

Review of Jana Gajić's BA thesis "Hood Elitism: Stylistic Transgression of Dominant Cultural Meanings in the Music of the Serbian Artist Mimi Mercedez"

Jana Gajić's BA thesis on Mimi Mercedez, trepfolk, and Serbian neo-Diesel youth culture is an excellent study that examines cultural and music resistance to economic inequality and precarity reinforced through discursive class-othering and vilification of trepfolk and neo-Diesel youth by the Serbian national-liberal elites. In terms of theory and analysis, this is probably the most advanced BA thesis that I have read as a professor at FHS. However, I will also mention some minor issues that can be helpful for the student's future work.

Theoretically, the student expertly operates with a vast number of relevant theories related to the main conceptual concerns of the thesis, mainly theories that examine relations between social class and cultural difference, and between youth culture and resistance, both contextualized through the readings on Serbian culture, music, and history. The student shows great intellectual maturity in her discussion of all the theories discussed in the work, which are not only a few (the student uses 57 theoretical bibliographic items in her work, in addition to 74 additional journalistic and primary sources). These are often quite complex theories that in their elaborations not only illuminate student's theoretical faculties but also provide a suitable framework for the understanding of all the complexities and contradictions related to Mimi Mercedez's music and Serbian neo-Diesel youth culture. Moreover, the student deftly utilizes these theories throughout the chapters in her analysis of music, history, culture, style, and resistance of Serbian neo-Diesel youth, while also manages to provide a very pertinent critique of Serbian journalistic writing and academic scholarship that often fail to comprehend and adequately interpret such youth phenomena and instead they themselves with their commentaries and analyses contribute to the dismissive elitism and cultural and social boundary-making that makes the work of Mimi Mercedez and the style of Serbian neo-Diesel youth necessary in the first place. Most importantly, through the multi-layered analysis (and "thick" description) of meanings in Mimi Mercedez' songs and in the examples of Serbian neo-Diesel style and discourse, the student successfully defends the main argument of her work, namely, how Serbian neo-Diesel youth resist and reject (through creative exaggeration, defiant entertainment, reversal, and critique) the common Serbian national-liberal ideology which claims that social class (e.g., lower class) results from cultural identity and cultural taste (e.g., neo-Diesel, trepfolk), and not vice versa.

After my praise of the work's foremost features, I also need to mention some of its minor deficiencies. First, the length of the text is 112 pages, and thus greatly exceeds the standard number of pages for BA theses (50 pages). This fact does not only complicate our work with evaluation, but also foregrounds some weaknesses of the work: there is some redundancy and repetition of information in the thesis which could be left out, and there are often too many theories and themes that the student is overloading her work with, which also takes away from a sharper focus of the thesis and its argument. Second, although the student conducted a fair amount of ethnographic fieldwork, there is very little ethnographic data from music concerts and everyday social situations included in the text (e.g., Mimi's performances are only mentioned on two pages: 95, 103). More of ethnographic data and performance analysis could enrich the thickness of the analysis in many parts. This also relates to a slight problem with song analysis, which mainly focuses only on the lyrics, but would benefit from more engagement with music, visual, and performance aspects of Mimi Mercedez's songs. Third, although the student is mainly attentive to the complexities and contradictions, and to the more problematic sides of neo-Diesel culture, I occasionally missed more critical engagement with certain phenomena, for example, when treating class as ethnicity (61), and by not distinguishing enough in the analysis the differences between working class youth and lower middle class youth (55). In relation to the former issue, if the student would, for

example, consider Roma youth in Serbia, she would probably have to concede that adding ethnicity to equation would exacerbate the situation for these youth and change the coordinates of the analysis. In relation the latter issue, I would be cautious in placing middle class youth (even if precarious and downwardly mobile) in the same category as lower class youth, as the former group might still carry some privileges over the latter, and the question of cultural appropriation and cultural slumming might still be important to analyse in regard to the relation between Serbian middle class youth and the neo-Diesel youth culture. I think these topics would need slightly more consideration, if not more problematization, in the thesis.

Furthermore, I also noticed that some of the more salient contradictions and problematic parts of the neo-Diesel culture (e.g., neoliberal subjectivity, and femimism) were often dealt only in the chapter's conclusions, mainly as afterthoughts (57, 106), while I would recommend them being better incorporated throughout the analysis. This could be specifically improved in relation to the Chapter 3, where the student on the one hand, successfully analyses and portrays the many intricacies of Mimi Mercedez' discursive strategies of feminist resistance, but on the other, fails to examine the limited range of these strategies, especially in relation to the actual social and material reality of lower class and middle class women in Serbia. For example, it seems that Mimi Mercedez in her style and music adopts a feminist (and neoliberal) version of the survival of the "fittest" approach (competition, aggression, boldness, normative fitness), which might not be viable for all women (e.g., those that are considered less verbally or physically "fit", within or without the subculture), and not in all situations (e.g., in situations of male physical violence; or even in terms of general gender inequality in Serbia). I actually do not have a proper answer myself to these dilemmas (scholarly or social), and would therefore like to hear more on these issues at the defence from the student herself.

However, all of my points of critique mentioned above are only minor issues, and considering all the positive sides of this thesis, I recommend grade 1 for the work.

David Verbuč (student's mentor)