

A R T W A R

The war in Yugoslavia, although arguably incited by activities of the Pope and the Western Church, acting through its secret agents of the German and Austrian states, might more bemusedly be construed as an Art War.

That is, it might more philosophically and truly be understood to be a struggle over aesthetics, chiefly visual aesthetics.

Newspapers and magazines on both sides show soldiers and weapons, as if here are the He-Men, and then deliver--as frontispiece, or inside cover, or icon in upper right corner of cover--a Madonna and Child. The Croatian version is Western, the Serbian version is Eastern. Same concept, same mother and child values, but different artwork. One has more sculptural features, the other more flat, with gold background. It's a matter of visual taste.

Television on both sides shows the dead soldiers as Fallen Christ, or Christ descended from the Cross, but without anyone to hold them. The coffins are opened, TV cameras directed in, under lights, and the wounds are closely examined, complete with swarms of maggots. Perfectly health flesh or teeth are shown alongside, to suggest what might have been. More, at least on Serbian TV, the initial focus of attention is on the instruments for what might have been: the genitalia. There are no fig leaves. Understandably, at least as I have observed in Serbia, the viewers moan, roll, rock, pull their hair, shout out. No flag-draped coffins here, with honor guard. It seems that the Serbians are more explicit. Is that a matter of visual taste? And what would the NEA or Jessy Helms say about it? Have not a people a right to be emboldened, by whatever means, given that in the recent past the slaughter was so great?

When the Serbian soldiers get ready to go to war, they have a big all-night celebration with their friends and girlfriends in a public hall, dancing altogether, communally, with their Eastern, Turkish, music.

When the Croatian soldiers get their sendoff, they run one by one in battle gear on to a waiting bus, each one being announced with a hurrah and upraised guns, as if the war were a football game. Each man is a hero, a player on the team, with name, rank and role announced before starting. Women are in the audience.

The difference is aesthetic, on the surface, but it reflects a more fundamental difference in social values and structure. The Serbians are more communal, the Croatians more individual. There is no Rocky in Serbia.

As Serbians have pointed out to me, the chief distinction between Croats and Serbians is in how they draw their letters. One side uses Latin letters, the other uses Cyrillic letters. The Serbians have the advantage of also being able to use the Latin letters. But using one or the other is strictly a visual question. Either way, the spoken language is the same. Which alphabet, in the end, would one rather look at? Is this not an art question, similar to that of the opposing sides in a country visited by Gulliver, where war erupted from the question of how, or where, to break an egg?