Waiting for Godot: Sarajevo and its Interpretations

After her first visit to war-torn Sarajevo, Susan Sontag was eager to be more than a mere witness to the violence and injustice inflicted upon the city. Her subsequent engagement with the city of Sarajevo could be read as a reaction to a kind of spectatorial voyeurism, enabled through modern media, where one peeks into the unfortunate lives of others from the comfort of one's living room and where information becomes a substitute for compassion. Later, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she critiques the relationship between spectating and the pain of others:

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere called 'news', features conflict and violence – 'If it bleeds, it leads' runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four-hour headline news shows – to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view.

(p. 18)

In her search for a more engaged activism, Sontag pitched the idea to direct a play to Haris Pašović, a well-known local director and producer. When he agreed and asked her what play she would like to direct, she immediately thought of *Waiting for Godot*. In her writings about this project, Sontag has noted: ‘Beckett’s play, written over forty years ago, seems written for and about, Sarajevo’ (*Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*, S. Jestrovic, *Performance, Space, Utopia* © Silvija Jestrovic 2013)
The production took place during some of the severest shelling of the central city since the beginning of the siege and received significant media coverage in the West; her efforts were both commended and criticized. *Waiting for Godot* emerged as one of the most iconic events in Sarajevo during the siege. In the Western media, the visits of Bono from the famous rock band U2, the performance of the Three Tenors on the ruins of the city, and Sontag’s *Waiting for Godot* epitomized the suffering and the resilience of Sarajevo. *Godot* not only became a metaphor of the besieged city, but also fed strongly into the imaginaries of Sarajevo as seen through Western eyes. How is the city of Sarajevo performed and textualized through this project and the subsequent writings about it? What kind of city narrative is created in this process and through Sontag’s account of her activism? And how does this narrative stand in relation to other performances of and in the city?

**Uneasiness with Godot**

Ever since accounts of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo first appeared in the media and in academic journals, I have had mixed feelings about the way in which these narratives constructed the identity of the city and canonized Sontag’s activism. As a citizen of Serbia living in Belgrade in 1993, I resisted my uneasiness at the time, believing that I had no ethical grounds on which to formulate a critique. Yet I have repeatedly felt the need to unpack this uneasiness in order to understand the city or at least to grasp my own imaginaries of Sarajevo. In writing this book on performing Sarajevo and Belgrade during the war, and the breakdown of Yugoslavia, the question of who is speaking – the distinction between insider’s and outsider’s view – has become crucial to an analysis of my own position within the discourse as well as to an understanding of urban experience and the narratives of others. In order to assess *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo as a performance of the city, then, it is necessary to tackle both the relationship between the actual encounter of Sarajevo with Sontag and the perspectives through which the various narratives of this encounter have been filtered.

After Sontag’s death in 2004, Haris Pašović proposed that a street or a city square be named after the US writer, director and public intellectual. It was an initiative that was supported by Muhadin Hamamdžić, the mayor of the city at the time, who maintained that Sarajevo and its citizens were grateful to Sontag for her humanitarian efforts and for her contribution to the history of the city. In 2009, a place was finally chosen: the square in front of the National Theatre where Sontag and