Goran Tribuson

The History of Pornography

Povijest pornografije

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Can the history of a political system be told through pornographic films, vinyl records, school friendships, and failed romances? In *The History of Pornography* (1988), Croatian writer Goran Tribuson uses precisely such seemingly marginal experiences to reconstruct nearly forty years of Yugoslav socialism. Rather than placing major political events and their protagonists at the centre, he focuses on a generation born in 1948, the year of Yugoslavia's break with Stalin. Their coming of age is shaped by promises of social progress, a gradual opening towards Western popular culture, and an increasingly pronounced gap between collective ideals and individual possibilities. Although primarily read as a novel about friendship and growing up, *The History of Pornography* is also a political chronicle of everyday life, in which the consequences of ideology become visible in private lives, social relationships, and personal disappointments.

The narrative is framed by the year 1987. Stanislav Ivančić, a writer living in Zagreb, returns to his provincial hometown to attend the funeral of his friend Čedo Kralj, known as Delon. Shortly after the funeral, his childhood friend Milan Grabar, better known as Miki, leaves for the United States, leaving him a manuscript entitled *The History of Pornography*. Although conceived as a historical and theoretical study of pornographic material, the manuscript contains a series of personal and generational memories. Stanislav makes it the starting point for his own narrative, reconstructing their shared childhood, youthful ambitions, and the gradual disintegration of their circle of friends.

At the heart of the group are Stanislav Ivančić, Milan Grabar (Miki), Čedomir Kralj (Delon), Ljubo Brabec, and Jaromir Kralik, known as Brambor, while Irena, Sonja, and Arleta also form part of their shared history. Their childhood unfolds amid school rituals, the cinema, the town promenade, first loves, and forbidden pleasures. Their coming of age coincides with the spread of consumer culture and the arrival of rock music, foreign films, magazines, and new technologies. After finishing secondary school, their paths diverge. Stanislav attempts to establish a literary career, Miki pursues a political one, Ljubo adapts to the institutions, Delon turns to travel and legally dubious business ventures, while Brambor remains on the margins of society. Their life choices represent different ways of navigating the same political and social system.

The novel's political dimension is established from the outset through the symbolism of 1948. Stanislav's father, Franjo, a committed communist, intends to name his son Stalin. News of the Cominform Resolution, however, forces him to change his mind at the last moment, and the boy becomes Stanislav instead. This comic episode reveals how deeply political shifts penetrate private life: even a personal name can become the consequence of a change in the official ideological line. Importantly, Tribuson avoids a simple division between supporters and opponents of socialism. Through different family histories, he portrays the enthusiasm of postwar reconstruction, bourgeois reserve, ideological intolerance, and the everyday compromises through which individuals seek to

protect their position.

The novel's most direct criticism of political repression emerges through the fate of Tonček Kralik, Brambor's father and the former owner of the town cinema. Following nationalisation, Tonček remains employed as a projectionist, while his death is shadowed by official suspicions of pro-Cominform activity. The gradual revelation of the circumstances points to abuse of power by a state security officer, blackmail, and the concealment of a private scandal through political accusations. Brambor grows up marked by his father's alleged guilt, although it is never established whether that guilt was real. His story shows how political repression extends beyond its immediate victims and continues to operate through inherited stigma, social suspicion, and the impossibility of reconstructing a reliable family history. The official version of events is both an interpretation of the past and an instrument for maintaining power.

The pornography of the title serves as an unusual means of historical periodisation. Miki's chronology distinguishes between periods of scarcity, the gradual availability of erotic material, and its technological democratisation. From rare photographs, artistic nudes, and clandestine film screenings to eight-millimetre films and videotapes, changes in access to sexual content reflect wider social transformations. The history of pornography thus becomes a history of consumption, technology, privacy, and social inequality. What once required collective viewing and intermediaries gradually moves into the private space of the home. Changes in media also signal changes in forms of social interaction, access to information, and attitudes towards personal freedom.

Particularly important is the tension between official socialist values and the appeal of Western popular culture. Rock music, jeans, American films, comic books, and vinyl records shape young people's identities just as strongly as schooling and political organisations. Yet Tribuson does not present popular culture as a straightforward realm of liberation. Western products become objects of desire, markers of social prestige, and means of distinguishing oneself from one's peers. Their availability depends on money, personal connections, travel, and the ability to cross national borders. Cultural freedom is not equally distributed but takes shape within specific economic and political constraints.

The setting of the provincial town further highlights the local consequences of major historical processes. The cinema, the town promenade, the school, the hospital, the tavern, and family homes are places where social status, political affiliation, and the limits of acceptable behaviour are negotiated. Local officials, directors, and party activists embody a system built on both formal rules and informal networks of personal relationships. It is precisely in this setting that the gap between publicly proclaimed principles and the actual mechanisms of social advancement becomes most apparent.

Narrative perspective is also crucial. Stanislav does not speak as an objective historian but as a participant in events, looking back in an attempt to understand his own life. Miki's manuscript, family anecdotes, rumours, and unreliable memories form a layered structure in which the past is constantly reassessed. Irony and humour undermine the authority of official historical narratives without erasing their tragic consequences. At the same time, the distinctly male narrative perspective raises questions about the position of women, whose experiences are often mediated through their relationships with the male protagonists. Generational memory itself thus reveals its own limitations.

Towards the end of the novel, Miki's father calls the former friends a "superfluous generation": they grew up with the promise of a better world, but society failed to fulfil their expectations. This

judgement extends beyond individual failures and becomes the novel's central political diagnosis. Death, emigration, professional compromises, and the collapse of friendships reveal how a collective future, presented as a historical certainty, turned into a series of private losses.

The History of Pornography is a political novel precisely because it does not confine politics to institutions, ideological conflicts, or decisions of the state. Politics manifests itself in the opportunities available to individuals, the objects they own, the spaces they move through, and the futures they can imagine. Tribuson's generational chronicle poses a question that resonates beyond the Yugoslav context: what happens to a generation when a political system ceases to fulfil the promises on which its sense of the future was built?

References:

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