young man with dark spiked-up hair wearing a fluorescent green sweater and raising one arm over his head. This, I learned, was part of the promotional campaign for *Ako me pogledneš vo oči*, whose massive success confirmed his place as the most prominent celebrity in Macedonia. He had recently departed from the Macedonian management company Avalon Production and signed with Serbian manager Ljiljana Petrović, who remained his manager until his death. Like many music managers, Petrović shied away from the spotlight, but exercised great influence with regard to Toše's career, including his repertoire choices, his persona and image, his financial agreements and his contact with the press and the public. Toše promoted *Ako me pogledneš vo oči* throughout Macedonia, and its Serbian language version *Ako me pogledaš u oči* in Serbia and Montenegro as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

At age 21, Toše was already a star, having first emerged into the public eye after winning the 1996 Melfest singing competition in the regional town Prilep at age 15. His first two albums, *Nekade vo nokta* (Somewhere in the night, Avalon Production 1999) and *Sinot Božji* (The Son of God, Avalon Production 2000), each had several number one hits in Macedonia, and both received Album of the Year and Best Male Vocalist at the *Zlatna bubamara na popularnost* (Golden ladybug of popularity)

awards.<sup>7</sup> After Serbian production house BK Sound purchased the rights to distribute *Sinot Božji* throughout former Yugoslavia, he received an *Oskar popularnosti* (Oscar of popularity) in Belgrade, a prestigious award selected by public vote. Building on his quickly rising popularity in former Yugoslavia, Toše then signed with Petrović and recorded and released *Ako me pogledneš vo oči*.

The album won *Zlatna bubamara* awards for album of the year, best male vocalist and song of the year, and all five singles released reached number one on the Macedonian charts. Similar to his first two albums, the music on the album consisted of mostly standard pop fare, including love ballads and energetic songs with electronic dance beats that contributed to his image as a teenage heartthrob. However, Toše's renown in Macedonia had already moved far beyond young female fans. During the period of the album's release and promotion in 2002 and 2003, I was repeatedly reminded by my male Macedonian colleagues and friends in their twenties that even though they did not care for Toše's music, that they liked him, that he was respected throughout the country, and that he was an important figure for Macedonia. Individuals who would not typically prefer music like Toše's would often point out that he was a skilled vocalist, that he was a trained opera singer (having studied briefly in New York in 2003 with William Riley, former teacher of Luciano Pavarotti), that he was known for giving humanitarian concerts, and that he was named a UNICEF regional goodwill ambassador in 2003. Through his and Petrović's strategic musical and business decisions, Toše began winning over the affections and respect of Macedonians beyond his original demographic of fans. As he began receiving attention as a Macedonian singer in former Yugoslavia (and, to a lesser extent, in Bulgaria), he began to embody, for Macedonians, the kind of indisputable symbol of national identity that could help bring Macedonia international recognition as a legitimate nation-state with its own indisputable name and cultural symbols.

After *Ako me pogledneš vo oči* was released, the public began to learn more details about its production process and the various social actors involved. The album was produced and recorded in Athens, with most of the songs written and produced by Greek songwriter Phoebus and producer/arranger Manolis Vlachos, with lyrics by Serbian lyricist Marina Tucaković. In fact, several of the songs had been previously composed by Phoebus and Vlachos, originally released by Greek pop singers with Greek lyrics and musical arrangements nearly identical to those used by Toše. In another apparent contradiction, Macedonians did not take issue with Toše's collaboration with the team in Greece, even though everyday discourse was rife with anger and displeasure at Greek policy blocking Macedonian recognition under its constitutional name that, in turn, was ostensibly preventing its accession to NATO and the EU and enjoyment of associated economic benefits and political stability. As in the instance of Toše's Vlah ethnicity, Macedonians tended to ignore what would seem to be contradictions inherent in the Greek collaboration, such as the flow of capital to Greek producers or the idea that Toše could be singing adapted and translated versions of Greek pop songs. With an end-justifies-the-means perspective, rhetoric among Macedonians focused on the mass popularity of the album in Macedonia and Serbia (certainly, in their view, more popular than the

<sup>7</sup> The *Zlatna bubamara* awards are sponsored by Radio Bubamara and are decided based on popularity and sales of a song rather than votes by an academy.

songs had been in Greece), and suggested the Greek collaborators were incidental to the production of Toše as an embodiment of Macedonian excellence that would be recognised on increasingly large international stages.

Both building on and confirming his widespread success in Macedonia and in the region, Toše was chosen to represent Macedonia in the Eurovision Song Contest in 2004, receiving the blessing of the Archbishop of the Macedonian Orthodox church on his departure for the contest. Upon his return, he performed in Skopje's City Stadium for an audience of 20,000 people, his largest in Macedonia to that time. A review of that concert by an American journalist living in Macedonia sums up Toše's pervasive appeal in Macedonia:

[Toše] represents one of the rare unqualified successes in Macedonia's fairly inauspicious modern history. For a small and landlocked country much maligned by its neighbours and accused of having no real identity, Toše's success as a *Macedonian* singer – and especially as one who has remained in the country, despite offers from abroad, is something that Macedonians can take pride in. (Deliso 2004, emphasis in original)

Over the next few years, Toše (and Petrović) continued to build his international reputation. In 2006 he landed a worldwide distribution deal as he honed his ability to sing in English. Macedonians I talked to during that time period would swell with pride as they described Toše's international accomplishments. They seemed to hope that a Macedonian with such talent and charm could slowly garner the attention of the world and at last validate their nation's existence. The same year, in anticipation of a pivot towards a wider international market with English-language material, Toše turned his attention to Macedonia and recorded *Božilak* (Rainbow, Award Entertainment 2006). It was an album of music from the Macedonian folk repertoire arranged for Toše and the Macedonian Philharmonic accompanied by folk instruments such as the *kaval* (end-blown flute), *gajda* (bagpipe), *zurla* (wooden double-reed aerophone) and *tapan* (double-headed drum).

Because of his well-established pop brand and massive popularity, Toše had little chance of being viewed as shifting his career focus to folk music. Rather, *Božilak* solidified him as a distinctly Macedonian artist across the country and former Yugoslavia by associating him with a repertoire firmly established as evoking a Macedonian past.<sup>8</sup> Macedonian consumers young and old eagerly devoured beloved songs such as 'Jovano, Jovanke' (Jovana, Jovanka) along with songs previously little known outside of folk music circles, such as 'Majka na Marika dumaše' ('Marika's Mother said'). 'Majka na Marika dumaše' became Macedonia's number one ringtone at the time, was added to the standard repertoire of folk ensembles throughout Macedonia, and has, since Toše's recording, frequently appeared on folk compilations recorded by other artists. The broad success of this album confirmed Toše's and the public's embrace of him as a symbol of Macedonia's cultural past and present. With the planned expansion of the scope of his career internationally, Macedonians had great hope for a future where he would bring recognition to their economically and politically struggling nation.

<sup>8</sup> Since the SFRY era, Macedonians have long been considered throughout the region (at least stereotypically) to be especially musical, and Macedonian folk music is widely revered (cf. Stojkova Serafimovska 2020, pp. 143–6). Macedonians generally embrace this stereotype.

The music of *Božilak* resonated with public discontent with Macedonia's prevalent and long-lasting economic and political challenges. It includes many folk songs with lyrics and musical sensibilities that evoke sadness, providing a cathartic collective sorrow of sorts reminiscent of Durkheim's 'collective effervescence', especially as it relates to rites of mourning (Durkheim 1995 [1912]). Exemplifying this collective sorrow on the album is the song 'Zajdi, zajdi jasno sonce' (Set, set bright sun), a folk-style song composed in the 1950s by prominent SFRY-era Macedonian folk musician Aleksandar Sarievski (1922–2002). Because of its renown as a Macedonian folk-style song, the mournful collectivity facilitated by the song is, among other things, a means of ethno-national identification.<sup>9</sup> Here are the song's full lyrics, and translation:

*Zajdi, zajdi, jasno sonce,  
Zajdi, pomrači se,  
I ti, jasna le mesečino,  
Zajdi, udavi se.*

*Crnej goro, crnej sestro,  
Dvajca da crneeme,  
Ti za tvoite lisja, le goro,  
Jas za moj'ta mladost.*

*Tvoite lisja, goro sestro,  
Pak ke ti se vratat.  
Moj'ta mladost, goro le sestro,  
Nema da se vrati.*

Set, Set, bright sun,  
Set, and make yourself dark.  
And you, O bright moon,  
Set, drown yourself.

Grieve forest, grieve sister,  
Let us grieve together.  
You for your leaves, O forest,  
I for my youth.

Your leaves, forest sister,  
Will return to you.  
My youth, O forest sister,  
Will never return to me.

In his biography of Sarievski, Macedonian ethnomusicologist Kiril Todevski specifies 'Zajdi, zajdi' as Sarievski's most well-known song, and also provides an interpretation of meaning embodied in song: 'If you want to more closely understand a nation – listen to its song . . . song is the truest transcriber and interpreter of the social and historical hardship in the story of the Macedonian' (Todevski 2002, quoted in L. 2009). This privileging of Macedonian song as a symbol of Macedonia's struggle (past and present) is indicative of the power of this and other songs associated with the Macedonian nation to facilitate a shared catharsis of sorrow. It also marks Toše

<sup>9</sup> Bulgarians have also claimed the song as their own (N.A. 2007).

Proeski's interpretation of 'Zajdi, zajdi' (arranged by classical composer Soni Petrovski) as even more poignant. Toše abandons his pop vocal techniques in exchange for a traditional Macedonian singing style filled with ornamentation and grandiose melisma, and sings the sorrowful lyrics of 'Zajdi, zajdi', telling 'the story of the Macedonian' through its song. His delicate and virtuosic ornamentation, a slow rubato evolving to a 7/8 meter, the presence of the improvising *zurla* and *tapan* and the well-known melody constitute a few of the indices of a kind of 'folk' national Macedonian-ness in this otherwise highly arranged orchestral version.<sup>10</sup>

Toše's performance of 'Zajdi, zajdi' is considered by many Macedonians to be the new definitive version of the song in Macedonia (although folklorists I have spoken to disagree). Toše tells the sun to set in Macedonia's song, yet himself represents the dawning of a new era in which the symbolically loaded (and contested) Macedonian sun as a national symbol is recognised and respected on the world stage. Toše's performance of the song operates in some ways like a mnemonic sonic palimpsest (Atanasovski 2015), accumulating and producing memories as new meanings and significations are inscribed and re-inscribed on it. When it was released, Toše's listeners could associate its meaning with multiple temporal moments. They could associate his performance with other versions of the song from previous eras of their life, connect it to national identity following the associations established by Yugoslav-era socialist ideologies about folk music, and perhaps use it as bridge to a glorious future where Toše's masterful performance transforms the hope of international recognition of a distinctive Macedonian nation from an imagined ideal into a reality.

Toše released one last album before his death, in Macedonia as *Igri bez granici* (Games without borders, Award Entertainment 2007), and in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Slovenia as *Igra bez granica* (City Records 2007), with all Serbo-Croatian texts. The team behind the recordings on the album included Bosnian arranger Nikša Bratoš, Croatian songwriter-producers Miro Buljan and Miroslav Rus, Croatian lyricist Antonija Šola, Macedonian lyricist Vesna Malinova and Serbian songwriter Zoran Leković. Many of the tracks were initially conceived in Serbo-Croatian, and then translated into Macedonian for the Macedonian-language release. While the album was a return to Toše's mainstream pop production sound, the title track opens with timbres strongly indexing southeast European traditional music, including a strummed *tambura* (long-necked lute) and a sound similar to a clarinet playing in a style reminiscent of *čalgija* and other Turkish and Romani styles long common in Macedonia and constructed as a national sound (Seeman 2012). An electric guitar enters to supplant the lead clarinet sound, and the poetic opening lines of the first verse speak of a longing 'to wake up in a world of love, without old debts or the ghosts that stalk me' (*da možam bar da se razbudam/vo svet na ljuboota bez stari dolgovi/i tie seništa/vo čekor što me demneat*). Although the song is seemingly about a lover, or lost love, the double meanings of both *igri* (games or dances) and *bez granici* (endless or without borders) open up connotations beyond those of a romantic partnership. In the chorus, Toše sings:

*A mojov život, igri bez granici  
umorna prikazna skinati stranici  
prazni neispišani.*

<sup>10</sup> 'Zajdi, zajdi' is typically rubato throughout, and the 7/8 meter in this version is a departure from typical performance of the song.

*A mojov život e večno paĝanje  
se da se sobere, poraz ke ostane  
naviki stari vo mene.*

This life of mine, games without borders,  
a tired story, torn pages,  
empty, unwritten.  
This life of mine is an eternal falling (failing),  
even to gather everything together, defeat will remain,  
old habits in me.

The song could be expressing a struggle not only with the frustration of being stuck in destructive personal habits, but also with the sense of being stuck as an individual dealing with the societal consequences of the Yugoslav wars and the incessant corruption that has plagued economic conditions for many in southeast Europe. The games played by the powerful have no limits and no borders, and Toše shares in the despair and frustrations experienced across former Yugoslavia. The poetic interplay between the self and the collective, the hopelessness about moving on from past sins, external and internal, and the sense that life is perpetually characterised by dreams unrealised, are all embodied in Toše as a symbol of hope for the future who resonates with the struggles of the present.

Toše's powerful significance as a Macedonian national symbol and as an icon across former Yugoslavia during his life took shape through his association with Kruševo as a birthplace of the Macedonian nation, through his devout Orthodox Christian faith, through his celebration of Macedonian folk music, through his body of work underscoring his humanitarian and clean-cut image, and through his posture towards an international market. The future that he pointed to, then, was one where Macedonia was widely recognised and praised, and where former Yugoslavia was known not for its violence and ethnic division, but for its humanity and its generous morality.

## Nostalgia and the remembered future

Toše's death, and the concomitant death of the potential futures his life had made possible, have mobilised various forms of nostalgia, a cultural practice whose forms, meanings and effects are always shifting and contingent (Stewart 1988). 'Eastern Europe' is often represented as a particularly significant site of nostalgic practice, at least in part because former imperial powers tend to construct 'Eastern Europe' as nostalgic in order to cast it as a subordinated 'other', stuck in the past (Boyer 2010). Perhaps as a result of this tendency to over-represent this region as nostalgic, much has been written about how nostalgia in postsocialist contexts often reframes the socialist and presocialist past to cope with the present (i.e. Todorova and Gille 2010).

'Yugonostalgia' is a term that emerged in the early 2000s in former Yugoslav republics and their diasporas, applied colloquially and in scholarship to nostalgia for Yugoslavia. Scholars have focused on a number of aspects of Yugonostalgia: capitalist consumerism of Yugonostalgic goods and services as a means for coming to terms with the Yugoslav past (Volčič 2007; Luthar and Pušnik 2010); Yugonostalgia as a critique of nationalism (Bošković 2013); nostalgias for the fantasies of the Yugoslav state and for SFRY Prime Minister and President Josip Broz

Tito (Lindstrom 2005; Velikonja 2008); and debates of Yugonostalgia's emancipatory and reconciliatory potentialities as a politics of the future (Velikonja 2011; Petrović 2013; Maksimović 2017; Petrov 2018). Ethnomusicologist Ana Hofman argues that much of the discourse on Yugonostalgia is produced under a burden to view the 'nationalistic' and the 'pro-Yugoslav' as 'two sides of the same coin' (Hofman 2015, p. 146), suggesting that studies oriented around music, especially ones that look beyond Yugonostalgia, can offer understandings that complicate this dichotomy between the political and the nostalgic, as well as similar dichotomies that set up oppositions such as commercial/engaged and escapist/emancipatory (Hofman 2015, p. 145). Nostalgia for Toše, and his relationship to the remembered future, are examples of complications of this kind of dichotomous thinking.

Toše's music, which includes recordings in Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovenian and Aromanian, on the surface seems to be a classic example of Yugonostalgia, as his popularity during his life seemed to be due in part to how he embodied the Yugoslav popular slogan 'brotherhood and unity', an encapsulation of the inter-ethnic policy by which SFRY held its population together.<sup>11</sup> While he was a decidedly Macedonian national symbol, he fluidly crossed post-Yugoslav national borders and connected with diverse audiences through language and musicality, producing, alongside his humanitarian efforts and clean-cut image, a vision of the unrealised dream of what Yugoslavia could have been. Yet because his career began after the breakup of Yugoslavia and much of his music was new and produced in contemporary styles, his recordings and performances did not necessarily directly evoke a nostalgic Yugoslav past.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Toše's persona seemed to represent a morality in public life that was distant from, and a vision for a future that was an alternative to, the violence and corruption that had characterised politics across former Yugoslav republics since the early 1990s. In addition to the fact that he was the first truly pan-Yugoslav star to emerge after Yugoslavia had broken up, Toše's fame arose soon after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in Belgrade (in 2000) and the death of Croatian president Franjo Tuđman (in 1999), during a brief period of optimism and harmonious relations among former Yugoslav republics. After Toše's death, this hopeful vision of him as both a Macedonian national hero and a guide showing the way to a new morality proved to be salient enough that it was transformed from a hopeful vision into a longing for a remembered future.

This longing for 'what might have been', had Toše lived beyond age 26, is not exactly Yugonostalgia, nor necessarily postsocialist, but rather is a yearning for a future that once seemed possible but is now lost. I turn here to Grant McCracken's early work in the anthropology of consumption, where he discusses the concept of 'displaced meaning' as a strategy by which groups (and individuals) deal with discrepancies between the ideal and the real through transporting cultural ideals to another location in time or space (McCracken 1988, p. 104). As a community recognises that reality (e.g. Macedonian national identity is contested, immorality and corruption continue to be pervasive) is impervious to such ideals (e.g. an enduring and

<sup>11</sup> Toše also was also known to sing in standard Croatian when performing in Croatia, in Serbian when performing in Serbia, in Bosnian when performing in Bosnia, and so on.

<sup>12</sup> Because his music fit neatly into neither nationalistic nor Yugonostalgic categories, it was available to be embraced broadly across former Yugoslavia (cf. Baker 2006). It could be argued, perhaps, that during his life he embodied a remembered future of Yugoslavia.

unique Macedonian national identity exists, it is possible to have a society devoid of violence and corruption), it often transports those ideals to a past 'golden age' (e.g. the empire of Alexander the Great or the time of SFRY). Meaning can also be displaced to a glorious future, a safe and versatile temporal space that is 'in some respects, more accommodating than the past as a refuge for displaced meaning [...], more unconstrained by historical record or demonstrable fact' (McCracken 1988, p. 107).

I suggest that meaning can be displaced to a glorious *remembered* future as well; this future is even less constrained by historical record or demonstrable fact, because it is one that is no longer possible and exists only as a memory of hoped-for conditions. McCracken argues that consumer goods can evoke, represent and form a bridge to displaced meaning, and that people can connect to their ideals, preserved in a distant though accessible temporal zone, through desiring and consuming those goods. Central to his formulation of displaced meaning is that the object of desire (the good) must remain *unattained* in order for the bridge from the real to the ideal to operate through the good. Once the good is attained, and the ideal is not realised, the bridge needs to find another vehicle in the form of a different unattained good (McCracken 1988, pp. 109–15).

Popular music today, then, is well situated to form such bridges to the ideal, since music's commodified status as something that can be 'owned' or 'attained' (Taylor 2007) has been shifting significantly since before Toše's death in 2007. Today, the act of listening to music on a streaming platform or watching a video on YouTube is not associated with the owning of a good, although it does create value as 'meaningful action' (Taylor 2017, p. 191). In the meaningful act of listening to music online, then, the 'good' is not attained and the bridge to displaced meaning remains intact as a valuable mechanism for individuals and communities to deal with the chasm between the ideal and the real. Similarly unconstrained by historical record or demonstrable fact as an imagined glorious future, the remembered future is a temporal space where meaning can be displaced safely, as is it a future whose only certainty is that it will never be realised. A dead, young pop icon like Toše Proeski provides numerous bridges from the realities of Macedonian and post-Yugoslav life to the various and dynamic displaced meanings of the ideal, meanings that are often located now, after his death, in the remembered future.<sup>13</sup>

### **This is not the end: cosmologies of death, agency and the remembered future**

Two months after the release of *Igri bez granici* (2007), Toše died in a car accident while travelling between concerts in Croatia in the early hours of the morning. The car he was riding in was struck by a semi-truck, and the other passengers, manager Ljiljana Petrović and the driver, both survived. The hopes of Macedonians for Toše to bring international recognition to Macedonia, and of people across former Yugoslavia for him to stimulate, or at least continue to embody, new paradigms of human morality, died along with his body. In place of those hopes, his death made possible the remembered future as a temporal space to which his persona

<sup>13</sup> Harriet Murav (2010) deals with a similar concept in post-Soviet Russia, but she does not theorise the temporal space of the remembered future.

and body of work could now serve as bridges. The certainty of the remembered (but now impossible) future can never be refuted, because it will remain an unrealised future for Toše and thus can be confirmed as once inevitable. His death transforms the remembered future from a 'what might have been' to a 'what *would* have been', a most accommodating temporal location for the displacement of ideals distant from the realities of life.

Displacing meaningful ideals to a remembered future is just one element of the redistribution of agency that occurs at the death of a pop star, when an artist's persona and recorded musical performances become available for new interpretations and uses, all of which serve to reveal any number of processes, values, desires and ideologies.<sup>14</sup> The absence of the ongoing embodied personal agency of the artist, in the case of Toše Proeski, not only elucidates social, political and economic challenges but also shapes the artist into a new kind of cultural resource for dealing with those challenges. The ways that various state and music industry actors have mourned and commemorated Toše, along with the responses to his death across various demographics of the public, make it possible for his work and persona to form bridges to ideals that have been relocated to the remembered future.

As soon as Toše's death was reported, Skopje's centre was flooded with flowers, candles and photographs, and all national television programming was replaced with non-stop Toše Proeski music videos and tributes.<sup>15</sup> These rituals were familiar to me as, when I had been living in Macedonia three years prior to Toše's death, Boris Trajkovski (1956–2004), the beloved president of the time, died in a plane crash and a similar grieving process ensued. After Toše's death, Macedonians immediately began comparing the two figures, discussing conspiracy theories behind both deaths, and equating the weight of Toše's death with that of Trajkovski's. Toše's persona began to acquire a new dimension of meaning, which now included an element of tragedy and revealed him, like Trajkovski, as a fallen national hero apparently victimised by a fate becoming common those seeking to make Macedonia known.

People in other countries throughout former Yugoslavia mourned Toše's loss in similarly large-scale public displays of grief. Beyond recognising him as a national hero of Macedonia, they mourned his loss as a symbol of a hope for moving beyond the violence and immorality that had plagued the region since the early 1990s. The day after Toše's death, Toronto-based Macedonian journalist Liljana Ristova spoke in an NPR radio interview about Toše as 'part of our homes, our families ... like our child'. She continued, her voice faltering: 'we [are] talking about the Balkans after all those civil wars, and everybody [across Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia] accepted Toše ... Toše was a new hope in the Balkans ... [he] brought something new ... hope that Balkan [*sic*] can be still, again friendly ... united ... human to each other' (Burbank 2007). Immediately after his death, commemoration narratives began to selectively highlight elements of Toše's persona that had to do with hope and humanitarianism, resulting in a centring of those elements in the mourning processes and death rituals that his death initiated.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut have examined one example of this redistribution of agency, the emergence of what they call 'effective agencies' in particular production processes of collaborations between living musicians and recordings of deceased dead pop stars (2010, pp. 17–21).

<sup>15</sup> One British producer that had worked with Toše described the mourning process as if it were for someone who had the standing of both Princess Diana and Robbie Williams (Slatensek 2009).

Cosmologies of death in Macedonia and throughout former Yugoslavia shed additional light on the ways Toše was mourned which, in turn, helped constitute processes where agency with regard to Toše's persona and work was redistributed. Broadly speaking, cosmologies of death for Macedonians reflect a notion of the continued presence of the soul of the dead here or in another world, and communication with the dead is significant for the living regardless of whether one believes in an afterlife (Risteski 1999; Petreska 2009).<sup>16</sup> While Orthodox Christianity has become an increasingly important signifier of Macedonian national identity since 1991 (Risteski 2009) and Orthodox death rituals are crucial to that identity, pagan aspects of death rituals continued through the period of SFRY and persist as normative, especially with regard to communicating with the dead (cf. Pavićević 2009, pp. 224–5; Petreska 2009).

Toše received a proper Macedonian Orthodox state funeral and burial in Kruševo, which not only served to further solidify his signification of the Macedonian nation, but also made it possible for people to relate to him (sometimes through communication) and to his body appropriately after his death. In her work on the political lives of dead bodies, which deals in part with cases from former Yugoslavia, Katherine Verdery argues that proper death rituals are essential for an 'orderly universe and fruitful relations among kin and ancestors' (Verdery 1999, p. 106). Appropriate veneration of the dead infuses national identity and community belonging with cosmological significance, which makes it possible for the dead – especially a prominent individual like Toše – to acquire greater salience in the political realm, available for use towards any number of political ends.<sup>17</sup> Toše's death presented particularly new ways of relating to the dead, especially considering the fact that such an iconic figure had not previously existed in Macedonia. Embedded in the ways that agency regarding Toše was redistributed after his death were assertions about kinship with Toše himself, about national and regional concepts of ancestry, and about belonging in a community being grounded in concepts of morality rather than in divisive constructs of ethnicity. In terms of kinship and ancestry, Macedonians came together in Skopje's square to mourn Toše's death, where they were able to affirm their personal and communal connection with Toše as a perceived son or brother, or simply as '*naš*' ('ours', meaning Macedonian, glossing over his Vlah ethnicity) more intimately than they ever could have during his lifetime.<sup>18,19</sup>

Across former Yugoslavia, the display of public grief for Toše, the region's beacon of optimism, was the largest since the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980. Toše's

<sup>16</sup> The Macedonian film *Senki* (Shadows, Mančevski 2007) deals with traditional and contemporary cosmologies of death in Macedonia. The film is oriented around the communication between the protagonist, a man who survived a near-death experience, and the souls of several dead individuals who have not been able to pass successfully into the next world.

<sup>17</sup> Stanyek and Piekut (2010) build on Verdery's argument, demonstrating how the recorded voices of dead singers can be manipulated in a redistribution of agency after their deaths.

<sup>18</sup> Toše was notoriously private, known to live a quiet lifestyle and was rarely seen in public other than on stage and for official appearances.

<sup>19</sup> Mourning for Toše was experienced similarly to what Jessica Greenberg describes as 'intimate, familial loss' and 'a break between a violent, nationalist past and a possible democratic future' (Greenberg 2006, p. 26), to some extent. It also allowed for the foregrounding of a particular form of masculinity: although unmarried and childless, Toše's persona was a representation of a heteronormative masculinity that was decidedly non-violent and unaggressive.

funeral was attended by a cross-section of music stars from former Yugoslavia, from Croatian mainstream pop singers (e.g. Toni Cetinski) to the Serbian pop-folk superstar Ceca (Svetlana Ražnatović, widow of war criminal Željko Ražnatović, commonly known as Arkan). This wide range of artists who would not normally cross paths indicated Toše's broad appeal, and their presence as an extraordinary gathering of incongruous artists was noted by the media at the time.

In Macedonia, this Durkheimian collective and cathartic mourning over Toše was experienced primarily, although not necessarily exclusively, among ethnic Macedonians. According to some middle-class Macedonian millennials I spoke to, ethnic Albanians in their teens and twenties also mourned Toše's death and attended events commemorating his life, although I have never personally met any ethnic Albanian Toše fans. For some ethnic Macedonians (and perhaps some Albanians as well), then, Toše's death may have provided a bridge toward the healing of ethnic tensions and a vision of a Macedonian nation that represented not just the ethnic Macedonian majority, but all citizens of the country. This perspective perhaps views Toše as representative of a national identity that was more inclusive (albeit still entirely understood in ethnic Macedonian terms), a liberal but decidedly Macedonian nationalism.<sup>20</sup>

The paradoxical elements of Toše as a pan-Balkan, inclusive symbol become more clear when considering his engagement with language and other elements of ethnic identity. On the one hand, he could be seen as inclusive by endearing himself to ethnic majorities of the various republics (and their markets) by singing in the majority language when performing in a given country. However, on the other hand, doing so meant that engaging with minority populations in each country remained on the periphery of his activity. For example, while Toše's ethnic Albanian pop artist contemporaries in Macedonia like Adrian Gaxha have cited him as a personal inspiration and viewed him as a gracious and virtuous person, Toše and manager Petrović did not develop strategies to market to or connect with Albanian minority populations in Macedonia or in other former Yugoslav republics, at least through language. Petrović's work with music industry actors in the production of Toše's work also reveals the limits of Toše's pan-Balkan inclusivity, demonstrating how the production and promotion of Toše's work is in a dialectic relationship with audience reception of it in terms that do not necessarily challenge national identity constructs. The fact that much of *Igri bez granici*, for instance, was initially developed in Serbo-Croatian by Serbian and Croatian producers and songwriters, demonstrates how Petrović's strategy followed familiar lines of affirming national identities based on ethnicity, catering to dominant ethnic majorities in each Yugoslav successor state. Since national identities in this region have been constructed based on ethnicity, especially as linked to language and religion (Todorova 2009, pp. 163–4), Toše's construction as a Macedonian national symbol cannot fully represent ethnic Albanians in Macedonia (who are also typically Muslim), and even his appeals across ethnic lines outside Macedonia are constrained

<sup>20</sup> In 2008, when the Eurovision Song Contest was held in Belgrade, Macedonia's entry was dedicated to Toše. The song, 'Let Me Love You', was performed by Macedonian pop singer Tamara Todevska, Macedonian pop-rap artist Vračak, and Macedonian-Albanian pop singer Adrian Gaxha. This multi-ethnic representation of the Macedonian nation (performed in English at the contest) was perhaps a statement, or performance, of this version of a liberal inclusive Macedonian nation for which Toše had provided hope.

by national identities, each one defined by a single ethnicity with a particular language and religion.

As Toše was mourned, the Macedonian public repositioned and reinterpreted his music in light of the tragedy, casting his unrealised international influence on behalf of Macedonia as an affirmation of fate as one of the forces against Macedonian recognition. Toše was buried on the outskirts of Kruševo on the grounds of a monument to the 1903 Ilinden Uprising, which had been built in 1974. His grave has become itself a pilgrimage site, and is continually heaped high with flowers, photographs and gifts (see [Figure 3](#)). The Ministry of Culture built a striking museum commemorating his life at the site, which directly situated Toše in physical and symbolic proximity to the Ilinden monument, a significant symbol of the Macedonian nation. Opened in 2011, the museum includes all of his awards, many of his possessions dating back to his childhood and recreations of his living room and his home recording studio complete with a life-sized Toše wax model (a second wax model stands on a small stage). The museum, constructed of steel, concrete and glass, forms the shape of a cross as a nod to Toše's devout Orthodox faith (see [Figures 4](#) and [5](#)). Its interior walls are embossed not only with song lyrics, but also with Toše's signature phrase from his performances, 'Ve sakam site' (I love you all), translated into over 100 languages. The museum itself is, among other things, a bridge to a remembered future where Toše is an international superstar bringing widespread recognition to Macedonia.

Inside each of the two Orthodox churches of Kruševo, about a 10 minute walk from the museum and Ilinden monument, one can find a framed photograph of



Figure 3. The gravesite of Toše Proeski, Kruševo, North Macedonia.



Figures 4 and 5. The Toše Proeski 'Memorial House' (Museum), Kruševo, North Macedonia. Photos by the author.



Figures 4 and 5. (Continued)

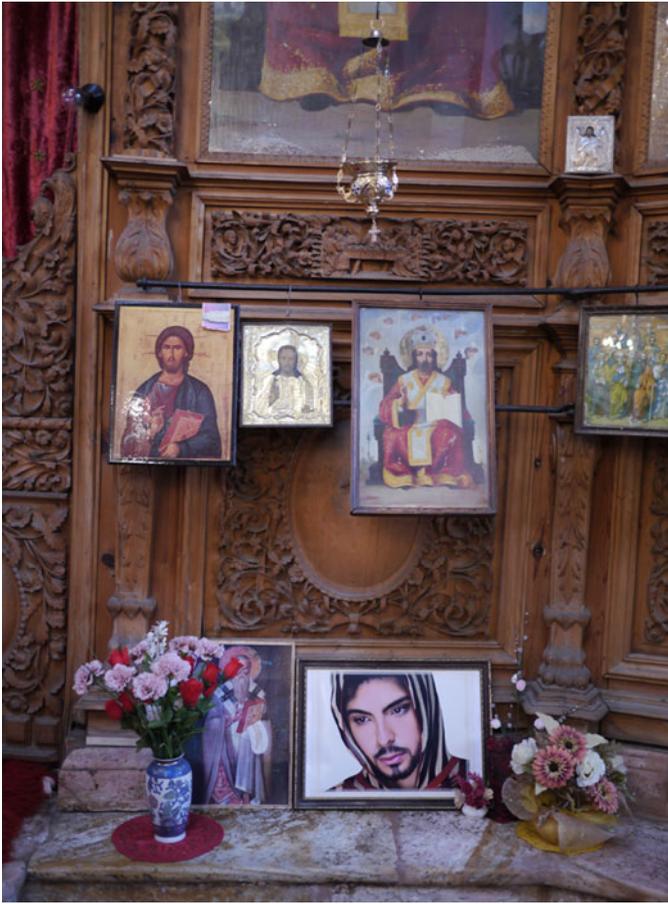


Figure 6. Toše's image at the base of an Orthodox church iconostasis, Kruševo, North Macedonia. Photo by the author.

Toše's face propped up on the iconostasis at foot level, appearing as a pseudo-icon of sorts. The priests claim that the photographs were placed there by unknown residents, but that they felt it would be inappropriate to remove them (Figure 6).<sup>21</sup> I visited the churches alongside some tourists from Russia who, as Orthodox Christians, were appalled to see an image of an 'unofficial' saint positioned at the iconostasis. The act of placing Toše's image in this location, and permitting it to remain, are examples of how agency regarding Toše's religion and spirituality was distributed and exercised after his death. Toše is not necessarily viewed as an actual canonised saint on a broad scale, but taken together, all of the religious commemorations at and near the site of the burial of his body play a role in transfiguring him into a spiritual entity (Partridge 2015, pp. 137–47), in the process associating him more powerfully with the Macedonian Orthodox Church and religious aspects of Macedonian national identity (Risteski 2009).

<sup>21</sup> I observed these photographs in 2011 and have heard numerous reports of them over the years since then. I am not certain whether they are still present in the churches today.

The burial of Toše's body in Kruševo and its proximity to the Ilinden monument connects him to the constructed nationalist narrative of Ilinden, and to Goce Delčev and its other heroes, adding to Kruševo's significance to the Macedonian nation (cf. Brown 2003). The agency deployed by state actors, his family and the Kruševo municipality with regard to his body and his memorialisation in Kruševo follow the well-worn patterns of nationalism as a form of ancestor worship that 'incorporate[s] into the notions of "ancestors," "brothers," and "heirs" people with whom our immediate blood ties are nil' (Verdery 1999, pp. 104–5). Links between ancestors, soil and nations 'make kinsmen, descendants, territory, and specific burial sites inseparable from each other' (Verdery 1999, p. 109); in death Toše is not only a Macedonian hero, but he is kin and descendent of past heroes, and his body territorialises Kruševo as uncontestedly Macedonian. The social actors involved in these official commemorations of Toše combine nostalgia for Toše and his significance to the remembered future of Macedonian recognition with the ethnic Macedonian national identity narrative of Kruševo, positioning him as an unequivocally Macedonian hero whose tragic death can serve as a cathartic tool to cope with the struggles of the present.

Toše's transfiguration into a spiritual entity also features in public discourse. He is commonly referred to as '*angelot naš*' (our angel), in other words, the angel of Macedonia. A photo-rich biography of Toše by journalist Sonja Aleksoska Nedelkovska, titled *Ova ne e kraj* (This is not the end 2014), opens and closes with Nedelkovska vividly describing dreams where she emotionally communicates directly with Toše about writing his biography. He explains to her how much he longs to return, to sing on the stage again and to record in the studio again. He also gives her his blessing to write about him. She concludes the book with a quote from her conversation with Toše in a dream where she asks him where she should start, and for him to tell her his greatest wish. He responds: 'Write that I wanted to become a worldwide superstar' (Nedelkovska 2014, p. 251). The agentic acts of communicating with Toše in dreams, mobilising discourse where he is considered an angel or unofficially sanctioning him as a saint in Kruševo churches reveal both general aspects of Macedonian cosmology – that there is an afterlife, that the dead communicate as angels or in other spiritual forms – and that Toše is, like Elvis Presley, Selena, Jim Morrison and other dead celebrities, a 'living ally of the believer' (Partridge 2015, p. 141), but on a societal scale. Thus Toše is not only a bridge to an idealised nostalgic past or remembered future, he is also transformed into spiritual form to a present spiritual otherworld, still communicating with and supporting the people that he left all too soon.

The ways in which Toše serves as a connection to out-of-reach ideals in multiple temporalities were evident at a 2008 humanitarian concert in his honour for an audience of over 40,000 people, one year after his death at Skopje City Stadium, by then renamed Philip II Arena. This event evoked nostalgic memories of Toše through videos of him performing, animated his music in the present through performances of his songs by stars from throughout former Yugoslavia, and suggested a remembered future of Toše's morality by way of its humanitarian aims. Songs performed, such as '*Igri bez granici*', were reinterpreted as having foretold Toše's death. The stalking ghosts of the song's lyrics catch him at last, and the text seems to confirm the ongoing 'eternal falling' of him, of Macedonia, and of the entire region. The concert began with a video of Toše singing '*Zajdi, zajdi*' in 2007, not long before his death. As Macedonians and people throughout former Yugoslavia watched Toše sing on screen

about the setting sun, his performance, as a mnemonic sonic palimpsest, was inscribed with additional layers of meaning. In his death he personified 'Zajdi, zajdi', seeming again to predict his own passing in the song's performance, which elucidated new associations of him with sorrow and discontent exemplified in the final line of the song, 'my youth will never return to me'. In an ironic twist, Toše will actually never lose his youth; he will never grow old in people's imaginations (cf. Bennett 2015; Partridge 2015, pp. 145–7).<sup>22</sup> Because he died at such a young age, he will forever be remembered as young – an antithesis of the lyrics of the song, which mourn the passing of time and the loss of youth in old age. The image and sound of an idealised youthful, pure version of Toše are now always available as a bridge to the ideals of a more just and purer world, ideals now located in the remembered future.

A visit I made to Macedonia in 2009 coincided with the release of a posthumous album, *The Hardest Thing* (Award Entertainment), and a documentary film about the end of Toše's life, *Toše Proeski: The Hardest Thing*, co-produced by Lilja Atelje, the company of former manager Ljiljana Petrović. A clear example of how Petrović continued to narrate and monetise Toše's work after his death, the film tells the story of Toše's death, but also documents the making of the album. The album features arguably the highest-quality English-language pop music production and performance to date for a Macedonian artist (at the time), the musical embodiment of Toše in the remembered future. Recorded and produced in Sweden, Jamaica and the UK, the album features the English-language song 'The Hardest Thing'. As Toše's voice sings the lyrics of the chorus, 'it's the hardest thing I ever have to do, to walk away from you, when I wanna hold you ...', listeners connect to a remembered future where Toše is an internationally known pop star, performing in English all over the world, bringing recognition to his home country and hope for a new morality across former Yugoslavia. The song featured prominently in the March 2014 finale of the reality singing competition *X Factor Adria*, which took place in Belgrade and included contestants from several former Yugoslav republics. Contestants frequently performed Toše Proeski songs throughout the months-long competition, and eventual winner Macedonian Daniel Kajmakoski sang 'The Hardest Thing' in the finale. With that performance, he captured the most audience votes, demonstrating that he had provided yet another bridge to the remembered future by way of Toše for Macedonians and fans throughout former Yugoslavia.

The consumable, repeatable musical products imprinted with Toše's voice and image provide a plethora of bridges to ideals that are unachievable in current realities, available to social actors including those who stand to gain financially from Toše's body of work (e.g. Ljiljana Petrović), people in media production (e.g. producers of *X Factor Adria*), artists and musicians (e.g. performers at commemorative concerts), state actors (e.g. when his performances and recordings are used at national events and on state television) and audiences of various demographics in North Macedonia and throughout the region. The ideals of international celebration of Macedonia and of a world devoid of corruption and violent immorality are both undergirded by the current dearth of economic and political stability in Macedonia and other parts of former Yugoslavia. In such contexts where challenges can seem

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin writes: 'A man [...] who died at thirty-five will appear to *remembrance* as every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five [...] the "meaning" of his life is revealed only in his death' (1968 [1955], pp. 100–1, emphasis in original).



Figure 7. Billboard advertising a concert promoting a new posthumous album by Toše Proeski, Skopje, North Macedonia, November 2018. Photo by the author.

insurmountable, longings for these perpetually unattainable ideals can stimulate their relocation to the remembered future, where they are accessible through the consumption of musical products whose significations help form bridges to them. In this case, agency regarding Toše and his music after his death is re-distributed to cathartically satisfy those longings, even as people mourn his once-certain future and the ongoing absence of these ideals.

### Conclusion: uneven remembrances and unrealised futures

With the passage of time and the social and political change that comes with it, the prominence of the famous dead such as Toše can also change, and the unevenness of their significance can come into better focus. During various periods of research in Macedonia between 2011 and 2018, I noticed that images of Toše still occasionally graced street-level billboards and, for a time, radio stations continued to play his songs (Figure 7). Macedonians from Toše's generation have in recent years bemoaned how children and teenagers do not prefer his music, but instead favour pop singer

Vlatko Lozanoski (b. 1985), whose production and vocal stylings share much in common with Toše's. Today in North Macedonia, regular discourse about Toše has largely subsided, but he has taken his place as a Macedonian hero alongside Alexander the Great and Goce Delčev, although Toše's status as a Macedonian national hero remains uncontested. In 2011 the state television station played Toše's videos continuously for much of the day on Macedonia's twentieth anniversary of independence, and Macedonians of all ages know many of his hits by heart. One friend reported that at a family birthday party in a village home near Skopje in 2013, the evening concluded with four generations of Macedonians nostalgically watching various YouTube videos of Toše and debating which of his performances was the best of his career (they decided on 'Zajdi, zajdi').

Other versions of 'what might have been' for Toše also persist within popular music industry circles in Macedonia. Some have blamed Petrović, and her desire to save a few Euros on a hotel or flight, for Toše's death in the late-night car accident. Others hold her responsible more generally, suggesting that Toše should have never left Avalon Production to sign with her. Some Macedonian songwriters have denigrated his material, telling me 'Toše's songs are terrible – if only he had collaborated more with me ...'. In most of these instances, the perspectives are informed by at least a degree of envy that these individuals did not have the opportunity to work with Toše as closely as others had. They attempt to encourage a narrative where it was Toše's and Petrović's decisions about his career, rather than his death, that prevented him from delivering on the ideals that could serve Macedonians so well.

In September 2011, as I was wrapping up three months of research in Macedonia, Macedonia's national basketball team made a run at the European Basketball Championship. Against all odds, the team finished fourth in the end but not before defeating two-time champion and perennial powerhouse Greece by 14 points in the group stage, one of several upset victories by underdog Macedonia in the tournament. In the context of endless montages on television and thousands of Macedonians celebrating in Skopje's new square after every victory, I kept hearing a familiar voice singing a song I had never heard before. I learned that the song, 'Makedonija naviva za vas' (Macedonia is cheering for you), happened to be the last song Toše recorded, part of a competition to choose a new national sports anthem one month after his death. Unsurprisingly, Toše and the song had won in a landslide. The song's lyrics draw on key Macedonian national tropes, with one verse reading: 'May this world now know about us Macedonians, one sun of Alexander shines in our chests'. After Macedonia's successful European Basketball Championship, the voice of Toše, Macedonia's angel and ally, resounded in public space and in people's homes. Broadcasters at Macedonian Radio Television who repeatedly aired the song had inserted Toše's voice and all that his persona had come to encapsulate into the celebration of national sporting success. With Toše, they, and those listening and singing along, affirmed Macedonia's contested national symbols once again, allowing Toše to lead those he left behind in celebration of Macedonia's recognition on the European stage and of its symbolic victory over Greece, viewed as Macedonia's perennial political obstacle. The hope for recognition of Macedonia that had died with Toše was enlivened in a different form through the national basketball team's success, even as he and his music formed a bridge to the ideal of that recognition (cf. Buchanan 2002).

Agency around Toše and his music after his death has continually shifted to position him to serve particular social, cultural and political ends. His signification

of the Macedonian nation and of a moral persona of goodness during his life continues to provide great cultural resources after his death as the living in North Macedonia and throughout former Yugoslavia face new challenges at personal and societal levels. For dead pop stars, especially those who are viewed as icons, shifting distributions of agency allow for them to live countless and previously unimaginable afterlives not only among individuals and die-hard fan groups, but also among broad populations of the living. When the gap between the ideal and the real is too vast in a particular society, dead iconic pop stars can serve as optimal bridges to the remembered future, a once-possible time when ideals can be experienced in reality. As part of the ongoing social lives of dead iconic pop stars (cf. Sterne 2003; Stanyek and Piekut 2010; Strong and Lebrun 2015), sound recordings, videos, images and commemorations of such stars perhaps help keep hope alive for the realisation of these ideals in some other form. Yet like dead pop stars, the remembered future is a memory, and while consuming the music of the dead brings hope, that hope is inseparable from the cathartic sorrow and mourning evoked not only for the dead, but also for the future that died with them.

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