

special theme

Introduction.

## The politics of aesthetic historicizations and memory culture in former Yugoslavia

**T**he rise of rightwing populism, authoritarianism and even fascism is redrawing the map of relations between memorial culture and politics. The spheres of cultural representation, memory and heritage are being subjected to new forms of politicization, a development which in turn has engaged new critical perspectives in philosophy and theory, as well as contemporary art. Disputing simplified notions of nationalism and heroism, as well as the symbolism of identification, alternate forms of memory culture are developing, beyond the state apparatus of official commemoration. Moreover, new forms of understanding are throwing light on new aspects of the status of memory culture, its form and its impact.

This special section in *Baltic Worlds* is the result of a workshop engaging with the politics of aesthetic historicizations, through the grid of the monument. Organized by the research project *Distrusting Monuments. Art and the War in Former Yugoslavia*, it has a special focus on memory culture in former Yugoslavia, but deals also with is-



Inside of Petrova Gora monument, Croatia.

PHOTO: CECILIA SJÖHOLM

sues of the monument at large. What does it mean to remember, what does it mean to forget? What are the tools used by nationalist memory cultures? And what concepts, aesthetic expressions and forms of understanding may we use in order to

counteract revisionist tendencies in rightwing populism and authoritarian ideologies?

In recent times, the conflict between the scene of contemporary art and older, nationalist memorial culture has become increasingly intense, not least in the Black Lives Matter movement. In Europe, a similar process has been ongoing, offering a critical perspective on an official history often embodied by monuments of heroism, nationalism and unity.

**GIVEN THE REVISIONIST** strategies of authoritarian ideologies, which entail coopting the past for political purposes, an engagement with what should be remembered and how through other and different perspectives is necessary. Memory culture is often regarded as something that produces a sense of stability in times of instability, creating permanence in times of flux, and a sense of be-

longing for collectives in need of healing. Such definitions, however, tend to miss out on complex questions about the many dimensions that historical sites may contain, such as the simultaneous existence of narratives and counternarratives.

In recent times, the interaction between the scene of contemporary art and memorial culture has become increasingly intense; monuments have been destroyed, or altered, and new ones have been created. Black Lives Matter has become a symbol for a global tendency in which the relation between representation, memory, and the writing of history has become an intensely debated matter of contention. In the region of former Yugoslavia, this is something that has engaged scholars, activists, and artists ever since the end of the war. During the last few years there has been an increase of debates and protests, exhibitions and art works that involve themselves in the topic. Protesting outdated models, the scene of contemporary art has pointed to the fact that the writing of history is a process in flux, and an issue that includes several components: political and ideological perspectives as well as aesthetic means. Commemorative projects and works of memorial culture should be seen as something open-ended and in need of constant reevaluation. As such, it may be showing and producing an array of productive practices and tools, not least when it comes to the way in which the reactivation of memory and the re-appropriation of an antifascist past and heritage may counter authoritarian revisionist attempts today.

**THE PROCESS** of historicizing the wars in former Yugoslavia, from the First World War to the Second, and finally into the ethnic wars of the 1990s which meant the breakup of the state of Yugoslavia, is still ongoing in the region. This, in turn, a deeper look into the relation between memory, history, politics, and aesthetics. There is a direct link between the ethnic wars of the 1990s in Yugoslavia and the rise of a right-wing authoritarian or neofascist movement today. The wars in the 1990s dismantled or erased the anti-fascist legacy from the second world war, removed monuments, burned books, changed street names, revised histories,



Jasenovac monument by Bogdan Bogdanović.

PHOTO: CECILIA SJÖHOLM

## “ACTIVISTS, ARTIST GROUPS, AND ORGANIZATIONS RETURN TO THE MEMORY AND HISTORY OF THE WAR TODAY.”

and ultimately denied genocides – a denial that is still ongoing.

At stake in the memory wars is thus the future of the region, between the ends of a heavy nationalist weight on the one hand and past transnational idea of solidarity on the other. The question of what we are to remember, and how, has come to involve a wide array of agents, materials, and forms of expressions, rather than just state funded memorials and museums. Activists, artist groups, and organizations return to the memory and history of the war today,

The visual historicizations and the alternative modes of writing history transcend the distinction between regional and transnational. Therefore, this issue of *Baltic Worlds* also moves beyond the region of former Yugoslavia. Given the ongoing dramatic shifts that surround memorials around the world, it addresses the “memorialization of culture” and calls into question received narratives of history, disputing simplified notions of na-

tionalism and heroism, as well as symbolisms of identification and belonging. The aesthetic forms and narrative means of art allow for the production of a new kind of memory culture, as well as for a new kind of understanding of how we are to conceive of what is to count as memory culture, in order to address complex issues of their uses today.

The internationally successful Yugoslavian avant-garde, flourishing in periods during the “golden age” from the 1950s through the 80s, started a tradition of pitting critical art

against state monuments. As mentioned, this theme section in *Baltic Worlds* has its origin in a research project called *Distrusting Monuments*. The title is drawn from Dušan Makavejev’s famous 1958 film, *Monuments should not be trusted*. The film itself is part of the Yugoslav avant-garde which questioned “official” history writing and opened a path towards radical experimentation through conceptual art, experimental film and performances at the margins of an official cultural infrastructure. This critical tradition has been consciously incorporated into the scene of contemporary art and memory activism in Post-Yugoslavia.

**THE FIRST ARTICLE** in this issue, authored by Cecilia Sjöholm, “Animating brutality: cinematic renderings of Yugoslav monuments”, discusses contemporary films that are dedicated to the extraordinary so-called anti-fascist monuments left in the landscape in all of former Yugoslavia. Sjöholm analyses the way the films treat the monuments as characters of the landscape, with a history that stretches beyond the significance of the events to which they were erected. Whereas such renderings can be seen as a way of “emptying” the works of their local and regional significance, the Anthropocene aesthetic of monuments such as that at Petrova Gora (Monument to the Uprising of the People of Kordun and Banija) can also be seen to create the possibility of a new kind of understanding, where ecolog-

ical concerns merge with historical ones.

In her article “Presence of Absence. Recognizing the Missing and the Mass Graves in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, Johanna Mannergren Selimovic writes about the memory work ongoing in the region as part of an elaboration of a war that, long after it has ended, is still surrounded by rumors, secrets and lies. Using the concept of “unquiet bodies”, Mannergren, who argues for the importance of finding a place and space for mourning, presents case studies of the role played by the ongoing process of finding bones and body parts as traces of war crimes in the antagonistic struggles between revisionists and other political actors.

Gal Kirn, in turn, addresses the ecological dimension in partisan art as a dimension of resistance. In his “Partisan ecology in the Yugoslav liberation and antifascist art”, he reads an array of artworks that juxtapose humans, animals and nature, pointing towards a new, emerging solidarity. In poems, short stories, drawings and graphic art material, the forest becomes a site of resistance. Diverse animals are not simply allegorical but rather »comrades« in the struggle, mobilizing nature in their fight against fascism, together with a practice of non-extractivist relation to nature that could be read in the more general lineage of the struggle to decolonize nature in contemporary culture.

REBECCA KATZ THOR’S “Concepts of Monumental Time” discusses the way in which monuments have changed in meaning and impact over the last few decades. Ever since James Young coined the term “counter-monument”, the ways in which appearance and memory are joined have been conceptualized in new ways. Not only does a counter-monument make memory work possible: it may also defy ideologies such as fascism through its very existence. Today, monuments have been seen to develop into “post-monuments”, defined in Thor’s article as monuments that are directed towards neither nation building nor defiance, but rather a structural wrongdoing in the past that society has not come to terms with.

Memory work – or, in contrast, the impossibility of memory work – can be

demonstrated also to have a place in literature, the aesthetic genre that in many ways is the most appropriate one for dealing with “memory in the negative” as Tora Lane calls it. Dealing with exile as a position from which memory work becomes something quite different from a nationalist stance, she addresses a condition where “estrangement is everywhere – in the present and in the past, and in the West and in the East.” What happens with memory, Lane asks in her discussion of Dubravka Ugresic, among other novelists, in a condition where countries such as Socialist Yugoslavia no longer exist? Can there even be a memory culture when the present is disinclined to see a meaning in what was honored in the past?

RETURNING TO the proper meaning of the research project inviting articles for this issue: “Distrusting Monuments”, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen returns to the same era as Yugoslav modernism but depicts the defiance of monumentality from the perspective of an art movement in Western Europe: the Situationists. To the Situationist International, monuments signified a ruling order of political and economic forms of domination in what they called the “society of the spectacle.” Bringing monuments down, or distorting them, the Situationists targeted the political imaginary of images through actions that today in many ways seem prophetic with regard to how images and monuments serve, or defy, political and economic orders today.

With Mladen Dolar’s article, finally, we return to the core issue that is often connected to monuments: that of nationalism. In “Nation and Narration”, Dolar shows how nationalism is always a product of myth and fiction. The question is how, and whether, we can disentangle real communities from imagined ones. To Dolar, this is a task which, in the case of Slovenia, appears to have surprising results. Rather than be at one with a certain narrative of continuity, what can today be called a Slovenian national identity has been formed as a series of breaks with an idea of what has been considered “authentic”; in works of literature and theater as well as in politics. National identity is never something that can be determined

by state powers or political ideologies: it is rather something that is formed by, as Dolar says, a “risky and contradictory process with uncertain outcome.”

IN THIS WAY, the current theme section in *Baltic Words* throws light on the condition of memory culture in former Yugoslavia through a variety of points of view and materials: dealing with its monuments, its literature, its art and its historical legacy, as put in perspective through other geographical places and cultural positions. By no means exhaustive of possible angles, the issue gives a few suggestions of how memory work in this specific region in the world can be approached. ✘

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Petrova Gora, Croatia.

PHOTO: SANDOR BORDAS

From the German Netflix sci-fi series *Tribes of Europa*.

ARTWORK BY LEIF HEANZO

# ANIMATING BRUTALISM

– cinematic renderings of Yugoslav monuments

by **Cecilia Sjöholm**

## abstract

The study of monuments tends to focus on human agency, in the form of political history, war history, antagonism, trauma and so on. Aesthetic qualities are often seen as superficial and fetishized qualities that belie the impact of the monument in a regional context. The rurally situated monuments of former Yugoslavia, however, must be seen through their extraordinary qualities as works of art, carrying an agency of their own. Rather than restricting the meaning of their impact, their aesthetic qualities and impact in the environment allow them to speak to us today from a new horizon.

**KEYWORDS:** monuments, Yugoslavia, Spomeniks, commemoration

In recent times, monuments have become an important object of study in the humanities as well as the social sciences; they are part of an understanding of the present that involves outstanding features of the past that have to do with political history, war history, ideological antagonism, trauma and victimhood. The study of monuments, however, tends to focus on the historicity of human agency. Although landscapes and natural sites can also host, or even be, monuments, little research is to be found at the crossroads between human and non-human memory culture.

But there are, indeed, sites that combine landscape, sculpture or architecture and historical claims, for example the rurally situated monuments of former Yugoslavia. These monuments are sites not only of war commemorations, such as concentration camps or uprisings from World War II and the 1990s war in former Yugoslavia. They are also sites of political and ideological conflicts today, vulnerable to disputes surrounding their interpretation, and disagreements about who has the rights to claim the importance and impact of their presence – or to impose their neglect. When they are forgotten, nature takes over: trees, bushes, and wildlife interfere in the forms and shapes that were supposed to symbolize human memory.

Situated as many of them are in a pastoral landscape, these monuments embody an antagonistic relation between nature







The monument Petrova Gora, from Igor Grubic's film *Monument* (2015).



National park Sutjeska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From Jóhann Jóhannsson's film *First and Last Men* (2020).

and culture that has engaged critical and aesthetic theory since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. What is the aesthetic impact of their presence in the landscape? This is the motive of two powerful cinematic renderings: the film *Monument* by Croatian artist Igor Grubić from 2015, and a film from 2020 by the late Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson, *First and Last Men*.

In this article, I will first give an account of the hesitancy regarding “aestheticization” that is often referred to when it comes to monuments and memory culture at large. What appears to be at stake here is the antagonism between wanting to see monuments as sites of local and cultural communities and seeing them as aesthetic objects from the perspective of a transnational, aesthetically and culturally engaged audience. Can the meaning of the monuments extend beyond the local and communal towards a more indistinct significance, and speak to us today from a new horizon?

Can aesthetic qualities substantiate, or, in contrast, undo the historical narrative that a monument is supposed to tell? Does a focus on aesthetic qualities of a memorial draw attention away from political, social, and local issues, or do they serve as a key to unfold the open-endedness of monument culture at large? These are questions that are continuously discussed with regard to the modernist monuments of former Yugoslavia.

### The background of the monument

The interaction between the scene of contemporary art and memorial culture has become increasingly intense in former

Yugoslavia. In the region, many of the monuments that were erected during the socialist era of Tito have been destroyed, or altered, and new ones are continuously created. This is a process that to a large extent mirrors the conflicts that are still ongoing in the region, conflicts that lie at the intersection between political, ideological, and ethnic allegiances, and that are often played out against the historical background of the Second World War. There are certainly differences between the different countries, and the way in which conflicts are played out around the culture of monuments. In certain cases, they have to do with nationalism's input in politics; in others, with the anti-fascist appeal to commemorate partisan battles, murders, and/or concentration camps, battled by neo-fascists. In others yet again, monuments of reconciliation are protested against.<sup>1</sup>

**ALL CARRY A NATIONAL**, regional, and local meaning. Many of the post-Yugoslav monuments, *spomeniks*, embody a scale, magnificence, and aesthetic presence beyond the ordinary. Large-scale architectural and sculptural modernist experimentations produce a stunning visual presence. During the 2000s, these monuments have become the object of increasing interest on the international art scene, as can be seen in and through the cinematic renderings, an exhibition at MOMA and so on.<sup>2</sup> In popular culture too for that matter: one of the most famous monuments, at Petrova Gora, has a prominent role in the German Netflix sci-fi series *Tribes of Europa*. Knowledge of how to access these sites is being disseminated: an English database to be used as a guide for



National park Sutjeska. From Igor Grubic's film *Monument* (2015).



all international *spomenik* tourists has been set up by an America-based researcher, and guided tours are organized on site.

**BUT THERE ARE ALSO** discussions on the way in which these monuments should be appreciated and valued: against the backdrop of their growing popularity as aesthetic objects, researchers have spoken out against purely aesthetic veneration since it is seen to produce a kind of cultural and historical depletion. Some argue that this results in an aestheticist fetishization, through an indistinct European modernist legacy. This is contrasted to a regionally and locally motivated form of appreciation maintained by local and cultural communities. The conflict can be seen in terms of the regional against the global, as in the formulation of art historian Sanja Horvatinčić:

The insistence on their exquisite aesthetic features as the only or primary criterion of determining their contemporary heritage status undermines the monuments' immense cultural and political significance.<sup>3</sup>

The essential feature of Horvatinčić's criticism is not that the monuments are seen as aesthetic objects. Her critique is that they can become indistinct and characterless, whilst at the same time being exoticized as Balkan "others". In this way, they are treated in the same vein as the people, histories and communities in whose names they are erected.

### Memory culture as sites of conflict

A similar resistance to the aestheticization of monuments, not with regard to post-Yugoslav monuments specifically but from a more general viewpoint of the status of memorial culture

today, can be seen in the work of cultural historians Cento Bull and Hansen. With their notion of "agonistic memory", Cento Bull and Hansen argue, with reference to the work of Chantal Mouffe, for a memory culture model where a variety of actors develop interventions that are called "agonistic" in and through their reference to specific histories and cultures. As researchers in cultural memory studies focusing on historical and cultural perspectives, Cento Bull and Hansen define two basic models of how a critique of hegemonic memory regimes can be construed and conceived today.<sup>4</sup>

**WHAT THEY WISH TO** challenge through their critique is, to begin with, what they call antagonistic models. These are simple memory regimes that take certain notions of monumental culture for

granted. Antagonistic models of memory culture assume that memorials and monuments should be conceived in and through distinct communities, such as nationalistic and ethnic collectivities. They are then motivated by a wish for the perpetuation of confrontation, or legacies of violence and suppression such as the colonial heritage. This is an antagonistic stance, in the sense that Chantal Mouffe has proposed. There is always a possibility that collective identities can construe a "they" which in turn can become a locus of hostility: "[...] as the case of the disintegration of Yugoslavia testifies, any form of we/ they relation, whether

**"DURING THE 2000S, THESE MONUMENTS HAVE BECOME THE OBJECT OF INCREASING INTEREST ON THE INTERNATIONAL ART SCENE."**

religious, ethnic, economic or other, becomes the locus of an antagonism"; that is, as Carl Schmitt has shown, they become integrated into friend/enemy constellation.<sup>5</sup> Antagonistic forms of memory culture are often evoked by extremists and belong to a fascist legacy.

Such models are, however, not dominant. What tends to be dominant is, instead, a model that is critical of this form of antagonism. In another article, Anna Cento Bull and David Clarke identify a cosmopolitan form of memory culture that holds a

more general view of what is worth commemorating, and how, often placing human rights in focus. It is often victim-focused, and speaks not to a distinct community but to a wider public. It is also a form of memory culture that is distinctly aesthetically elaborated. The model for this form is taken from James Young's classic article on what he called the counter-monument, where he refers to a series of small scale, aesthetically conscious works that were erected in commemoration of the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> These works have been consciously made so as to avoid crude forms of representation. They make memory in and through dignified and artistically elaborated forms, whilst at the same time extending beyond those aesthetic forms – memory is construed, so to speak, as something that goes beyond the sheer form of its material and aesthetic appearance. The typical form of the counter-monument is, therefore, abstractly modernist, in the vein of 1960s modernism of concrete and sculpture. The archetypical example is *Monument against Fascism* by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev Gerz, a pillar erected in a square in Hamburg in 1986, that was allowed to disappear into the ground.

Cento Bull and Clarke refer to the aestheticization of counter monumentality today as generally problematic – it refers to an aloof, cosmopolitan, aesthetic audience through consensual ideas of human rights. In this way, it construes a new kind of hegemonic memory regime in which we all seem to agree on what is to be remembered, but the aestheticization of these memorial forms tend to erect not only a false kind of consensus on what we should remember, but also on what memory culture should be, and what it should look like.

**CENTO BULL AND CLARKE SUGGEST**, instead, what they call an agonistic model as their ideal, a model that challenges both antagonistic models of identification and the fleeting memory of aestheticization. To this end, Cento Bull and Clarke stress the importance of the use of public spaces and institutions, as well as artistic interventions: artists make memory more flexible. They take the example of when the Centre for Political Beauty (Zentrum für politische Schönheit [ZPS]) created a new *denkmal* – modelled after the monument to the Holocaust in Berlin which in many ways today can be said to be the most distinct, modernist counter-monument that we have – next to the garden of high-ranking AfD politician Höcke. Höcke had suggested that the Berlin *denkmal* was a memorial of shame that should be taken away and replaced by a monument in Dresden. This antisemitic and revisionist gesture was then, so to speak, punished by the art activists, who made Höcke view a small *denkmal* every day erected in the garden next to his house.<sup>7</sup>

There are, today, other forms of counter monumentality that are agonistic, produced for instance through the Black Lives Matter movement which challenged, altered or simply removed monuments. To Cento Bull and Hansen, as well as Cento Bull

and Clarke, agonistic memory culture can be defined as multi-perspectival and open-ended, in contrast to both the antagonistic, ideological memorial and the aloof, aestheticized form of counter-memory.

In this way, Cento Bull and Hansen contrast what they perceive as forms of aestheticization with what they see as more meaningful memory practices. I believe that the wariness and suspicion of what is conceived of as aestheticization is quite typical for a progressive discourse in memory culture today, exemplified also by Horvatinčić. In this discourse, aesthetic qualities that are not very distinctly attached to histories or identities are seen as meaningless.

However, the aesthetics of the monument can, in itself, counter its own destiny. Monuments are not always subdued under a symbolic meaning. They can, like art, be multi-semiotic and multidirectional. This has to do with the way in which they manage to achieve a presence in and of themselves, which may take us beyond human agency.

There is a difference between the reading of the past and the multi-perspectival dimensions that art works produce. But sometimes the works can be so strong in themselves that they produce other, new meanings. A reference to the future, perhaps, but also to the environment.

### Jóhannsson and Grubić

Both the films *Monument* by Igor Grubić and *First and Last Men* by Jóhann Jóhannsson point to this more-than-human aesthetics. Igor Grubić, the creator of *Monument*, is an internationally renowned Croatian artist. In his film, one monument stands out: Petrova Gora, a monument to the uprising of the people in Kor-

dun and Banija. It is a monumental, futuristic building, constructed over several years during the 1970s and completed as late as 1981, in memory of the Partisan uprising against the Nazi regime in 1941, involving several architects and artists, for instance the famous Serb artist Vojin Bakic. This is a monument that stands out not only for historical reasons, involving both Serb and Croatian history, but also for aesthetic ones: Thanks to its other-worldly features it has been made the home of the heroes in the Netflix sci-fi series *Tribes of Europa*.

Visiting Petrova Gora in 2022, as I did, was not easy. The road from the Croatian side was closed, as was the *spomenik* itself. In its vicinity lies the remnants of one of the biggest Partisan hospitals in the region, now being restored for the purpose of becoming a museum. But nothing gives witness to the monument itself being restored. It is damp, pillaged, withering away unobserved. The walls are full of holes, the steel plates on the outside of the construction have been stolen. Trees, fungus and mold are growing inside the building. It is a monument of corrosion, through its steel and concrete construction. Graffiti reveals that it has been visited, but you need to force

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War memorials in the former Yugoslavia. From Jóhann Jóhannsson's film *First and Last Men* (2020).

entry to get inside. Animals must live there – you can hear their sounds – or is it big drops of water?

**THE CONCRETE OF** the *spomenik* is brutal in the landscape, but at the same time the building itself contains organic shapes, for instance in the form of an extraordinary spiral staircase of marble, shaped like the one in the Whitney museum. When you look up, it looks like a giant ear, or a flower. The Whitney building was conceived in 1963; Petrova Gora is a collaborative effort that took place a decade later, and it is in many ways a more uncompromising piece of postmodernist architecture.

There are three eras of socialist modernism: the first from the 1950s until the early 1960s, then a more international era took over throughout the sixties, where the brutalist forms that made Yugoslav architecture famous were created. The style was explicitly made so as not to look like social realism; it was New Wave. Petrova Gora appeared towards the end of an era when the partisan monuments (or monuments to revolution as they were mostly referred to) were cutting-edge avantgarde.

In his film *Monument*, where he gives Petrova Gora a distinct place, Ivor Grubić attempts to retrieve its visibility through aesthetic rather than historical means. The film is poetic, metaphysical, contemplative. In the film, the sound predominates. It is a rhythm where the wind, the water, the animals create sounds that are amplified in the large empty rooms of the building.

In Grubić's film, the monuments at Petrova Gora, *Tjentište*, and Podgarić all have characters. They are in natural settings,

alone, abandoned. At the same time they have a profile, which help create a form of narrative together with the seasons: fog, rain, snow. The film is made in a hazy grey tone which only dissipates into a solemn color for certain moments. Vjeran Salomon's soundtrack introduces an other-worldliness into the atmosphere. But what comes across most distinctly is the way in which the monuments, such as Petrova Gora, occupy a solitary location, standing in the midst of a landscape marked by growing vegetation. Grubić creates a profile, as he says, for each monument. The monuments are animated through the seasons, and the sounds of the seasons. Through nature and the atmosphere, they acquire a life that is neither human nor non-human – marked by traces of human suffering, but also acquiring an animated spirit of their own.

In real life, the monument of Petrova Gora is extraordinary in proportion, shining in the sun at the top of a mountain, overlooking the landscape for miles. In Grubić's film, however, there is nothing heroic about it. It is, he says, important to show that these monuments were built in places of real suffering. At the same time, what stands out in the film is not of the memory of what happened, but the life of the monument itself. There are almost no people in the film, and when they appear they are see-through ghosts, transparent without features.

**THIS FILM IS** dedicated to monuments that managed to escape the widespread destruction that went on during the 1990s war. Socialist monuments were often targeted since they symbolized the rule of Tito. But the antifascists and the socialists are not the same, Grubić points out: to him, the monuments are a part of an anti-fascist legacy which revisionist forces have tried to compromise. The monument in Petrova Gora is antifascist not despite but because of its aesthetic features, which is also part of the legacy that Grubić depicts. It is obvious in Grubić's film that it is the otherworldly aesthetics of the monuments, the shapes and rhythms of their extension, that embodies the memory of the struggle. They are not complicit with the glorification of a régime, or an ideology. Their shapes run counter to what is readily available as narration, and they are placed on their own at sites outside of the urban cityscape that is dominated by political powers.

Jóhann Jóhannsson's film, in turn, is in many ways aesthetically similar: slow moving, meditative, using sound to enhance the experience of the extraordinary features of the monuments that are depicted. His film, however, stresses the feature of eternity that is so specific for the modernist-brutalist monumental style: making the monuments into an inhuman form of creature, and making them speak with monuments from other centuries. In this way, Stonehenge communicates with Bogdan Bogdanović's extraordinary sculpture from the concentration camp of Jasenovac. The wings of Bogdanović's sculpture are well maintained, unlike the architectural monument at Petrova Gora. It offers one of the most famous silhouettes of monumental culture.

Jóhannsson's film is based on a novel that tells of a civilization that mutates, written in 1930 by author Olaf Stapledon. It is a story that stretches over several million years, from the past

into the future. The planet changes, the orbit changes. The film makes sci-fi creatures of the monuments, to the other-worldly beauty of Jóhannsson's own compositions and the voice of narrator Tilda Swinton.

One feature is shared with Grubić's film: the monuments come in somber colors, and they are at times clad in a fog that stresses their aloofness, their distantness, perhaps also the impossibility of memory. In Kenzo Ishiguro's novel *The Giant*, fog is the impossibility of memory: an element that we have to cut and conquer in order to create relations not only with our past but also with each other: not having a memory means not having a relation – neither with the past nor with the living.

In Jóhannsson's film, the difference between the past and the present is obliterated: it is not clear if we are looking into deep histories or distant times to come. The monuments appear like aliens, like posthuman creatures. What is depicted is not a foggy depletion of memory under aestheticized forms and sounds, it is rather an experimental form of commemoration, where the past is intertwined with the future.

## Sunken natural beauty and aestheticization

This experimental form of commemoration that takes place in both of the cinematic renderings of these monuments is an aspect which has to do with aesthetic presence: humanoid sculptures in fog, rain, snow, blatant sun. The landscapes and the atmosphere are intertwined with the sculptures.

Bogdanović's sculpture is but a small part of the monumental installation on site. Located at what used to be a concentration camp where the Croatian fascist regime killed around 80.000 people from the resistance, and ethnic Serbs, Bogdanović also used the land around the monument to mark the placement of the buildings of the concentration camp. Shaped as mounds of earth, covered in grass, but mounds placed in holes, Bogdanović's work has the character not only of being a monument, but also a monumental piece of land art, using shapes and natural materials to create the landscape. For a visitor, it is not the sculpture that plays the main role – it is the earth. The memorial carries the signs of a distinct narrative, but it is tied to a sense of time that stretches over generations, and over the dead towards the future. Its aesthetic is tied between the distant past, of the earth, and the future, in the wings stretching towards the sky.

In his volume *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno's classic chapter on "Natural beauty" points to the steep temporality that is tied to an aesthetics of nature:

**The image of what is oldest in nature reverses dialectically into the cipher of the not-yet-existing, the possible.<sup>8</sup>**

To Adorno, the relation to nature lies at the core of what we call the aesthetic. Artworks belong to the sphere that Adorno calls a second nature: they belong not to the natural world, but to the social world, which has the ability to make things appear natural. What is beautiful in artworks is something that we conceive

of as reminiscences of an age that we cannot seize in the present. Beauty cannot merely present itself to us sensuously. It has to do with ideological investments: what is conceived of as "natural" has to do with the implementation of ideals.

Art imbues the relation to nature with ideological meaning. It is not by chance that nature becomes "aestheticized." We may think of the glorification of the Alps in bright colors, works that were intertwined with German nationalist ideology in the 1930s, for instance. These are not just examples of bad taste, but more or less inevitable developments of the violation done to nature. There is no "neutral" aesthetic ground through which art can relate to nature. On the contrary, art is an agent which uses aesthetic means to determine the fate of nature.

What is violent, contradictory, and frightening about nature becomes instead familiar in art, bestowed with an acceptable face: what is called "second nature" must, so to speak, appear natural. This is why art, or rather what is called "aestheticization", is a production of ideology. What is even worse than an openly nationalist adoration of sentimentalist art, according to Adorno, is the conviction that beauty can present itself naturally, beyond the layer of social and cultural history that he calls a "second nature."

This expresses Adorno's concern with "aestheticization": Artworks are also products of human labour, and of ideas. To Adorno, it is more in line with art's own place in history to make the former demonstrative of the latter: what aestheticization does is to attempt to point beyond history. Here Adorno shares the concerns of memory culture historians such as Horvatinčić or Cento Bull and Hansen/Clarke: aestheticization is a kind of ideology that makes us forget the historical and conceptual features of the artwork and look only at sensuous dimensions that make it empty and fleeting.

The idea that the aesthetic lies above and beyond social and cultural relations is, to Adorno, worse than the ideologization of beauty and art.

**IF TODAY THE AESTHETIC** relation to the past is poisoned by a reactionary tendency with which this relation is in league, an ahistorical aesthetic consciousness that sweeps aside the dimension of the past as rubbish is no better. Without historical remembrance there would be no beauty.<sup>9</sup>

In this way, the aesthetic is contrasted to aestheticization in Adorno's opinion. Art and aesthetics have to do with our world, our history, they give us a sense of what is real and important. Nature, in turn, has a quality that lies beyond attempts to domesticate it. Nature is bestowed with what could be called a natural age, a profound history that leads us beyond modern, human interventions. In this way, nature can harbor both a sense of present history and a sense of deep time.

## Beauty and memory culture

In this way, we can also approach the questions of the aesthetics of memory culture from its attachment to nature: The sense of deep time that nature can produce is not about ignoring or undoing historical reality. It is rather deepening our sense of what

Adorno calls natural history: a dimension that we tend to repress in our focus on human agency, but that is intrinsically linked to it. As Deborah Cook writes, to Adorno human history is intrinsically intertwined with natural history. They share a destiny of always being in a transitory state.<sup>10</sup>

We cannot stand on nature, so to speak, and create art, without incorporating at the same time a sense of time that goes beyond generations. The beauty of art cannot be conceived beyond a sense of sunken time. Art produces the wounds of history, wounds that make the sunken ideal of natural beauty appear. In this way, objects of memory that stand in a landscape carry many dimensions of time simultaneously.

This is why monuments are also wide open to artistic renderings: their aesthetics create a presence that extends beyond the historical and ideological motivations that lie behind the specific monument. But they also point to a new dimension of violence and ruination: applied to nature as such.

Shaped as otherworldly forms, as they are, in the landscape, the monuments of former Yugoslavia give witness to anti-fascist struggles through their placement, as well as through their brutalist and futurist avant-gardism. Today, their relation to the landscape has acquired a new complexity.

They are too big, brutal in shape and presence. But it is a violence that is not contrasted with the pastoral landscape. It is also echoed in it. These monuments are not only placed on a historical ground, they are also set in a used nature: Petrova Gora in a forest of plane trees, for instance, a fast growing, invasive type of tree. It is also a place of leisure, for citizens from Zagreb who come to take a walk in the forest and eat lunch at the nearby guesthouse. What used to be a place of hiding, what Andreas Malm talks about as a partisan wilderness of hiding and resistance, has now become a different kind of nature.<sup>11</sup>

But deep time can still be sensed in the landscape. In the films, the cinematic renderings of the monuments make up for the loss of wilderness. Through evocative fog, rain, snow, through the slow movements of its music and rhythms, the images evoke a deep time. But this is done not through nature, but through aesthetic means: Rather than obliterate the historical dimension of the monuments, aesthetics is here used as a means to give a history to the monuments when nature fails to do so.

**WHAT ART CAN DO,** Adorno argued, is to animate a life that is, so to speak, stolen from nature. Through their cinematography, sound and so on – set beyond time and cultural specificity – something emerges in these films that not only has to do with a general, posthuman, Anthropocene aesthetics, although that is certainly there. What emerges is that the monuments are creatures of their own history. Their shapes and materials speak to us as objects from a past that we cannot fully grasp, and a future that we do not know. And yet, at the same time, they give witness to distinct events and a particular history that cannot be belied or altered.

The writing of history is a process in flux, and when it comes to memory culture, it is also a question of politics and ideology. Setting monuments in nature, however, as objects of the land-

scape, they also acquire a sense of time that moves beyond simple mechanisms of ideology and aestheticization. With the more than human quality of the monuments, they make the memory of events take place between a future and a past that we cannot grasp, giving meaning to events through a sense of deep time. ✖

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Family members in Krajina Identification Project (Sejkovaca mortuary).

PHOTO:ICMP

# THE MISSING AND THE MASS GRAVES

by **Johanna Mannergren Selimovic**

## abstract

Nearly three decades after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, thousands of people are missing and mass graves are regularly found. Relatives still search for knowledge about their loved ones in the midst of secrets, rumors and ethnonationalist denial. As the country struggles to come to terms with this dark legacy of the war, art has emerged as a space for recognition of the lingering *presence of absence* of the missing.

**KEYWORDS:** Bosnia and Herzegovina, missing, mass graves, ethnonationalism, presence of absence, recognition, peace.

In the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) more than 100,000 people were killed.<sup>1</sup> About 7,500 of them are still missing. Where are they? Where are their graves? The missing people are absent, yet they are present. They are what Ed Vulliamy calls the “unquiet bodies”; through them the violent past lingers and haunts the present.<sup>2</sup> We mourn the missing and we yearn for them and pin hopes to their absence. The mass graves, those that have been located and those that are still waiting to be discovered, are unsettled spaces where silences and stories congregate and stick to bones and mud. Often not formally marked, they are still perceived and sensed. They are not void of meaning. They exert *presence of absence*, highly productive of post-war politics.

In this essay I reflect upon the contentious memory politics



around the *nestali*; the missing. They form a powerful trope in Bosnian political discourse that speaks to the core of the problematic peace in BiH. They are a result of the ethnonationalist logic of the war, and the searches and exhumation processes seek to address this dark legacy.

Based on fieldwork and interviews mainly carried out at different moments during 2012, 2018 and 2021, the essay discusses how the search for the missing affects the everyday lives of the relatives, as they seek to counteract the collectivizing violence of ethnic cleansing and genocide through refusing erasure. Their difficult work is foremost a struggle for knowledge in the midst of secrets, rumors and denial, and hence speaks to a key topic regarding transitions from war to peace: the importance of truth and recognition long after the end of war.

How can the lingering violence of mass atrocity be acknowledged and memorialized in a highly divisive present, where on the one hand, war crimes are actively denied in an increasingly revisionist culture, and on the other hand, the missing have become a highly politicized trope used for advancing collective victimhood by elite political actors? Can aesthetic expressions create a space for remembering that encompasses presence of absence? Towards the end of the essay, I discuss an art installation that opens up possibilities to, with Jenny Edkins' words, "encircle the trauma", and give space for mourning and restoration.<sup>3</sup>

## Mapping the mass graves

**"I do not like the expression the missing. They are somewhere".<sup>4</sup>**

Let's begin with some figures and logics of mass atrocity. Let's begin with some red dots on a computer screen. Each dot symbolizes a mass grave on the virtual online map created by the International Commission for Missing Persons (ICMP), containing all the information available about the mass graves and their whereabouts.<sup>5</sup> Some of these mass graves are huge, like the one in Tomašica in the northwest of the country in which remains of more than 400 people were found; others are smaller, containing "just" a few bodies. Many of the missing originate from the mass killing of more than 8000 Bosniak men and boys from Srebrenica by Bosnian Serb and Serb forces. It was "the largest single crime on European soil since World War II"<sup>6</sup> and the events were judged as genocide by the ICTY.<sup>7</sup> The forced disappearances were key tactics in the Bosnian war, used to create fear and chaos, and the interactive map demonstrates a topography of homogenizing, ethnonationalist violence. Navigating the map gives a startling insight into how profoundly these tactics have changed Bosnian everyday life for generations to come. In addition to the killed, 1.2 million people were forced to flee. Most of them have not returned. One reason is that the Dayton Peace Accord constructed a postwar state mainly along the divisions

that the ethnic cleansing had created, and the state of BiH thus consists of two entities: the Bosnian Serb Republic (*Republika Srpska*) and the Bosniak-Croat Federation. Many people are consequently no longer living in the place where their loved ones went missing and where the mass graves might be located. This affects geopolitics in the present -- when mass graves are found, they are often in territory politically controlled by the former enemy side and there is little interest from local authorities to commemorate and mark these places.<sup>8</sup>

**DURING THE FIRST YEARS** of the war, analyses of objects such as bullets, blindfolds and ligatures were important, practices

later replaced by sophisticated DNA analysis developed by the ICMP. From the beginning it was the International Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) that was in charge of exhumation and identification,<sup>9</sup> now it is the Special Department for War Crimes of the BiH Prosecutor's Office.<sup>10</sup> Other important bodies in BiH include the national Missing Persons Institute (MPI) which is mandated to investigate every "credible report" regarding mass graves. Reports

are collected from witnesses or perpetrators coming forward or from information emerging from prosecutions; however as time goes by, the number of witnesses forthcoming is declining and also their accounts are not as precise. Investigators thus seek to combine witness statements with geospatial analysis as well as analysis of aerial and satellite pictures.<sup>11</sup>

In the face of such sophisticated technology and legal scaffolding, it may seem strange that relatives who are engaged in victims' associations have to take an active part in the search. They are often socioeconomically vulnerable and struggling in contexts where they have little support from local authorities. Nevertheless, they have developed strategies for advocacy, extracting knowledge, locating bodies, and making the MPI investigate their claims.

## Searching for bodies and recognition

One February morning I walk on foot together with F. up a woody hill situated above a small town in central BiH. The sky is blue, and the February snow is like meringue, crunching under our city shoes as we make our way through the forest. We suddenly enter an opening in the forest, and we stand still as the rustles of the pine trees fill the silence. Underneath the snow there is a sand pit, and this is the place where F. has helped find two mass graves. We stand at one of the red dots on the ICMP map.

F. has been searching for missing people since the end of the war. One of them is her brother whom she saw for the last time on July 23, 1992. He disappeared together with 46 other men when the enemy forces emptied one of their detention camps set up in the center of the town. Three years after the war, she and other relatives got hold of some information -- someone said that trucks had been travelling up the hill to this place, the sand

**"CAN AESTHETIC EXPRESSIONS CREATE A SPACE FOR REMEMBERING THAT ENCOMPASSES PRESENCE OF ABSENCE?"**



A book of belongings showing photos of clothes and objects found near some of the bodies.

PHOTO:ICRC/BENOIT SCHAEFFER



Srebrenica victims' personal items help keep memories alive.

pit. Of course, this makes sense, F. thought at the time, a well-chosen place – easy to dig, out of sight. F. and her fellow members in the association informed the council and the IMP, digging began eventually and eight bodies were recovered. But F. was certain that there were more bodies hidden there. She was right: one day in 2008 someone passing through the woods found a leg sticking up from the ground. Shifting land masses following heavy rain had unearthed yet another four victims. Ten years later, when we first met, in the small office of the victim association, F. was still searching.

She made Bosnian coffee for us on a small hotplate and showed me a wall full of photographs, yellowed, tattered, from a time long gone, happy snapshots from family albums mixed with serious faces from more formal occasions. She pointed to this one and that one, my school friend, my husband's colleague, this family was wiped out, all gone... telling stories of their lives and their disappearance and the cold miserable little room become crowded with them all.

At that meeting she was upset and I ended the interview for ethical reasons. But at this time, in the midst of the forest, she is in a relaxed mood. I on the other hand want to leave, the pine trees are so tall and stand so close, I am thinking that I never before have seen such tall, dark trees. F. wants to stay, she likes being here. Listening to her talk this time, it seems as if the site functions as a forensic testimonial that speaks clearly to the present about the traumatic event, a site where the presence of absence can be lived and acknowledged, even if it is not marked.

**Some people say that let them be, let them stay wherever they are. But I disagree with this, I feel that if I don't have his bones and the other family members' bones, I feel as if nothing has happened. It is as if there had been no war, no torture, as if there had been nothing.<sup>12</sup>**

## Spaces of silences and secrets

**It all started with the man with the map. That is when we started digging.<sup>13</sup>**

Paradoxically, there are in fact a lot of people who know the whereabouts of the remaining missing. There are thousands of perpetrators in BiH living ordinary lives who have never been tried for their crimes as well as bystanders who for various reasons have decided not to talk. The ICMP has a function on their interactive website for people to share anonymous information about killings and mass graves and while the number of callers is going down, there is still a trickle. Many are getting old and decide to unburden themselves before they die.<sup>14</sup>

Yet guardians of such information are potentially powerful, and some will not speak without getting something in return. Negotiations around the protection or revelation of secrets can generate material or social capital.<sup>15</sup> F. and other survivors navigate an epistemic landscape where knowledge is gathered through rumors and whispers – and through transactions of truth for money. When her association discovered bodies the first time, it happened through an anonymous contact. After weeks of negotiations, they met a man in a petrol station café. He drew a map by hand and shared his secret. And now, once again, F. is involved in a painful discussion with another man who claims he has been told where her brother rests. She has met with him, he said he knows the perpetrator and told her details about life before the war that make her – maybe – trust him. She says he wants a sum of 5,000 Euros, and that he in turn will pass on some of the money to one of the killers. The sum is enormous to her. Even if she had the money – would it be morally possible for her to pay the perpetrator? She does not know.

The first few days after the first meeting, my feelings were first hope, hope to find my loved ones, and happiness. And then I was not able to sleep.<sup>16</sup>

## Not here nor there

Forensic anthropologists talk sometimes about the biography of bones, and that there is an expectation that the findings of human remains may overcome all ambiguities. The DNA process will remove doubts of identity while found objects – a blue sweater, a plastic comb, a photograph in a wallet – will humanize the bones and provide a direct link between the living and the dead. Yet even when the graves have been found, uncertainty may prevail. In the case of BiH, this is because in order to hide the crimes, the Bosnian Serb Army re-opened a number of mass graves towards the end of the war and moved the remains on trucks to more hidden locations, especially those killed in the Srebrenica genocide. These sites have come to be known as “secondary” graves. Because of the use of heavy diggers and other machinery, many bodies were torn apart and body parts ended up in several secondary graves. Some of these graves were also reopened and the human remains were moved yet again and reburied in “tertiary” graves.<sup>17</sup>

The practice of moving bodies to secondary or tertiary graves has ongoing repercussions for the relatives that long to find out what happened to their loved ones; it means that often the search for the missing will not result in “finding the body” but rather parts of it. Religious authorities in BiH have stated that it is enough for 40 percent of the body to be buried in order for it to be a proper burial,<sup>18</sup> yet it is a line that may be perceived as arbitrary. How do you decide when it is time to stop the search for yet another piece?

**A BOSNIAN-SWEDISH** young woman whose father went missing after the genocide in Srebrenica was waiting for a long time for him to be found:

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 20, 2007, the call came [...] They had found his head and his left arm. And they knew where the mass graves were [...] My Mum let us make all the decisions. 'You are his children, you decide, when they have found enough we can bury him'. And we felt that there was too little, there wasn't enough. So we waited and then there was one more call, and a third call, over the next two years. And then it was quiet for another couple of years. And then we sat down, me and my siblings. Because somehow we wanted more, you always want more, somewhere you can go. Simply a resting place where you can say a prayer and find some kind of peace. And in 2011 we decided we were going to bury him. We worked out that

we found about 36 percent of him altogether, in eight different graves.<sup>19</sup>

## Rituals and (re)collectivization

It is often claimed that memorialization can contribute to the “restoration of personhood” of the missing, even in the absence of identified human remains.<sup>20</sup> Memorialization can consist of monuments, rituals, museums, plaques, often visible markers that express collective meanings. There are however few monuments to the missing in BiH, where focus has rather been on rituals and ceremonies that enact the restoration of personhood through burial; the transition from being missing to being found. The most notable is the yearly commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide that comprises a number of events, including a burial ceremony of victims that continuously are identified – in 2023, 30 victims were buried. The event attracts tens of thousands of mourners who travel from near and afar to commemorate at the Potočari burial site close to Srebrenica. These events are very important as a performative moment in which collective perpetrator/victimhood identities are upheld.

In line with the understanding that the handling of dead bodies has to do with the construction of the political and moral order of communities, these events ultimately concern sovereign power and how sovereignty can be claimed.<sup>21</sup> Commemoration is thus a means to create and sustain a particular social order through reversing the dehumanization of the mass graves and the ethnic cleansing, recognizing the victims as individual humans again.

Yet these commemorative rituals are contested, precisely because of the tension between the individual and the collective. While many testify to the importance of the burial ceremony, some relatives and other activists express that they are uncomfortable by such politicized, collective mourning rituals.<sup>22</sup> They argue that the victims in fact become inscribed in collective victimhood and become representative of a specific ethno-religious positionality, which they may not have actively embraced while alive.


## Aesthetic expressions of presence of absence

And so finally I turn to art as a medium for engaging with the trauma of the missing and ask if aesthetic expressions can possibly create a space for remembering that encompasses presence of absence. In various conflict-affected contexts artists seek to approach loss through marking the voids, addressing that which “fractures representation”.<sup>23</sup> My own fascination with the concept of “presence of absence” emerged through an encounter with the powerful work of Doris Salcedo concerning the missing in Colombia. Her art, often in the form of installations, pins our attention to the political implications of when violent loss is not marked or mourned, yet ever-present. Likewise, Bosnian artists

**“BECAUSE OF THE USE OF HEAVY DIGGERS AND OTHER MACHINERY, MANY BODIES WERE TORN APART AND BODY PARTS ENDED UP IN SEVERAL SECONDARY GRAVES.”**

in BiH and in the diaspora have, in numerous works, engaged with the invisible but ever-present postwar memory politics of remembering and forgetting.<sup>24</sup>

Possibly the artwork that speaks most powerfully to the experiences and the loss of F. and of T. and her family that I have highlighted here, is the nomadic exhibition ŠTO TE NEMA.<sup>25</sup> It is a travelling installation/memorial that engages with the intangible heritage of coffee rituals. The project started out in Sarajevo, where Bosnian-born American artist Aida Šehović in 2006 displayed 923 of the thimble-like Bosnian coffee cups given to her by the association Women of Srebrenica, and filled them with the frothy, thick Bosnian coffee. More or less every year since then, Šehović has organized the installation in cities all over the world, the number of cups growing each year as members of the Bosnian diaspora as well as others have added more and more. At the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in 2020, 8372 cups were laid out on the grounds of the Srebrenica Memorial Centre and laboriously filled with coffee (one for each genocide victim) and the cups will eventually be displayed in a permanent monument at the Memorial Center. In the meantime, the cups have been displayed at several museums, in Sarajevo as well as beyond BiH.

The cups are a material manifestation that reminds the onlooker of the loss of each one of those killed and missing. At the same time, the installation is a manifestation of intangible cultural heritage. It concerns the importance of the coffee ritual in BiH, as a means to engage and maintain good neighborly relations. Coffee-drinking was an intrinsic part of the upholding of the pre-war multiethnic weave in communities such as Srebrenica before the war. Furthermore, the nomadic monument was created by the artist in conjunction with a large number of people getting together and making, sharing coffee, thereby weaving new connections. The cups speak directly to the people on the yellowed photos on the wall of memory, under which F. made coffee on the small hotplate. They concern all those who confront the lingering pain of presence of absence that mass atrocity generates, long after the end of war. They remind us that mass atrocity rips apart webs of relations. They speak to the loss of sociability and the loss of lifeworlds. 

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Photo reproductions of artwork from the Muzej novejše in sodobne zgodovine Slovenije. Courtesy of National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia.

# PARTISAN ECOLOGY IN YUGOSLAV LIBERATION AND ANTIFASCIST ART

by Gal Kirn

## abstract

Partisan and decolonial ecology is a notion addressed by Andreas Malm and Malcom Ferdinand respectively, in their texts on the Caribbean maroon partisans – the emancipated slaves – who moved to the more mountainous parts of the islands that were still covered by dense vegetation. This concept is here taken to another historical context, that of Yugoslav partisans' fight against the fascist occupation in the Second World War. I engage in reading an array of partisan artworks that point to fascist domination/war over nature juxtaposed to emerging solidarity among humans and animals/nature. From poems and

short stories to drawings and graphic art material, the subject matter of forest as a site of resistance and political subjectivity emerges. Diverse animals, pack of wolves, birds that continue to sing despite the thorny branches, the figure of the snail as the affect and attitude of resilience – these become "comrades" in the struggle, mobilizing nature in their fight against fascism.

**KEYWORDS:** Partisan ecology, antifascism of non-human world, partisan aesthetics, becoming, "human animal", poems, graphic art, figure of resistance.

## A few theoretical notes on partisan ecology

The figure of the partisan is often associated with (party) politics, with clearly – even blindly – taking a side. One of the major partisan statements that encompasses a wide range of fields can be found in Karl Marx’s famous 11<sup>th</sup> *Thesis on Feuerbach*: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”.<sup>1</sup> This visionary statement, not without irony, prompted many new (philosophical) interpretations; however, its initial challenge has remained unresolved: How to change the world, and with what means? Oscillation between different standpoints and practices only pointed out that neither activity nor praxis can give the answer to these questions, and most notably cannot be isolated from one another. The eminent partisan question asks then how heterogenous practices – political, theoretical and artistic – contribute to the struggle of liberation, to changing the world.

It is precisely such a heterogeneous and transformative struggle that took place in the forests of partisan Yugoslavia, on the liberated territories that built alternative political and cultural organizations and succeeded in mobilizing masses of illiterate peasants, youth and women into the partisan struggle against the fascist occupation from 1941 to 1945.<sup>2</sup> Partisan activities cannot be reduced to military guerrilla tactics – even if Yugoslavian resistance was one of the few in Europe that succeeded in liberating itself on its own; there were political, and most notably cultural and artistic activities that became the most important weapons of mass creation. In four years of liberation struggle masses of anonymous poets – most of them self-educated, and many of whom had just learnt to read and write – produced 40,000 poems. In the almost impossible circumstances of scarce material and non-existent artistic infrastructure, partisan artists created thousands of drawings, novels, graphic works, sculptures, photos, even symphonies and films.<sup>3</sup> War, then, was not merely a dark period of horrific deeds but also a process of cultural revolution that entailed emancipation of those that had been most exploited before the war in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Thus, the negative aspect of the struggle, the fight against the fascist occupation, was connected from the very beginning to the utopian and transformative aspect: to build a new partisan Yugoslavia.

**FINALLY, HOW, AND WHY** can Yugoslav partisan – liberation art be connected to the topic of *ecology*? While at that time concern over environment was not high on the theoretical-political agenda, today we speak of theoretical and political urgency: If one is invested in the world and changing the world, then thinking and acting in the light of climate transformation and ecological challenges would be high on a partisan agenda set against corporate greenwashing or climate denialism. Global capitalism is clearly,

according to scientific research, political actions and our changing reality, hitting the limits of the environment and its delicate ecosystems. These alterations have brought dramatic changes in how we imagine the future. It is not that a large part of science fiction and fantasy has already had turned from a utopian to a dystopian future imaginary,<sup>4</sup> and that the demise of socialism intensified this process is old news. However, the imagery of the apocalyptic future, of the unpredictable and uncontrollable force of nature, has been evoked in the very name of neo-partisan ecological groups: “extinction” rebellion, “last” generation, etc. Scenario building and imagination of apocalypse has then been very often presented as a restriction to thinking about a different and alternative future that would drive us beyond the religious trope of Last Judgment and sins for which humanity will finally need to pay.

**IN THIS ARTICLE** I would like to contribute some preliminary research on the Yugoslav *partisan ecology* that could be of help both for thinking about the artistic lineage and heritage of the oppressed of World War II, and also for giving a clear – partisan – position that is engaged in our present. I will be examine those

practices of partisan ecology that were able to rupture from the ongoing state of “primitive accumulation of capital”.<sup>5</sup> These practices imagine and already materialize a world where community-in-resistance develops a coexisting and non-extractivistic relation to nature. The term partisan, and decolonial, ecology is also influenced by the work of two authors; Andreas Malm’s short text on the maroon partisans and wilderness, and Malcom

**“PARTISAN ARTISTS  
CREATED THOUSANDS  
OF DRAWINGS, NOVELS,  
GRAPHIC WORKS,  
SCULPTURES, PHOTOS,  
EVEN SYMPHONIES  
AND FILMS.”**

Ferdinand’s book on decolonial ecology that gives a fascinating reading of Caribbean modernity in the light of resistance to colonial and environmental fractures.<sup>6</sup> Both authors present us with a compelling emancipatory trajectory of the former slaves who built alternative communities from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Former/emancipated slaves received the name maroon<sup>7</sup> and escaped from plantations deep into the mountains, marshlands and forests, where living conditions were difficult. Their lives were endangered: previously as slaves, and later too their fight for freedom in the dense vegetation was continuous. Nevertheless, maroon communities expanded and constituted a different, autonomous form of living that among other things relied on a more organic relationship with nature. Maroons remained militarily vigilant guerrilla fighters who occasionally intensified raids on the plantations and freed other slaves. In this respect they kept fighting against the oppressive forms of the plantation system, and against the most violent side of the primitive accumulation of capital. For Malm, the transition to fossil capitalism is internally linked to colonialism, and is most heavily felt by the colonized peoples and on the peripheries of the world system; while for Ferdinand it is also vital to see that maroon transformative resistance offered a utopian horizon, and he takes this

as an epistemological departure point in rethinking Caribbean histories.

Neither of these two mentioned works focused on the artistic dimension of the partisan maroon struggles, but their theoretical frame informs my ongoing research. In my research I will first need to align the Yugoslav partisan case into the general transhistorical solidarity/lineage, which Walter Benjamin already called for as a recovery of the “tradition of the oppressed”.<sup>8</sup> Having in mind a very different historical context (from the Caribbean), I analyze the resistance to the fascist occupation in Yugoslavia during World War II. There are a few immediate similarities in partisan practices and sensibility to their environments. In a similar vein to the maroons, Yugoslav partisans – in order to survive and become/remain free – were forced to take refuge in the dense forests and mountains of the Balkans. These sites of refuge turned into veritable sites of resistance and constituent power. The Communist Party, along the partisan self-organization with people, developed alternative political and cultural counter-institutions in the liberated areas. Partisan art played a vital role in creating this imaginary of a different world. What also needs to be taken into account is that their *modus operandi* was very mobile since liberated territories disappeared, were expanded, or partisans needed to move in entirely different regions, sometime in a matter of weeks. The whole liberation struggle can be seen as a long reterritorializing movement and guerrilla warfare. Yugoslav antifascist resistance did not merely oppose the fascist occupation but was designed as a fight against the prewar Kingdom of Yugoslavia; that is, it targeted the exploitation and domination of people, and war itself as domination over nature.

IT IS NOT SURPRISING that within the partisan struggle, the “people’s liberation struggle” in Yugoslavia, nature, forest, animals, and plants played a vital part in the partisan way of life and imaginary, as is here claimed, forming a sort of partisan ecology. What is perhaps more surprising is that even in the most recent scholarship on partisan struggle and partisan art, there has been no serious study on this dimension and relation. One will find Marija Stanonik’s short analyses on nature in partisan poems; Lojze Gostiša analyzed some allegorical motifs of animals in graphic art; and in an appendix to his book, Miklavž Komelj gives a short overview of “becoming animal” in some poetic-literary partisan works.<sup>9</sup> However, the broader analysis of partisan art and symbolic politics, the relationship of partisans to nature, and the role of nature in art, has been hitherto missing in analyses.

### Partisan birch/art: between propaganda and modernism?

The material presented will not be used in order to canonize and elevate nature and landscape in partisan art. Rather, my initial hypothesis is to show how selected artworks that worked with the non-human – such as plants, forests and animals – became not only allegories of the partisan struggle, but also took sides in the struggle and were touched by liberation. I am not look-

ing (just) for documentation of fascist terror on the animals killed and scorched earth, but on those images and poems that grasped nature dialectically, as both traces of horrific violence and promises of emancipation. In times of fascist danger there is no innocent nature, or trees, which evokes a contemporaneous trope of Walter Benjamin putting forward “politicization of aesthetics” against the fascist “aestheticization of politics” – or Brecht’s poetic remark that it has become almost a crime to speak of trees in the times of fascism.<sup>10</sup>

IN THE YUGOSLAV and most notably in the Slovenian liberation context the controversy about what role to ascribe to partisan art was sharpened in 1944 following a public call for drawings/paintings. The controversy is known by the name “partisan birch” (in Slovenian *partizanska breza*), since the call carried the following political directive: If someone wants to paint a tree such as a birch, then it needs to be clear that “a well-drawn birch tree cannot be a work of art if there is no rifle leaning against it or if it is not pierced by a burst shot.”<sup>11</sup> Nature would need to carry a direct representation of (military) struggle, and this is why the call was deemed propagandist, and carrying a decree/directive. The text was immediately challenged by many communists and diverse partisan artists in the public debate that articulated an autonomist position (that also prevailed). Many retroactive interpretations of this controversy – which were sustained throughout socialist times – claimed that we were dealing with a typical dichotomy between a socialist realist / propagandist side and an autonomist, modernist side that supported the autonomy of artists.

However, a close reading shows that both sides were not so far apart: the autonomist (later modernist) perspective never argued that there is such a thing as value-free, unpolitical art. Even more within the liberation struggle will any work of art become political; while also, what was deemed propagandistic neither excluded any particular art form from partisan art, nor could we claim that socialist realism was a predominant frame of liberation art. The retrospective dichotomy was overcome by the partisan art practice itself: to follow neither propaganda nor partisan modernism/avant-gardism as the guide for practice. Rather, as I tried to show in my book,<sup>12</sup> in the rich artistic material, from graphic or written to oral and music formats, we will find a mixture of modernist, expressionist, avant-gardist, but also propagandistic, vernacular, and folkloric tendencies and legacies. There were no pure partisan forms; what one witnessed was rather a dramatic reversal of who is a producer of art, of what is produced for whom. Those in the struggle were producing for those in the struggle, while the forms were rather a hybrid of amateurish and elitist, produced by new and some established leftist artists, who used scarce material in very inventive ways. Within graphic art we could for example find very expressionist, surrealist, but also social realist and propagandistic drawings, posters, and engravings. Elsewhere I claimed there was no singular tendency that was hegemonic, but a multiplicity of styles and forms that expressed partisan politicization of aesthetics, the drive, affect and imaginary of people’s liberation.





France Mihelič, Ožgana tepka/Scorched pear tree, 1944, črna kreda/black chalk, 38 cm x 27,5 cm, RI-11964.

### Case studies: nature becomes partisan?

Departing from the controversy of partisan birch let me give one striking example of a partisan tree, a drawing that became a famous partisan graphic, called *Scorched Pear Tree* (ožgana tepka).

#### *Scorched pear tree*

This work was by France Mihelič, who was one of the more famous expressionist graphic artists and produced quite a vast graphic portfolio where (dead) nature and burned trees have an important place. I would like to suggest that the scorched pear tree does not only represent an emblem of fascist war. It is true, as Tina Fortič Jakopič argued, that the scorched tree can be seen as a victim of fascist war, but perhaps there are two further moments to stress: rather than victims, scorched trees are “material witnesses” of war. In a move that isolates and makes the tree autonomous from the landscape, – we not only embellish a trace of violence, but also underline a sign of resisting landscape. Komelj highlighted Mihelič’s rather antimilitaristic stance:

**Mihelič maintains that trees are important precisely in their concreteness and foreignness and that the very standpoint from which we become aware of their**

**importance is also the standpoint from which we can resist the attempt at any aestheticization of war devastation [...] antimilitarist.<sup>13</sup>**

Although part of the wood is dead, its horrific form persists and can be a striking exemplification of partisan resilience and resilience of the struggle: an emblem of partisan ecology.

Furthermore, if Mihelič became famous through a joint venture during the struggle – he made a fascinating graphic map, *Our Struggle*, with Nikolaj Pirnat – his most visionary and inspiring graphic work can be found in his series of drawings *Apocalypse*. He captured the dimensions of destruction of villages, people, nature; signs of violence, rape and torture form an apocalyptic landscape not easily captured by photo or film lenses. There is one striking drawing – which also later became a graphic artwork, a linoleum cut, called *Traces* (*sledovi*).

#### *Traces* (Blood's brotherhood)

Tina Fortič Jakopič argues that this particular drawing “encapsulates the stage of total ruin, while at the same time it shows the moment where everything calms down and silences ... the only surviving beings are two crows”.<sup>14</sup> The only surviving beings: animals. This slowing down is symptomatic, since most other images and graphic art from Mihelič represent movement, of people, partisans, fascists, and other figures. In contrast to those, both *Scorched Pear Tree* and *Traces* seem to become standstills of war, where life becomes still, and can be seen as a temporary result of the movements of war.



France Mihelič, Sledovi (Krvava bratovščina) /Traces (Blood's brotherhood), linorez/linoleum cut, 1945, 17 x 14,80 cm, GR-63.

The next groups of examples deal with forest, which as mentioned was not only the primary site of refuge for partisans, but also a primary site of political organization and resistance, a laboratory of people’s power. Animals, and the forest itself, became a major part of partisan and artistic sensibility. Despite Marija Stanonik’s suggestion that within partisan poetry the representation of nature is not as predominant as one would expect, we still have a multiplicity of visual and written material that highlights forest as new political space. Even more, forest becomes a direct allusion to the partisan struggle itself (cf., Komelj 2008). I would like to quote one section from Zoran Hudales’ Senoviški poem that holds a fascinating transition turning partisan fortresses into partisan choirs – choirs being the most popular and mass poetic form and praxis of the partisan struggle:



[...] forests, green fortresses,  
murmur of struggles, heroes and victory ....  
Murmur/rustle over the ground where dear ones have  
fallen.  
Murmur proud, bud and stand!  
With the wind mighty to the far distances  
Sing especially a song of freedom.<sup>15</sup>

The transition from immobile fortress of nature to those choirs given a voice is accompanied by a small shift from murmuring and mourning of the fallen to singing songs of freedom that become extremely mobile and spread to far distances, even to the occupied cities. A similar rhythm and resilience can be traced in various inscriptions of the caged, bruised, and battered birds, and also those birds that cannot be caged, or those that get free. A partisan bird continues to sing despite the impossible circumstances, despite not being heard because of fascist bombs or restrictions to speaking in non-German languages. Despite restrictions and thorns, the partisan bird keeps singing and awakening the people (see another strong poem from Radajev, 1944, *Sing birds*). Birds thus became a strong visual trope; one of the most famous examples was a nightingale singing on a branch of thorns.

#### Nightingale

The image was included in some printed partisan poem collections. One could even say, emphatically, that such emblems from nature helped to substitute the typical figurative heroic representation of male or female partisans. This bird stands as the index and symbol of the partisan resistance as such.

Tree, forest, and a bird are perhaps too handy examples of partisan – liberation art. Let me

turn now to the more horrific representation, or representation of beasts that have always served to cement the border between human/civilization, and animal, or in a more propagandistic genre, the other side: Fascists would be then expected to be seen as beasts/wolves that prey on »our« people/innocent sheep. However, in various poems, stories, and visual arts one can trace positive references to wolves, and wolf-partisans. From the first partisan reportage made by partisan poet Matej Bor, and his partisan drama from 1942 *Torn/Ragged (Raztrganci)*, Bor used wolves in a clear connection to partisan subjectivity, to becoming partisan-wolves. Also, strikingly, the very first partisan poem printed in Delo in December 1941, *Sing after me (Pojte za menoj)*, not signed but written by the major Slovenian poet Oton Župančič, also ended with a reference to wolves. The song calls



Ive Šubic, Ilustracija za Pesmi Simona Gregorčiča. Illustration for Poems of Simon Gregorčič, linoleum cut, 8 cm x 5 cm, inv. nr. GR-632.

people to arms against the fascist occupation and collaboration, and concludes:

then the wolf assembly  
goes to slaughter the hunters.

The assembly of wolves, a “pack of wolves” can be found as becoming a force of fierce resistance, some of whose positive legacy comes from the broader Balkan imaginary (see also Komelj 2008). I suggest here not to take this as a mere metaphor, but rather as an imaginary that sets a political process in motion, what Deleuze and Guattari call “becoming animal”.<sup>16</sup> The latter is defined by a movement from major/the constant to minor/the variable, where deterritorialization marks a nomadic modality of becoming: Partisan struggle, due to its intensity and specific site of struggle, overcoming the border between human and animal. Importantly, such a political reading goes against a retrospective and relativizing liberal-humanist trope that insists on holding to the distinction between humans and animals. Such a trope ascribes horrors of war to humans that became animals (circular argument: because of the war). Such argumentation exculpates humans from horrific deeds: fascist deeds, but also the antifascist struggle for revisionists; these were so inhuman because of the war ideology, because of them departing from human/civilized nature. This presupposes that war is foreign to human nature, or that human beings in times of peace and stability are somehow innocent, civilized, and do not do anything so horrific as preparing grounds for annihilation. It is only war that makes humans into beasts. The metaphor and distinction contributes to the decontextualization of war, here the struggle against fascism, while it is also not factually correct. Biologically and environmentally, the non-human world evidently has no human morality, but follows its own dynamic, laws, selections, adaptations and symbioses that balance ecosystems, while no animal species or beasts exterminate within their own or other species, or build concentration camps with the most perfect industrialist precision. The alternative partisan poetic-literary-political trajectory puts forward a new identification that partisans needed to become the beasts in order to beat the fascists, that it sometimes takes the whole existential engagement to win the struggle. The process of overcoming the binary separation between human and animal is thus highly critical towards the moralizing humanist trope and can be traced in many artworks of that time.

Yet again one of the most emblematic form of visual representation of the beast will be found in France Mihelič’s cycle *Apocalypse*. Some authors entitled the image a screaming dog, but I would like to suggest reading this image as a howling wolf (or even a partisan or a dog becoming a wolf?). Tina Fortič Jakopič analyzed this image as the depiction of a wandering dog as the last one left (besides the two crows already mentioned), who can only howl to the sky in despair. But again, adding a small dialectical twist, this howling wolf can be seen as calling for vengeance, as calling others to arms, to join the emerging assembly and pack of partisan-wolves.



France Mihelič, Tuleči pes (Cikel Apokalipsa)/Howling dog (cylce Apocalypse), tuš s čopičem / ink with brush, 1944, 21 x 17 cm, RI-15148.

### Howling dog

Partisan printing contributed a range of poetry and literature for children – there were partisan hospitals in the liberated areas – and within this poetry for children I found a little cartoon that accompanied a poem called *Animals Help* (*Živali pomagajo*), published in 1944.

**That night at full moon  
The animals of the forest gathered  
They came together in unison:  
“We will help the Partisans!”<sup>17</sup>**

Cartoon accompanying the poem *Animals Help*. Some animals become couriers, others patrol, again all are partaking in the partisan struggle against fascist occupation. Also importantly, many partisans took animal names when they entered detachments. One of the last key animals present in various stories, poems, graphic maps, photos, and drawings is undoubtedly a mule, or a horse. These were essentially partisans’ most vital means of transport, also a symbol of victimhood and resistance, and a strong part of the constant partisan marching columns.



Animals help / *Živali pomagajo*. Source: Slovenski pionir, april 1944, pp. 9–10. Comic that accompanies a poem.

### Column in snow

Some of the most striking figures that represented a mule and a horse are those of Ive Šubic, who refers to the mule by name, or to a horse as a “comrade”, which points not only to overcoming the distinction between human and animal, but to the animal belonging to the political camp. This very much evokes the thought that Oxana Timofeeva – closely reading Platonov whose concern and utopia implied the whole planet – suggested: “In his writings, not only humans, but all living creatures, including plants, are overwhelmed by the *desire for communism*”.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Platonov, the horse’s comradely back; in the case of Šubic his comradely face and never ending support in their joint quest for liberation.



Ive Šubic, Kolona v snegu/Column in snow, linorez/linoleum cut, 1944, 18,5 x 14,3 cm, GR-66b.

### Partisan mule Jaka

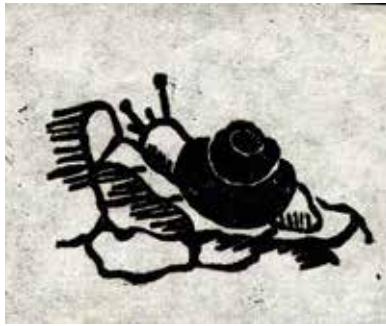
Finally, I would like to mention the image of an animal that might not be seen as struggling in the first lines of partisan struggle: a snail. A snail might be seen as moving too slowly compared to horses, wolves, birds, neither being fierce, nor really able to form assemblies like wolves, not really able to sing a song that would mobilize nature and masses to the joint struggle, or transport the wounded and food for the whole detachment. However, a snail represents the most central feature, attitude and affect of the partisan struggle itself. The snail embodies resilience and a painstaking, long, enduring walk of resistance and liberation of the partisans. A snail also always carries its house, portraying a certain detachment from property and state and pointing to the deterritorializing movement of partisan troops. This feature was also evoked by Che Guevara and different anticolonial struggles.



Ive Šubic, Partizanska mula “Jaka”/ Partisan mule Jaka, svinčnik/pencil 1944, 24,5 x 19,4 cm, RI-676.

### Snail

The snail is thus a fitting embodiment of deterritorializing logic that performs constant movement. The snail is a figure that can be juxtaposed to the telluric dimension of belonging eternally to one “homeland”. Let us remember that precisely the attachment to soil was so important in Carl Schmitt’s definition of the partisan figure. For him, partisan formation is distinguished by mobility and irregularity and overdetermined by the telluric attachment. Partisans love and fight for the soil, which we can read as an echo of fascist *Blut und Boden* ideology.<sup>19</sup> For the partisan snail, like the old mole that digs, over and under the soil, it is all about redefining and transforming what the land/country is. For partisan snails, land is not part of a predefined organic national substance, where blood from soil defines its past and future (of a chosen nation) but will transform the land itself and identities in the course of the struggle.<sup>20</sup>



Alenka Gerlovič, Polž /Snail (Ilustracije za Slovenski pionir, 1945, št. 1), linorez/lino-leum cut, 1945, 5 x 6,2 cm, GR-24.

**TO CONCLUDE**, I argued that the Yugoslav partisan struggle and their artistic activities, among other things, produced a strong ecological sensibility, a non-extractivist relationality with the non-human world. We find different depictions, caricatures, allegorical motifs, narrative and representative power invested in the forest, animals and plants. Partisan autonomy and liberated territories were enabled by the deep forests, while they turned refuge into political spaces, and mobilized the non-human world in their struggle against fascism. In the short selection and analysis of some poems, short stories, drawings, and graphic art, animals are not a simple allegory; rather the partisan struggle is marked by a process of becoming (human) animal, by overcoming of distinction between animal and human, enlisting animals as comrades in arms in the fight against fascism. Partisan ecology thus acts and imagines a world without arms or wars, but also a world that challenges and develops beyond growth and profit. ✖

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- 9 Marija Stanonik, *Iz kaosa v kozmos: Kontekstualnost in žanrski sistem slovenskega odporiškega pesništva 1941–1945* [From Chaos to Cosmos: Contextuality and Genre System of Slovenian Resistance Poetry 1941–1945] (Ljubljana: Society for the Study of History, Literature and Anthropology, 1995); Miklavž Komelj, *Kako misliti; Mihelič France and Gostiša Lojze. 1994. Franceta Miheliča Balada o Drevesu : 1941–1945*. [How to think; Mihelič France and Gostiša Lojze. 1994. France Mihelič’s Ballad of a Tree: 1941–1945] (Ljubljana: Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2008).
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- 12 Gal Kirn, *Partisan Counter-Archive*.
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- 18 Oxana Timofeeva, *History of Animals* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 168.
- 19 For my criticism of Schmitt, again Kirn Gal, *Partisan ruptures*.
- 20 Snail is also one of the most important figures of Zapatista movement and their walking into alternative future.





PHOTO © ATELIER SHALEV-GERZ, RETOUCHEE

Esther Shalev-Gerz & Jochen Gerz, *Monument Against Fascism*, 1986, permanent installation Hamburg-Harburg, Germany.

# Concepts for contemporary monuments

by **Rebecka Katz Thor**

## abstract

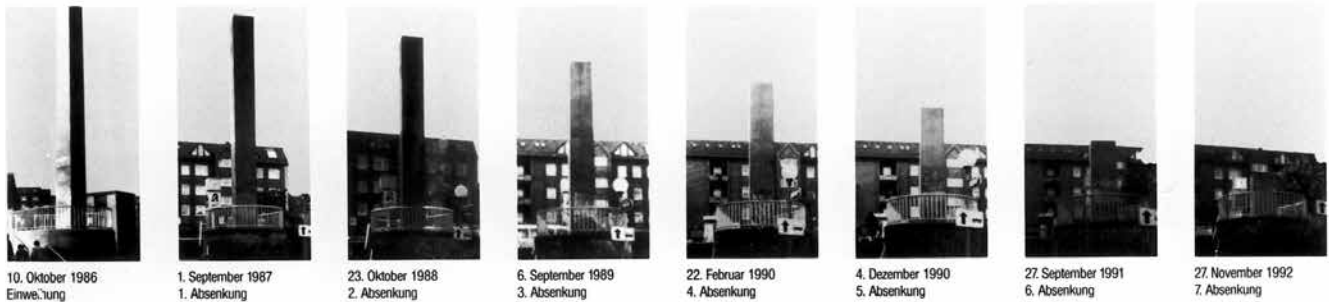
What concepts can we apply to understand the current wave of new monuments? In this article I suggest labeling them post-monuments, related to the commissioning body's implied interest in what is commemorated, on the one hand, and the possibility of making amends, on the other. The concept builds on the one suggested by James Young in the early 1990's "counter-monuments" regarding the German memorial culture of the time. I address how post-monuments can be seen as a future-oriented rectification, repair, and response.

**KEYWORDS:** Monuments, memory, post-monuments, counter-monuments, repair.

"We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 meter-high lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely and the site of the Harburg monument against fascism will be empty. In the long run, it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."

*Jochen Gerz & Esther Shavel Gerz*





The images show how the *Monument Against Fascism* gradually was lowered into the ground.

PHOTO: © ATELIER SHALEV-GERZ\_RETouched

In 1979 the Harburg district of Hamburg initiated a process for a monument against fascism to counter the wave of Neo-Fascism in the city. Artist duo Esther Shavel Gerz and Jochen Gerz won the commission to create *The Monument Against Fascism*, and it was realized in 1986. A 12-meter-high column clad in lead with a one-meter-square perimeter was installed in a central square. The conceptual framework included an invitation to the residents of the city to engrave their names directly onto the surface of the monument with the metal pencil provided to ratify a common statement about fascism. When one surface was covered by inscriptions, the monument was progressively lowered into the ground, making new surfaces accessible. After seven years, only the top of the monument was visible; from the side of the structure, it was still also possible to glimpse the column. The monument is contextualized with a text giving the background to the project. Their idea sprung, according to their own account, from their first discussion about the competition when Jochen Gerz approached Esther Shavel Gerz with the proposal and she responded by asking why another monument was needed at all: “We have too many already. What we need is one that disappears.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1990s, James Young coined the term “counter-monuments” regarding the German memorial culture of the time, in which the monument was doubted as an incitement of public memory.<sup>2</sup> Young describes a new type of memorial work, counter-monuments, which are in his words “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very promise of their being”.<sup>3</sup> Or as he frames it in another text: “Counter-monuments would be memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument – to be ephemeral rather than permanent, to deconstruct rather than to displace memory, to be antiredeemptive.”<sup>4</sup> The monument by the Gerzes is one of the most prominent examples of Young’s view: This monument “against” something gives way for a new conceptual understanding of what the monument both is and does.<sup>5</sup> It is an expression of what is considered important enough not only to remember, but also to make a mark against. Hence, it ad-

resses a wrongdoing of the past and articulates a societal refusal of such ideology in the present. The fascist past is literally buried in a sense, yet the processes were tainted by neo-Nazi slogans on the monument, which testify to the impossibility of burying the past in any sense.<sup>6</sup> This monument, and how it is understood by Young, has since then come to shape the debate on monuments which do not follow a conservative nation-building tradition.<sup>7</sup>

YOUNG’S NOTION of a vernacular memory and its expression as a negative form first appears with Maya Lin’s *Vietnam memorial* in Washington in 1981. Lin, at the time a 21-year-old architecture student, was commissioned through an open competition to create the monument, which turned out to be a decisive moment in the

**“WHEN ONE SURFACE WAS COVERED BY INSCRIPTIONS, THE MONUMENT WAS PROGRESSIVELY LOWERED INTO THE GROUND, MAKING NEW SURFACES ACCESSIBLE.”**

history of monuments. The memorial’s triangular shape cuts into the ground, instead of rising as most traditional monuments would. Another of Young’s prominent examples at the time is the memorial to the Nazi book burning, conceived by sculptor Micha Ullman in 1995. *The Empty Library*, or *Bibliothek*, take the negative form even further as it is a subterranean room lined with empty white bookshelves, beneath a glass plate in the pavement on the square where in 1933, the Nazis burned over 20 000 books by mainly Jewish and communist authors. The equivalent number of books would fit on the shelves of the memorial. Yet another, more contemporary example, that also show how the negative form has remained and developed, is Jonas Dahlberg’s unrealized monument, *Memory Wound*, intended to commemorate the victims of the far-right massacre on Utøya in Norway in 2011. Young has also written on this monument, but the affinity between Dahlberg’s proposal and Lin’s memorial are striking to anyone.

Dahlberg’s proposal caused strong reactions, and the project was eventually cancelled. The point of departure for an intense debate on the means of commemoration, and, above all, who needs to be confronted with this memory, was triggered by the design itself—a wound in the island. Dahlberg’s proposal involved physically taking a slice out of a peninsula facing the island, thus creating a gap separating two land masses from each



Esther Shalev-Gerz & Jochen Gerz, *Monument Against Fascism*, 1986, permanent installation Hamburg-Harburg, Germany.

other. A material and metaphorical wound that would convey a symbolic violence in that it could never heal. Therein, perhaps, lies one reason for the immense opposition to the work among those who live in the area, but also its artistic strength.

IN LIGHT OF THE IDEA of counter-monuments, and the concept of post-monuments that I propose for a certain kind of contemporary monuments, I briefly want to return to the Latin origin of the word monument, *monumentum*. It literally translates as “something that reminds” and is one of the ways in which monuments have been used historically: as reminders or celebrations of a nation’s or a person’s deeds or glory. However, there are also other aspects at play in terms of figuration, symbolism, and space. Monuments are not to be equated to public sculpture, and one of the things that differentiate them is that the monument has a mission foreign to the essential openness of artworks. As I have discussed elsewhere, a monument performs something specific, while works of art can do infinitely many things.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, the question of expectations regards both the monument’s function from the point of view of the one commissioning it, and how it comes to be interpreted in the public space. On the other hand, there is an underlying constant negotiation of what a monument is expected to do and what it does. The commission of a monument is often slightly different than that of a permanent public artwork in terms of a designated memorializing theme, which should also be reflected in the artistic expression.

In German there is a seemingly helpful distinction between *Denkmal* and *Manhmal*, where the former tends to refer to deeds and moments of glory, and the latter commemorates and memorializes victims of war and suffering. Yet in practice there is no such clear division. The monument for the Jewish victims in

the Holocaust, for example, is called *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*, but also there are colloquial terms such as the *Holocaust-Mahnmal*. Such a conceptual division does not exist in Swedish or English, even if several concepts are in flux, i.e. the English terms “monuments”, “memorials”, and “memory art”. The German *Gedenkstätte* or *Manhmal* implies a call to action, to remember rather than memorialize, and to mourn rather than to honor as the *Ehrenmal*. In Swedish there are concepts that translate as “memorial site” (minnesplats), “memorial mark” (minnesmärke), or “memory care” (minnesvård) with a similar implication of mourning, whereas “monument” remains an overarching category, spanning from statues of kings, commemorations of victims of natural disasters, to contemporary performative interventions labeled by artists or commissioners as “monuments”. To call a work of art a monument inscribes it in a certain (art)history and implies a claim of a mission and motif of memorializing.

The purpose of the concept I suggest is to understand the processes around contemporary monuments dedicated to what are often labelled as “difficult pasts” such as a fascist legacy or as present expressions of authoritarianism or racism. The post-monument concept aims to capture what is at stake in the commemorative processes and what differentiates these processes from other monuments. It is related to the commissioning body’s implied interest in what is commemorated, on the one hand, and the possibility of making amends on the other. This term is a tool or framework to analyze the monuments at hand and to capture similarities in their missions. Yet neither the concept nor the application does justice to the specific histories these monuments seek to commemorate. I reflect on how such monuments encompass a temporal continuation in the form of reparative work and might enhance a rupture, an end, and a

new beginning all at once.

As I argue in an article focusing on post-monuments, they are defined by a conflict of continuity and rupture, where they both entail historical violence of oppression and racism, and simultaneously a wish from the commissioner to recover and offer repair, even though that which it seeks to commemorate is also a present issue.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the specificity of such monuments resides in a structural condition of conflict between what they com-

**“[...] A MONUMENT PERFORMS SOMETHING SPECIFIC, WHILE WORKS OF ART CAN DO INFINITELY MANY THINGS.”**

memorate and who commissions them. That is, in the flows and power relations present between what is commemorated, who is doing the commemorating, and by which means and expressions, and the temporal status of both the memorialized and the monument. They differ from a general notion of monuments in what they commemorate and by their processes, since they commemorate violence and oppression that is associated with shame rather than a collective grief or pride. What is crucial in this discussion is that these monuments are defined by their processes as much as their motifs (the aim to memorialize).



Rendering for the LBTQI+monumentet *Gläntan* (*The Glade*) at Esperantoplatsen, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2022.

IMAGE: NEW ORDER ARKITEKTUR AND CONNY KARLSSON LUNDGREN

A PRELIMINARY DEFINITION of post-monuments could include three main factors:

1. They commemorate a difficult heritage, a structural wrongdoing in the past that society has not yet come to terms with.
2. They are commissioned, funded, initiated, or built by the same governing body that was structurally, legally, or symbolically responsible for the oppression or wrongdoing that it wishes to commemorate.
3. They are conceptualized in a framework of vulnerability and repair.

THE COMMISSIONING of post-monuments facilitates structures for commemoration of difficult heritages, violent pasts, or oppression. As such, they are processes ruled by what they seek to transmit (the subject matter that the monument should commemorate), the effect of the commission to that transmission (for example, when a city frames a form of oppression as something of the past rather than the present) and the transmissive shape or form (the possible success or failure of the aesthetic expression).

The core of “post” is a question of temporality, which in the context of monuments and commemorations is complex. Firstly, all monuments are ruled by a temporal structure that is at least three-sided: the time that they commemorate, the time that they are built, and the temporal instances when they are encountered and interpreted by a viewer. This is evident in relation to the demands to remove statues, for example. Secondly, monuments tend to be perceived as a form of closure, hence a rupture between a before and an after, an ethical and temporal coming to terms with and moving beyond. Thirdly, monuments “fix” an historical event in time, they monumentalize what they seek to commemorate and imply a non-forgetting, which is also both ethical and temporal.

THE NOTION OF “post” stems from Marianne Hirsch’s work on post-memory. Her term relates to how memory is intergenera-

tional and proposed in an era of many “posts”, as she herself recognizes, which we are no longer in. She first formulated the concept of post-memory in the early 1990s, and has developed it since. However, one can argue that “post” belong in the past context of “post-colony”, “post-secular”, “post-human” etc.,<sup>10</sup> whereas today it is more relevant to understand our era in terms of “de-” or “un-”, of “decoloniality”, and of “unlearning”, for example. Yet Hirsch insists that post-memory both shares features with other “posts” such as:

**their belatedness, aligning itself with the practice of citation and mediation that characterize them, marking a particular end-of-century/turn-of-century moment of looking backward rather than ahead and of defining the present in relation to a troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms and that it is not a mere method or idea but a “structure” of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience.<sup>11</sup>**

If monuments in a general sense are understood as simultaneously aimed toward both past and future, these monuments have a more complex temporal structure. Post-monuments might be understood as durational and/or open-ended. Further, as discussed above, the “post” does not demark a move from one thing to another but a relation between pasts and presents, which is negotiated in terms of continuity and ruptures. These monuments are also “post” in relation to the commissioning body, since many of these the initiatives do not come from “above” as in conventional processes of public monuments, but are formed by activists or civil society. The “post” should not be understood as designating a specific time (like post-Soviet, postwar, postmodern etc.) but as a state of contingency, of being defined by a past that one also wishes to take a stand against and be responsible for.

They are embedded in a framework of vulnerability and repair as an attempt of societies to respond to a violent past. This



framework is temporally based and holds unstable positions and acts. To take the notion of vulnerability seriously, a temporal negotiation and reevaluation must remain central. It is a situated knowledge, and the threshold allows for new or other situations. This ties into what contemporary monuments are expected to do, and to label them as post-monuments is an attempt to expose this *doing*. Hence, labeling a sort of contemporary monuments as “post” does not indicate primarily that they temporally succeed some other type of monument, but that they imply in their conceptual formulation that a particular episode of oppression or a violent past is now part of a history that calls for a response.

The concept above all addresses the history of monuments, their subject matter, and forms of aesthetic expression. Hence, not as after monuments, but monuments that are “post” in the sense discussed above. I suggest a “post” rather than “counter” or “para” against the backdrop of Young’s term countermonuments and the recent suggestion by Nora Sternfeld as she proposed another concept, the “para-monument”. She describes how her and Young’s concepts differ, since the para-monument does not address the idea of a monument negatively but appropriates the form and discourse of the powerful monuments in order to turn these properties against them – hence it is neither “against” the monument nor defined by it.<sup>12</sup> For her, a para-monument is dominated by the quality of being near, next to, and going along with, both spatially and temporally speaking. Thus, her concept is in stark contrast to Young’s memorial spaces which have a self-refuting quality embedded in them, both conceptually and aesthetically. The notion of post-monuments draws on and departs from these two notions in the sense that it is nor counter and nor going along with. However, all three concepts share a sort of foundational reflexivity.

**I CAME TO THIS** concept as a response to the wave of new monuments that can currently be observed in Sweden; both in what is being monumentalized, and in how it is being done. These monuments can be read against a backdrop of the past decade’s international debate on monuments, from the 2015 *Rhodes Must Fall* movement in South Africa, demanding the removal of statues of Apartheid leaders, to the toppling of statues in connection to *Black Lives Matter* in 2020. Although in Sweden similar demands never reached beyond the culture section of the daily press, these current monuments can be seen as directly linked to these movements; not only in what they memorialize, but also in terms of how the processes are considered and conceived. That is, how and by whom the monuments are initiated, commissioned, and potentially realized. The current manifold commissions of monuments in Sweden can thus be seen as a reaction upon the topics and demands raised and as a proactive act towards possible demands in the future. Among the monuments that are discussed, produced or recently inaugurated in Sweden are a monument over Swedish Colonialism (process between 2019–2021, discontinued), a LGBTQI+ monument in Gothenburg (inaugurated November 2023), an antiracist monument in Malmö (will be inaugurated 2025), a Seyfo memorial to the Assyrian genocide of 1915 (process between 2019–2022, discontinued),

several monuments to war veterans (from 2019-present), a handful of monuments honoring the Roma population (the most ambitious one inaugurated in Gothenburg 2020) and one celebrating 100 years of Swedish democracy (inaugurated June 2022).

**ALTHOUGH THE EXAMPLES** range from traditional monuments to experimental modes of remembrance in terms of theme, form, and conceptualization, they share a feature of shedding light on events and histories previously not present in public spaces. The oppressions and discriminations as thematized in these monuments should be considered on a structural level. The question of what it means to create such monuments must be reiterated. At the time of writing, it is one month before the dedication of the LGBTQI+ monument, *The Glade*, by Conny Karlsson Lundgren. It might pass mainly unnoticed and become part of the invisibility of an everyday public landscape or it might cause an intense debate, the two contrary poles ruling the discourse and faith of public art. But will it do something more? Will it offer some kind of apology for those who suffered under Swedish discriminatory laws or mark for contemporary citizens that such oppression is a matter of the past? Will it become a stage and a site to hang out as the design suggests? Hence, what I have aimed to show is that post-monuments like this should evoke a future-oriented rectification, repair, response or even a societal change. ✕

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# POST-COMMUNIST MEMORY IN THE NEGATIVE

by Tora Lane

## abstract

This essay takes the novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* by Dubravka Ugrešić as a starting point for a discussion of why the notion of a post-Yugoslav or post-communist cultural memory seems to be a contradiction in terms. The manifest impossibility of forming a collective post-Yugoslav memory provokes a reflection on how cultural and collective memory has been used in post-communist Eastern Europe to historicize the communist past, which further has served the revival of a nationalist agenda. Ugrešić offers a counter memory, if we understand the term from Foucault as something that escapes the forming of identities. Finally, I suggest the notion of negative memory, as introduced by Reinhardt Koselleck, as a more apposite term for approaching memory in the post-communist sphere and in the unfolding catastrophes of the modern world.

**KEYWORDS:** Dubravka Ugrešić, Memory novel, memory politics, counter memory, negative memory.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1997), which belongs to the genre of the memory novel, Dubravka Ugrešić reflects on “the condition called exile”, as the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky termed it, through different auto-fictional stories from her personal experience of the fall of communism and its aftermath in the 1990s. Yet the exilic pathos that we found amongst writers in exile from the communist regime such as Brodsky or Miłosz is downplayed, if not to say inverted in the novel. Ugrešić did not escape from communism, but from the ethno-nationalism of post-communist Croatia. And there is no sense of retrieval of a lost home through memory, no nostalgia, because estrangement is everywhere – in the present and in the past, in the West and in the

East. If there ever was a homeland for the writer and main character, it was Socialist Yugoslavia, but how to relate to that historically existing political construction and its loss remains unclear. In this ambivalence, the novel opens the question of what sense of meaning there is to be held from the past and the present in the context of the fall of communism. And with Ugrešić we can ask the question whether there actually can be a cultural memory of the communist states, not only because there is no communist state any longer, and because the memory of this recent past is being silenced, but also because the very idea of an enduring cultural or collective memory is contrary to a notion of universalist communality that lives on in the post-communist legacy.

## Framing the lack of a memory

The title, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, refers in direct terms to a museum dedicated to the surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945, but as the novel proceeds we begin to suspect that it indirectly bespeaks what we can understand as the unconditional surrender of communism in Eastern Europe. Through memory fragments, photographs, and narratives of the lives of people that the post-Yugoslav writer has met, she gropes for what they seem to be saying to her about the experience of the communist past, the transition to the liberal capitalist West and the rebirth of the Balkan nation states. In its rather inconspicuous attempt to understand, the novel constitutes a patchwork of fragmented memories evoked in the form of diary entries, ruminations on photographs, or simply reflections on different themes and shorter stories, and it never becomes clear what all these stories really can say to us, together or apart. The different pieces are to be read, as the author writes, like the belly of the sea elephant at Berlin Zoo that had swallowed different pieces of junk, with a narrative woven by chance



Dubravka  
Ugrešić.

DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

MAURICE  
HALBWACHS

JAN & ALEIDA  
ASSMANN

HANNAH  
ARENDT

ASTRID ERLI

REINHARDT  
KOSELLECK

SUSAN SONTAG

MICHEL FOUCAULT

OSIP MANDELSTAM

and not by any particular “meaningful coordinates of historical reconstruction”.<sup>1</sup> And as a comment on the form of this memory work, aligning her memory work with the avantgarde, Ugrešić quotes Shklovsky who wrote: “I do not want to be inventive. I do not want to construct a plot. I will write about things and thoughts. Like in a collection of quotations.”<sup>2</sup> The novel collects moments, past and present, but there is no collectivity around which these dispersed notes can be centered. In fact, it is as much the urge to collect these snapshots as their dispersion that gives the novel its tone. And while dispersion means broken and refracted light, it is a word which has the same roots as diaspora. Just as this dispersion has no original light to trace back from the scattering, it has neither an “original” people to be retrieved in exile, nor a past as a place of meaning. In the novel, we are always and everywhere already clouded in the disastrous smog of modernity, and what remains is to look into this dispersion for what it tells us of the past and the present.

**IN FACT, THE LACK OF** a collectivity and a center around which to gather the memories, impressions and expressions characterizes this novel in the vision of the historical moment that it conveys. Through the dispersed prism of a timid everydayness the writer looks with a Janus face at the crossroads of the historical line or turning point of 1989/1991 both into the *before* of communism, and into the *after* of a whirlwind of liberal democracy and national re-awakening. Ugrešić is reluctant to adhere to political narratives telling of the unambiguous greatness of this moment of freedom and democracy in the unconditional surrender of communism, making the new nation states in the new Europe the only way to a bright future. In the essay “Ostalgia” in *Nobody’s Home*, a collection of essays from 2005/2007, she writes:

**The business of remembering sometimes resembles a resistance movement, and those who do the remembering become like guerrilla warriors. There is an official version of history, espoused by the official institutions, and the professional watch guards of history who attend it. There is a personal version, one that we see to ourselves. We catalogue our lives in family albums. But there is also a third history, an alternative one, the intimate history of the everyday life we have lived. This one receives the least attention. The archeology of everyday life is the sort of thing that only oddballs care about. Yet it is the history of the commonplace which is the custodian of our most intimate recollection, more precise than any official version, and more exact and warmer than the one bound up in those family albums. For the secret of remembering is not conserved in a regional museum or a photo album, but in that little cookie, the *madeleine*, that Proust, the master writer, knew so well of.<sup>3</sup>**

She therefore goes to listen to how it is mirrored in the dissonant private intimate experiences of people unable to find a home or meaning for themselves in this world of the after. It is also in this panoply of lives and memories that she comes across a

question of the relation between the collection of memories and collectivity in the post-communist world, which we can read in the following conversation taking place amongst former citizens of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at an exhibition at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin:

‘We’ll never have a museum like this’, says Zoran.

‘How could we when the country has disappeared’, says Mira.

‘That’s why we’re all walking museum pieces ...’, says Zoran.

‘But if the country has disappeared, then so has collective memory. If the objects that surrounded us have disappeared, then so has memory of the everyday life that we lived. And besides, memory of the former country is tacitly forbidden. And when the ban is one day lifted, everyone will forget ... There’ll be nothing left to remember’, I say.

‘Then everyone will remember something that never existed ...’, says Mira.<sup>4</sup>

It is typical of this novel and of Ugrešić’s way of writing that this casual private conversation taking place amongst migrants contains a key to understanding the relation between history, memory, and politics in post-communist times as well as to the novel and the writer’s manifest unwillingness to organize the memories collected in the book into “historical coordinates”. The people speaking are migrants from the Balkans, that is, former citizens of Yugoslavia. When they say that they can have no national historical museum like the *Deutsches Museum*, in which objects from everyday life are displayed, they deplore the lack of a museum for the former Yugoslavia which is the gathering point of their history and their memories. The country is no more, that is, there is no longer any socialist Yugoslavia, and the world and the objects that constituted it disappear. The conversation mentions the effective silencing of the memory of socialist Yugoslavia in several Balkan states, or what in official circles today in Croatia is still often referred to as “the former state”. And it can be added that the almost revisionist relation to the communist past in the newborn nation states was one of the reasons why Ugrešić, who called herself post-national, left Croatia in 1993.<sup>5</sup> But more so, there are people of a past collectivity who remember this world, but while there is no place and no collective in the present for whom the memories of the former Balkan communist state are being preserved, there is also no enduring collective memory. The collective popular memory of Yugoslavia, the excerpt seems to tell us, perishes with the state that historically sustained its existence. And in turn, the Yugoslav collective exists only as a memory of a people that is no longer.

**UGREŠIĆ IS ARDENT** in her reluctance to carve out a space, an identity, or a narrative for the dispersed articulations of the experience of the recent past. And for the writer Ugrešić, the question forms itself as the question how it is possible in writing to *collect* a story out of memory fragments, when the collective this

relates to is deemed to be in the past as a failed experiment under a regime of pitiful lies. And while doing so, she distinguishes herself from the general scheme of post-communist memory writing, in which a sense of a truer other reality can be opposed to the lies of the political regime through the memory work performed in exilic writing. Ugrešić's loss of a past and present collective leads her to thematize the relation between the present and the past, in the sense that we can see how the making presence of this past in the present shapes the understanding of the past, and also in turn, how the understanding of the past shapes its making of the present.

Thus the question of exile and exile writing also comes into play, since exile also seems to presume a place of meaning that you can return to in reminiscence. Since the country where Ugrešić lived and grew up, Yugoslavia, not only does not exist anymore, but even its existence is denied as a historical parenthesis, often treated as nothing but a political, ideological construct in the face of what is often portrayed as a restored (national and nationalist) history, her exile is an exile from nowhere, with no country or collective to go back to, and with no collective subject to harbor these memories. And while there can be no Yugoslav collective memory, her memories are as dispersed as the country from which she is not in exile, which is no longer, and for which the memories can have no meaning. Just as her exilic relation to her country stretches into the present (she is in exile not from a lost Russia or Poland, as a Nabokov, a Milosz, or even as in could be imagined in the poems of Brodsky, but from the Yugoslavia that exists no longer and from actually existing Croatia – and here there is no nostalgia), there is also no clear demarcation between the past and the present in the novel. Ugrešić invites us to understand memory through her dispersed prism where there is no relation between the past and the future, just as there is no real difference between anywhere and anytime. She shows that while the past does *not* form itself into a locus of a particular historical memory, the present never acquires any coordinates or contours.

### Cultural memory and national reawakening

The moment in the museum is not only crucial for the novel and for what it says about the memory of former Yugoslavia, but it also has wide-ranging implications for a possible critique of the concepts of collective or cultural memory. It indicates that there indeed is a memory of Yugoslavia that is collective or cultural in the sense that it refers to a collective or cultural experience and meaning-making of the past, although it cannot adhere to the concept of collective memory. In other words, there is something in the notion of collective in collective memory, or, for that matter, in the notion of culture in cultural memory, which excludes not only the memory of former Yugoslavia, but also, by extension, certain post-communist memories of the communist era. And it seems that we can see *via negativa* that what prevents us from speaking of a Yugoslav collective memory is the notion of an enduring collective. The Yugoslav collective implies reference to the collective experience of a political construct, an expression

of Yugo-nostalgia. A cultural memory of Yugoslavia would be a memory that is connected not only with a no longer existing state but also with the notion of collectivity in communism, which was not founded on national or ethnic identity, but on an idea of the universal communality of the working people. Because in turn, like Ugrešić with her critique of the cultural memory politics of the newborn nation states, would not the collective memory of these nation states also imply a political construct? Can there be a Croatian cultural memory as long as there is a Croatian state? And what enduring collective or culture can there be if it is not sustained by an equally enduring political idea of the collective or the culture? Because what the conversation tells us in the end is precisely this – a collective memory can only live on as long as the idea of this collective does too. In the countries of the former Yugoslavia, there is no Yugoslav collective any longer, but amongst people on the Balkans there are memories of collective and collectivity, that in a certain sense lives on through them, but as an idea appears irretrievably lost to history. And this ambiguity of the collective memory not only concerns Croatia and other countries of the former Yugoslavia, but with some modifications, much of the post-communist world.

**WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE** of memory, the notion of collective memory as introduced by Maurice Halbwachs has been effectively criticized precisely for implying an essentializing notion of collective. Cultural memory was introduced by Jan and Aleida Assmann as a further development of the term, since it arguably does not link shared forms and places of memory to an existing collective, but can instead open to negotiating the articulations of memory of different local, regional, national or transnational groups within the wider sphere of culture. In the introduction to the handbook *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (2008), Astrid Erll proposes to consider cultural memory as an umbrella term denoting: “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts”.<sup>6</sup> The definition is very broad and runs the risk of watering down the term, blurring it in several cases with that of history. Jan Assman, however, is more specific in his contribution to the handbook, and he gives the following definition of “Communicative and Cultural Memory”: “Memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level.”<sup>7</sup> This definition adheres broadly to Halbwachs' thesis and indeed preserves the central idea of the collective. Thus, one may ask, as the passage from Ugrešić's *Museum of unconditional surrender* suggests, whether this definition does not exclude forms of memory that work counter to the formation of an awareness of identity, especially when there are conflicts between the personal and the collective, the past and the present. In particular, it seems crucial not to exclude the memory of a culture, a collective, an identity or a selfhood, which for different reasons seems to make no sense in the present. In other words, like collective memory, cultural memory presupposes a group or groups that is/ are acknowledged as such and separately or jointly can formulate and advocate a historical experience. This also concerns the interplay between past and present. In another contribution



to the theory of memory, Assman asserts that cultural memory is the “contemporized past”,<sup>8</sup> but this also presupposes that there is someone for whom and by whom the past is being contemporized. As collective memory presumes a *collective* that endures over time, it also makes *memory* into a relation between the past and the present, where the past can be given a sensical form, a storage of established facts about the past, or meaningful artefacts that constitute a sanctuary for the survival of (a) culture, that in turn can give a manipulable meaning to our today. Personal, social and cultural memory are not circles with natural transitions and interrelations, but rather conflictual spheres. In social, collective and cultural memory, we must still always face the edifice of something that was, and this can in several respects be contrasted to the private memory that we meet in Proust or Nabokov, when something is brought into the present in the act of remembering (what in German is thought of as *Erinnerung* – a reawakening of what was within the person who remembers).<sup>9</sup>

One can paraphrase Hannah Arendt’s sentence about the paradox of human rights to say that cultural memory is accorded only to those who already have a cultural identity. It was in the 1949 article “The Rights of Man: What are They?”, later included in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that Arendt argued that the declaration of human rights requires states to protect inalienable human rights, although these rights are enjoyed only by the citizens of national states.<sup>10</sup> And by analogy, memory is understood as a human capacity, and cultural memory belongs to everyone and can be shared by everyone, whereas it needs a subject with a cultural identity to negotiate an understanding of history. And, in other words, one may further argue that the notion of collective or cultural memory sustains the idea of the collective or cultural subject, just as in turn, the collective sustains the idea of memory. But can we then not also take this further and ask if there is not a historico-conceptual linkage between the memory turn and the return of nationalism and fascism today?<sup>11</sup> As collective or cultural memory relates to, restitutes or preserves an essentializing idea of a culture or of a collective, it also derives a sense of meaning from the past of a culture or collective over against the dispersal of peoples and groups or even over against the destitution of meaning, history, collective and culture in our today. In his thesis on collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs argued that collectivity is needed for private or personal memories to become intelligible, to acquire meaning or make sense. The primary scene of memory is a young homeless girl without a family and of distant origins, who, dissociated from her past, has difficulties in making sense of her own recollections. Memory, Halbwachs infers, is dependent upon a *milieu* in which the personal recollections are communicated, materialized, and sustained by others.<sup>12</sup> If we extend this notion to culture, is it not so that cultural memory also is understood as the locus where historical experience can acquire

meaning and make sense? Moreover, is it not so that therefore, in turn, the notion of collective memory works to preserve an idea of a collective or culture over time as a collective or culture that is given in history? Can we then not say that collective memory contributes to a conserving and perhaps even essentializing perception of the collective and of culture that would redeem this collective against the dispersed and dissipating workings of history, against modernity and nihilism? And would this not be true as much for the sense of a Croatian, a Swedish or a European cultural memory?

SUSAN SONTAG STATED in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that there is no collective memory, there is only collective instruction.<sup>13</sup> The Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov, who won the Booker prize for his novel *Time Shelter*, commented that the novel is about the “militarization of memory” in today’s Eastern Europe. As he states, previously the Communist Party explored ideas of the future; now the populists are using bright visions of the past. This tendency to form a political utopia out of the past can also be related to the memory discourse today, understood with Jan Assman as the way in which identity is established out of the relation to the past. And, needless to say, a vision of the future

derived from a bright national past is an inherent feature of nationalist or fascist discourses. And yet, the whole (political) re-nationalized identity of post-war Europe is built on a condemnation of its past, a condemnation, which for several reasons was extended in a problematic way to the communist past of Eastern Europe. And what appears particularly problematic with regards to memory discourse is how the communist past in several countries was erased from popular memory, and how the no longer and no more communist was formed into a positive identity.

Indeed, there seems to be a politics to cultural memory, which concerns not only the use of memory for political purposes, but the very concept of cultural memory itself. Cultural memory means the formulation of, or the historical experience of, a group or a people that endures over time because of the relation between the history and the identity of this group and therefore can “contemporize the past”. This becomes particularly apparent in the case of Eastern Europe, and it is the reason why memory politics has been effectively used by a national agenda for decades in Croatia and in other former communist states. In the CBEES State of the Region Report 2019, *Constructions and Instrumentalizations of the Past*, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa showed how the boom of cultural memory in Eastern Europe in the early 2000s became intimately linked to the ideology of the reborn nation states from under the yoke of communism.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore no wonder that memory today goes hand in hand with nationalism. Nationalism in Eastern Europe feeds on anti-communism, and memories of communist repres-

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SPHERES.”**

sion, and the notion of collective memory feeds the return of the idea of a national collective that had been suppressed but endured over time.

## Counter-memory and the political historicification of the present

But what other memory can there be? One could perhaps argue that Ugrešić writes a counter-memory, but then we must not understand this concept as it is often used today to denote a memory activism that counters falsified or otherwise distorted official historical memory narratives.<sup>15</sup> Ugrešić is not attempting to compose a different history of Yugoslavia, the fall of communism and the transition with the war out of the articulation of a different collective experience. The experience she seeks to articulate is that of a people that once belonged to Yugoslavia, and that now stands without their former country, unable to articulate their experience through memory. In other words, the movement of her writing does not go back to history, but seems rather to open up a different perspective on recent events and their relation to the present. This past is not treated as the store house of collective facts and artefacts that can be brought into meaning for the present; instead, she shows how the relation between the past and present are confused – from the perspective of the present. And yet there is a sense in which Ugrešić’s memory can be understood as counter-memory, if we go back to Foucault’s original definition in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* as a memory that would “inhibit the formation of any form of identity”.<sup>16</sup> Foucault’s notion of counter-memory establishes a method of retrieval of an understanding of the very historicity of knowledge,<sup>17</sup> through recalling and remembering also how detours and derailings, or, as Foucault writes, dispersion and dissipation, have formed a history that we want to understand as the linear progression of the same, measured by the criteria of truth. Foucault’s counter-memory cannot serve to “contemporize the past” and establish cultural identities over time. It must have no final aim, serve no purpose, and establish no truths. Its purpose is instead to unravel the mechanisms behind the establishment of truth through historical knowledge. But what is collective or cultural memory if not the establishment of a collective or cultural identity out of a shared experience of significant past events, since it concerns articulations of the significance of historical events for a certain group?

**NOW, UGREŠIĆ DOES NOT** have a genealogical approach in the Foucauldian sense of a methodology for a critique of metaphysics derived from historical knowledge. Yet with Foucault we can speak about a counter-memory that does not serve to alter the understanding of the ‘facts’ or ‘truths’ about history, but instead about a memory, which in its multiplicity and “dissipation”<sup>18</sup> is advocated by no one, serves no purpose, but instead invites us to critically approach the historical background to concepts of

continuity and linearity. And Ugrešić takes us to the memory of a critical point in recent history, not to point at a different history, but at how the memory discourse is at work in the very formation of the memory of former Yugoslavia and how it reinforces the sense of dispersion and dissipation. For the people that she meets and for herself, the experience of the fall of communism seems to lie as much or even less in the imperative to deal with the past and to uncover the lies of the communist regime, than in the consequent dispersion of a people that in the economic hardships of the transition, the wars, and in a second rate European migrant status, were left with only the history of a temporary and flawed political identity to fall back upon, and the identities, continuities and linearities construed in post-communism as memory from a political relation to the history preceding communism.

What is more, the counter-memory at stake in the novels of Ugrešić and in general in the experience of the fall of communism is not that of a distant past that can offer us a genealogical perspective of the historicity of certain metaphysical concepts, but instead a near past, of immediate relevance for the understanding of our today, especially from a political viewpoint. And

what is interesting in the politics of the memory of communism, which should include the politics of the memory of its fall and its aftermath, is how it mobilizes memory for political purposes. Just as the memory of a more distant past is used as a resource for the encouragement of nationalist sentiments, so is the memory of the near past under communism made into a negative other. And yet the communist past is not only a political system that history judged to be flawed, but also

an integrated part of modern history, with respect to institutions as well as to the experience of the people and to the lessons that we can draw from it. And the question that Ugrešić poses is, at heart, how, in the midst of a time that through a discourse on cultural memory is forming an identity from its relation to the past, we can grasp a memory of that which belongs to the negative in history writing. And by analogy, we may also ask what happens to individual memory when it enters into a relation with historical political judgements, since in the case of Yugoslavia, the historical judgement about communism (=the judgement about the history of communism) is at the same time in question and not in question in this memory. And furthermore, can we retain an idea of counter-memory in the sense that Foucault intended when speaking of the experience of communist Eastern Europe beyond the way that the establishment of political truths about history, and/ or historical truths about politics, has come to serve the formation of current national and ethnic identities in the region?

**THE HISTORICAL JUDGEMENT** of communism is directly related to that of Nazism. According to the *European Parliament Resolution of 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future*

**“SHE SHOWS HOW THE RELATION BETWEEN THE PAST AND PRESENT ARE CONFUSED – FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRESENT.”**

COUNTER MEMORY

COLLECTIVE  
MEMORY

NEGATIVE  
MEMORY

POST-MEMORY

MEMORY  
NOVEL

CULTURAL MEMORY

HISTORICAL  
MEMORY

MEMORY  
WORK

of Europe, the totalitarian regimes termed as “communist, Nazi and other dictatorships”<sup>19</sup> are placed on an equal footing in relation to crimes in history. Remembrance here plays the role of the arbiter of history with direct political consequences: “whereas after the defeat of the Nazi regime and the end of the Second World War, some European countries were able to rebuild and embark on a process of reconciliation, while other European countries remained under dictatorships – some under direct Soviet occupation or influence – for half a century and continued to be deprived of freedom, sovereignty, dignity, human rights and socio-economic development”.<sup>20</sup> The statement on memory is not entirely neutral. Although it is indisputable that in several respects the communist system was thoroughly insufficient and lagged behind that of the liberal capitalist West, stating that the countries of Eastern Europe were *deprived* of socio-economic development can be contested. In other words, a “European” statement about recent “European” history in terms of “European” remembrance is made into a political statement about the fundamental rights of European member states and their citizens in the present that also means the establishment of a “European” identity derived from its history, formulated by the European Union.

Moreover, the statement implies not only a “contemporization of the past”, but also a historicization of the present. After the fall of communism, the judgement of a recent and still ongoing past is being rationalized and turned into the past, according to the process described by Reinhart Koselleck in *Sediments of Time*:

[...] every history that we analyze as something completed in the past is a *logificatio post festum* [rationalization after the fact]. This necessarily presupposes, however, that every history is *in actu* without meaning [*sinnlos*]. The irony or paradox of this idea is thus that actual history first reveals its truth when it is over. In other words, the truth of a history is always a truth *ex post*. It first presents itself when it no longer exists. The past must become past for us before it can reveal its historical truth.<sup>21</sup>

The present has been turned into history to serve as a political principle for the EU in its formation of a European (political) identity. The fall of communism was followed by a rapid and politically sanctioned transition to democracy and free market economies, administered by the reborn Eastern European national states. It is questionable whether the past in all its respects had really become a past in the sense that it could reveal its historical truth, if indeed such a truth can be revealed. Instead, I would argue that the recent past was made into distant past by means of a historical truth that was motivated by the need to condemn totalitarianism. The communist past was extracted from the general path of European modernity as erroneous, although in several countries, its institutions or the legacy of them were still important. Moreover, the reaction of peoples of Eastern Europe to the transition was also politically monitored through the memory discourse. However, if we consider the

problems of communism and totalitarianism in relation to the nature of modernization and modern politics, as indeed Hannah Arendt invites us to do, we ought instead to ask the question what the history of modern communism tells us about the present rather than condemn it to the past.

## Negative memory

The purpose of this article is not at all to retribute and redeem the memory of communism, but to find concepts to approach and understand the historical and political circumstances surrounding memory and remembering in the post-communist sphere. And instead of turning the condemnation of the past into a positive identity through the discourse of culture memory, Koselleck’s term “negative memory” in *Sediments of Time* may offer a perspective on modern history that is more apposite to the experience of having lived under communism. Koselleck was highly critical of the concept of collective or cultural memory, while sensitive to the difference between the lived experience of an event and the meaning attached to that event in hindsight as the historical memory of it, and historical memory here understood in German not as *Erinnerung* but *Gedächtnis*. Memory (*Erinnerung*) cannot, he argues in *Sediments of Time*, establish a meaning in hindsight, while remaining faithful to how something was lived and would be remembered in a personal manner. It is when memory becomes *Gedächtnis* that it forms a part of history writing – as a way of according a certain meaning to a historical event, and as a part of history, memory becomes a crucial tool for historical manipulations. And *Gedächtnis* stands in a problematic relation to *Erinnerung*, not only today, but especially in times of totalitarianism, mass war and mass destruction. With the example of Stalingrad, Koselleck argues that on the German as well as on the Russian side, a rationale has been accorded to its memorialization, but perhaps, he suggests, there is a profound absurdity or meaninglessness to what took place, a meaninglessness that also needs to be accorded for in memorialization. The rationale ascribed to the battle of Stalingrad as the turning point of the war may, he argues, be contested by saying that the war was already lost from the start,<sup>22</sup> but what does that argument do to the meaning of the experience of each of the millions of soldiers who suffered and died?

THE QUESTION ABOUT the historical meaning of Stalingrad opens up the more fundamental issue for Koselleck’s discussion of negative memory, namely, the Nazi crimes and the Holocaust. Negative memory is that which in its atrocity cannot be remembered by those who experienced it (as for instance, genocide) and yet needs to be accounted for by history.<sup>23</sup> This also poses a problem of meaning, since remembering (memory, personal or collective) is the meaning making of an experience of the past. The extermination of the Jewish people can never be given any meaning; it is instead an immense meaninglessness that stares at us from out of the camps. Therefore, he concludes, there is a negative memory vis-à-vis history that places us in front of an aporia, because, as Koselleck writes about the Nazi crimes: “Moral judgement is necessary but it does not alter the past”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, we



can understand the negativity of this memory as the impossibility of remembering, not only in the sense of not having the experience that is being remembered, but also as the impossibility of bringing this past into a meaningful relation to the present and presence, although we live with the imperative not to forget this historical event that goes beyond the moral ability to remember. The past speaks only for itself, answers only to itself, while we are only left staring at its terrifying consequences. No monument can redeem this. There is no representation and no moral distinction that can help us, but we must rather stay with or by the aporia. He writes: “We can thus recognize that aesthetic solutions are possible if they thematize unanswerability itself...” or further, “This means an aporia, namely the impossibility of generating meaning through memorialization, itself becomes an aesthetic theme.” (p. 248) In other words, the negativity of the memory can only be brought into meaning in the present if we somehow recognize ourselves in the inability to form a memory or “contemporize the past” in the sense that we cannot abstract any meaning from the Nazi crimes. Reinhardt Koselleck insisted that as memory remembers the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and further, it must bring to our contemporary world a question of the meaning of events that threaten us with an immense and ultimate meaninglessness. The notion of a collective remembering seems to redeem us from a sense of meaninglessness, irrationality or even from the terrifying consequences of the present, and yet, it seems to keep us caught in the objectification of the present into the past.

There is a negative memory of communism just as there is a negative memory of Nazism in the sense that there is an immense number of people who cannot speak about the crimes committed to them. Moreover, the sheer immensity of this number points to a meaninglessness that no memory can account for. But the notion of negative memory can also open up a way of dealing with the memory of people who lived and experienced communism, such as Ugrešić and the people she met. If Koselleck’s approach mainly deals with the aesthetic expression of the impossibility of making sense of the past because of its utter meaninglessness, or its utter atrocity, Ugrešić’s novel brings the recent past into the question of the relation, and how meaning making of the historified recent past in our today meets present experiences of the present. But also in relation to Ugrešić, the notion of negative memory could open a space for an articulation of an experience that cannot be formulated or advocated through any collective.

One could therefore hope that it would open the articulations of this past beyond its historification to really form a counter-memory to the establishment of historical truths about the present. Because what communism really says about modern history may perhaps still appear for us. Again, modern history, in its drive towards the future, appears to be obsessed with leaving things behind through a process of historification. This is also a process that memory making today needs to reckon with.

## Conclusive reflections

I would like to conclude with reference to the Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, who made the question of history and time into a

central theme of his poetry. With the experience of the Russian revolution, he again and again addresses the impossibility of remembering oneself as the inability to be in and with one’s time, to be contemporaneous in a world that repeatedly establishes historical truths and narratives of collective or cultural meaning. In a poem titled with a date, *1 January 1924*, that is, titled with time, Mandelstam writes in pain and despair:

**It’s such a pain to look for a lost word,  
To raise sickly eyelids, and when  
One’s blood is thickened with quicklime,  
To gather night herbs for a foreign tribe.**

**The age. The layer of lime thickens in sick son’s blood.  
Moscow sleeps like a wooden chest.  
There is nowhere to turn from a tyrannous age ...  
Like in old days, the snow smells of apples.<sup>25</sup>**

Here past and present are intertwined in a gordian knot of meanings impossible to generate and yet present, memories established and yet impossible to be remembered. The time is a master-age, from which you cannot run nor hide, which means that you can also neither remember, nor forget. Thus, time shows itself as a dictator to a world that appears as a valley of death, because all meanings are corrupted, and, as if polluted, smogged, and only the snow smells of old apples. To reduce the time that Mandelstam steps down into as to Hades or Petropolis as that of post-revolutionary communist Russia is, I believe, yet another fetishization of the past in the name of collective memory. I would say that it is the contemporary world where meaninglessness haunts us and meaning seduces us at every step. Mandelstam speaks to us about the age through the age as an Orphic singer who attempts to remember how to speak of this time, while painfully aware that the words for it may be lost. ✕

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- 4 Ugrešić, *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 243f.
- 5 For a comprehensive account and an in-depth reading of the theme of exile and memory in the ruins of East Europe, see David Williams, "The Citizen of a Ruin" in *Writing Postcommunism. Towards a Literature of the East European Ruins*. 33–69.
- 6 Astrid Erll, "Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction" in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds., Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning and Sara B. Young, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 2.
- 7 Jan Assman, "Communicative and Cultural Memory" in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds., Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning and Sara B. Young, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 109.
- 8 Jan Assman, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", *New German Critique*, Spring - Summer, no. 65 (1995):129.
- 9 In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov emphasized the poetics of the art of memory as *Erinnerung*, but his memory is exilic in the sense that it refers to a lost country that is also his country of origin. Meaning vibrates in every scene, every scent, light, touch and sound of his childhood in its sharp contrast to the darkness of post-revolutionary Russia. And we find this poetic cult of a minute memory, reviving the dead in an existence that like Eurydice is faintly sensed, over against a dull and trivial reality in several stories by Nabokov.
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- 15 In her article "Decommissioning Monuments, Mobilizing Materialities", Ann Rigney "calls for reflection, not just on strategies for giving voice to hitherto occluded actors, but also on best practices for undermining hegemonic narratives and decommissioning their normative power." See the article in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, eds., by Yifat Gurman and Jenny Wüstenberg, (London: Routledge, 2023).
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- 17 Foucault writes: "Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form to all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents." Ibid, 146.
- 18 Ibid, 162.
- 19 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html)
- 20 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html)
- 21 Reinhardt Koselleck, *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*, transl. by Sean Frenzel and Stefan Ludwig Hoffmann, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 186.
- 22 He writes further: "Indeed, viewed over the long term, we can locate the turning point prior to the outbreak of war in 1939, for in light of the global political constellation, the beginning already contained the seeds of the downfall. From this perspective, the entire war would not just be meaningless in itself, but would from the start also be absurd [unsinnig] vis-à-vis the rational calculations and embellishments. Stalingrad would then become a symptom of a war of aggression motivated by utopian visions, a war that eventually became World War II, and that was instigated for ideological reasons without any kind of political or military rationale. The criteria for meaninglessness would then lie in the ideology critique of Hitler's racist and expansionistic plans that *Mein Kampf* had already openly stated." Ibid, 179
- 23 "To speak of the negative in memory is ambiguous, because either the negative in memory implies that the content stored by memory is off-putting, unwelcome, despicable and worthy of scorn, or it means that memory (das Gedächtnis) closes itself off to recollection (Erinnerung), refuses to become cognizant of the negative: that memory thus represses the negative and thus makes the past responsible for it and relegates it to oblivion." Ibid, 238.
- 24 Ibid. 217.
- 25 Osip Mandelstam, "January 1, 1924" in *Centuries Encircle me with Fire. Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam*, transl. by Ian Probststein, (Boston MA: Academic Studies Press, 2022).



PHOTO: INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE, NO.12 (SEPTEMBER, 1969)

A photo of the Situationist International placing a copy of a statue of Charles Fourier at Place Clichy, Paris, 1969.

# Placing a statue in its proper place

by Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen

## abstract

In 1969 the Situationist group re-installed a copy of a statue of Charles Fourier on an empty plinth at Place Clichy in Paris as a gesture of commemoration of the events in May-June 1968 in Paris. The article will discuss the event and use it in an analysis of the ongoing monument wars that took off in the summer of 2020.

**KEYWORDS:** Situationist International, Charles Fourier.

**O**n March 10, 1969, members of the Situationist International lifted a 100-kilo bronze-finished plaster copy of a statue of the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier onto a 2.5-metre empty plinth in Place Clichy in Paris.<sup>1</sup> The Situationist International generally had little use for monuments. Especially not monuments immortalizing kings or other political or religious authorities. In line with the group's revolutionary critique of the capitalist commodity economy and the pictorial forms of domination that constituted the fragile simulacrum of a society they called "the society of the spectacle", there was nothing else to do but destroy the ruling order and its monuments.<sup>2</sup> Not only did monuments glorify an oppressive history, their presence was itself a blockage to another way of using the space of the city. Monuments were materialized ideology. Therefore they had to go. The case of the Fourier statue,

however, was different: it had to go back to its place in the center of the city in order to make possible a different use of the city.

**IRETURN TO THIS** heavy-handed practical joke from 1969 on the back of the huge increase in the number of protests against statues and monuments. I do so, claiming that the Situationists' small action in 1969 is instructive for those who want to reflect a little on the relationship between public monuments, art, violence and history. The toppling of statues culminated in 2020 where the protests against racist and colonial statues almost seemed to take on the character of a new iconoclastic international dedicated to a reinterpretation of history from a consistently anti-racist perspective. As Jacqueline Lalouette writes in *Les statues de la discorde*, between May 30 and October 23, 2020, more than 100 statues commemorating slave owners, settlers or fascists were toppled by protesters or removed by local authorities in the US, Great Britain, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, and other countries.<sup>3</sup> The global spread of statue topplings was triggered by the murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American who was strangled by a white policeman on May 25 in Minneapolis. Floyd was choked while repeatedly uttering "I can't breathe". The phrase immediately became an anti-racist slogan not only in the widespread demonstrations and riots that took place in the following days in the United States, but in the many demonstrations that took place around the world in the follow-



ing weeks and months, where protesters rejected racism and police brutality and demanded the decolonization of public spaces. The toppling of statues is nothing new, but the summer of 2020 marked a high point; the scale exceeded earlier iconoclastic moments in recent history, and one toppling seemed to inspire the next in a global flow of urban interventions.

## Against monuments

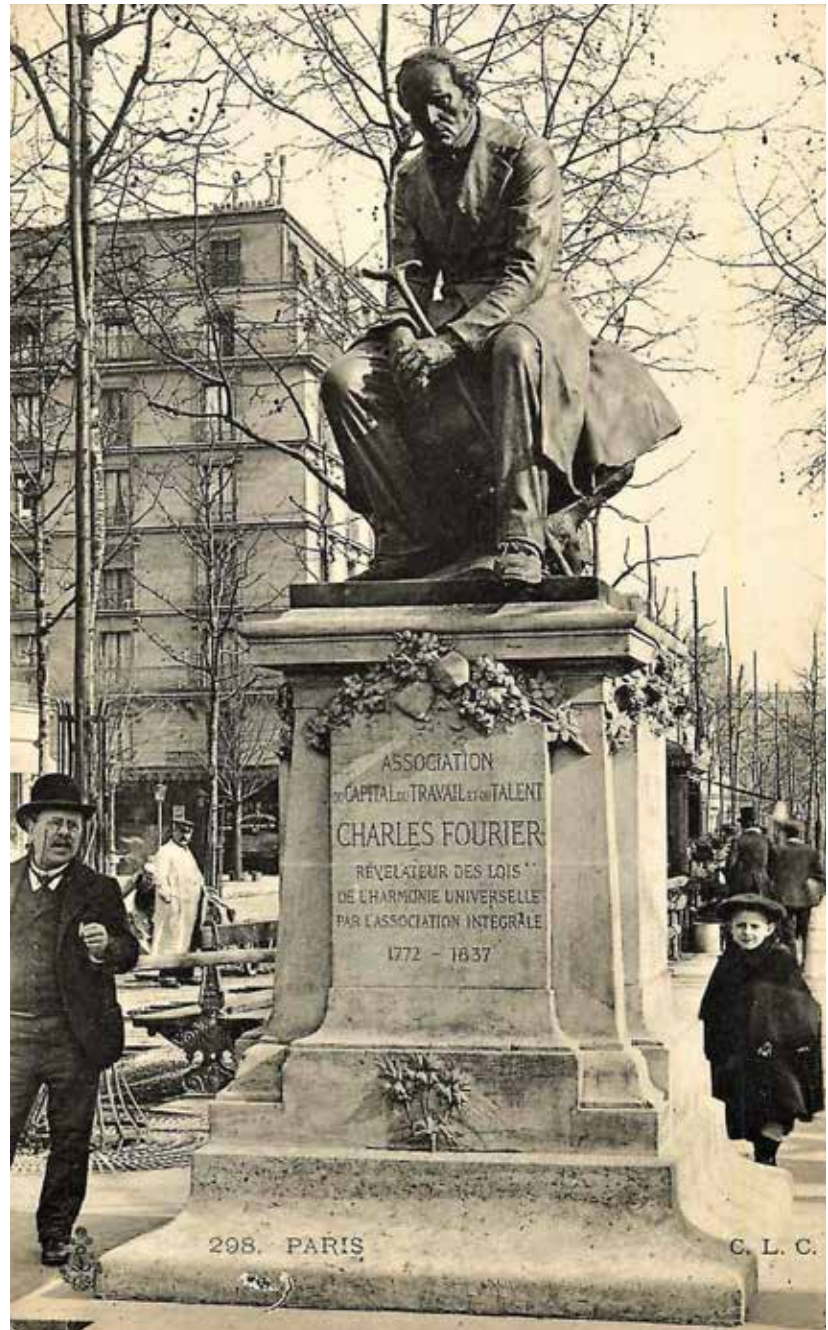
The Situationist International was against monuments. They saw themselves as part of a marginalized and almost completely destroyed revolutionary movement that tried to criticize existing capitalist society as a global social totality. It is difficult to articulate the kind of historical self-consciousness the Situationists had: the avant-garde is not what it once was, but the Situationists' analysis of the function of monuments in the city can perhaps help us in the discussion of the ongoing statue struggles.

The Situationists were a collective of anti-capitalist practitioners active from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, who sought to develop a practical critique of the alienated nature of late capitalist society and its revolutionary overcoming. The group was initially composed of artists and cultural producers but after a few years of existence most practicing artists were expelled as the group deemed the production of art works to be too compromised an activity. It was no longer possible to create individual art works and art had to become an activity outside the institution of art.

In his 1959 film, *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*, Guy Debord went to great lengths to avoid filming monuments. As he explained in the "Technical Notes" he prepared for the film, the camera had to avoid showing monuments at all times.<sup>4</sup> In a film about the lives of young Lettrists in Paris in the early 1950s, this was difficult – but necessary. It was important not to show monuments so as not to naturalize them.

The Situationists saw the many monuments and statues in Paris as elements in a battle for the control of the city in which the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, went to great lengths to preserve historical monuments of French kings and emperors as part of its transformation of the city into an urban theatre.

**MONUMENTS WERE PART** of a struggle for urban space. As the Situationists put it in a 1962 text, no monuments were innocent.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, monuments and statues functioned as political statements in the class struggle. The ruling order filled the city with statues and monuments or emptied it to make room for



The statue of Charles Fourier erected at Place de Clichy in Paris in June 1899. PHOTO: ALAMY

cars. The built environment was a testimony to domination. Not only did the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, display their own grandeur in this way, but they also prevented the possibility of any other use of the city. It became filled with objects and artefacts. Statues, cars and advertisements were all part of the materialized ideology of the spectacle. They were anything but innocent; they were testimonies to a history of oppression and exploitation, of how the proletariat was robbed of control over their own lives through images of a commoditized existence. The past led naturally to the present, and the future was a variant of the present. There was nothing else. The spectacle was everywhere.



“Modern capitalism dissuades people from making any criticism of architecture with the simple argument that they need a roof over their heads, just as television is accepted on the grounds that they need information and entertainment. They are made to overlook the obvious fact that this information, this entertainment and this kind of dwelling place are not made for them, but without them and against them.”<sup>6</sup>

The Situationists sought to challenge this situation by intervening in the culture of the ruling class. The Situationists fought in the world of the bourgeoisie, in the city, but against it: the city understood as a whole civilization, capitalism as a way of life that had hastily been built after the destruction of the World War. The small Situationist group fought with and against the images and representations, including statues, that the bourgeoisie had spread everywhere. It was an ideological war they were engaged in, and they understood the action in Place Clichy as a battle in this war. As a kind of guerrilla action on enemy territory.

## Authorities in stone

As Henri Lefebvre, friend of the Situationist group, wrote in *La production de l'espace*, monuments are a way of stopping history. They produce or occupy a space and postpone the future by preserving the past or the present. Monuments are almost always traces of violence and death, but they are characterized by “a generally accepted Power”.<sup>7</sup> Once erected, they produce “a consensus [...] in the strongest sense of the term”, writes Lefebvre.<sup>8</sup> Now they are there. This is the way the world is organized, they seem to say. “Small wonder that from time immemorial conquerors and revolutionaries eager to destroy a society should so often have sought to do so by burning or razing that society’s monuments.”<sup>9</sup> Monuments transform a brutal reality into “a materially realized appearance”.<sup>10</sup>

PERHAPS THE MOST RADICAL critique of monuments was formulated by Georges Bataille in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when he wrote a series of short texts on the counter-revolutionary function of architecture. “Thus great monuments rise up like dams, opposing a logic of majesty and authority to all unquiet elements. [...] Indeed, monuments obviously inspire good social behavior and often even genuine fear. The fall of the Bastille is symbolic of this state of things. This mass movement is difficult to explain otherwise than by popular hostility towards monuments which are their veritable masters.”<sup>11</sup> Bataille understood monuments as authorities in stone, imposing admiration and astonishment on the masses. The monument is an attempt to stabilize and dominate space. They issue “authoritative commands and prohibitions”, wrote Bataille.<sup>12</sup> The storming of the Bastille in Paris during the French Revolution was a natural reaction to this submission, a rejection of society’s authorized super-ego. It was telling that the masses not only stormed the prison, but quickly tore down the whole building.

The fight over the statues in the city is always part of a larger

**“THE MONUMENT IS AN ATTEMPT TO STABILIZE AND DOMINATE SPACE.”**



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Certain founding members of the Situationist International in 1957. From left to right: Guiseppe Pinot-Gallizio, Piero Simondo, Elena Verone, Michele Bernstein, Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, and Walter Olmo.

struggle. Bataille, Lefebvre and the Situationists make us aware of this. Statues are large, three-dimensional incarnations of power, placed on high pedestals and made of durable materials such as stone, marble or bronze. They are substitutes for the people they represent.

When activists in Martinique in 1991 cut off the head of a statue of Joséphine de Beauharnais and painted her neck red, it was, of course, an attack on the continuing (post)colonial oppression on the island.<sup>13</sup> Like Guadeloupe, Martinique remains part of France and has the status of a ‘French overseas department’. In the 1660s, the local population was massacred by French colonizers and plantations with enslaved Africans were established on the island. Inspired by the Haitian slave revolt led by Toussaint L’Ouverture, slavery was then abolished in Marti-

nique in 1794. However, it was reintroduced in 1802 by Napoleon, advised by his then wife, Josephine de Beauharnais, who grew up as the daughter of a French plantation owner on the island who owned 300 slaves. In 1856, a statue of Josephine de Beauharnais was erected in Fort-de-France, the capital of the island. It was this statue that activists beheaded in 1991. The Empress lost her head.

The activists did what should have happened during the French Revolution, when de Beauharnais had been arrested with her first husband, Alexandre de Beauharnais, and narrowly escaped the guillotine.

THE 1991 ACTION in Martinique is part of a history that includes not only the 2020 statue topplings, but also the storming of the Bastille in 1789 and the toppling of the Vendôme Column in 1871. These are iconoclastic attacks on an oppressive racial-colonial order that consistently divides the dangerous classes in order to ensure the accumulation of capital.

## “Monumentalization of violence”

The toppling of the statue of Napoleon in Place Vendôme stands as a high point in the history of the anti-colonial reconquest of the city by the lower classes. The iconoclasm of the communards was part of a large-scale attempt to create the conditions for a communist life where everyone could express themselves beyond established hierarchies, political, religious and artistic, where everyone was (virtually) creative beyond class and racialization.<sup>14</sup> The statue of Napoleon was toppled in a carefully orchestrated political event organized by Gustave Courbet. It was not just a sudden outburst of popular discontent against the emperor, but part of a visual campaign to destroy the symbols of the old imperial order so that a new life in Paris could be possible. As photographs of the event show, a huge crowd gathered in the square, which had been renamed Place Internationale, and three orchestras played in turn before the statue of the emperor was finally toppled. It had been sawed off at the bottom, so it toppled like a giant tree as one of the orchestras played the Marseillaise. The crowd cheered ecstatically as the 40-metre-long column, consisting of melted-down cannons from the Battle of Austerlitz with the statue of Napoleon at the top, dressed as a Roman Caesar, toppled over. Maxime Vuillaume described the toppling as a decisive event: “Suddenly, there it is, like the flapping of the wings of a gigantic bird, a huge zigzag through the air. Oh, I will never forget the colossal shadow falling past my eyes! A cloud of smoke. All is over. The column lies on the ground, cracked, its stone viscera exposed to the wind. Caesar lies humiliated and headless.”<sup>15</sup> The emperor, enthroned in the centre of the square, was gone. No one would look up to him anymore.

**DURING THE OCCUPATION** of the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris in May-June 1968, members of the Situationist group had found the mold for the statue of Fourier that had stood in Place Clichy until December 1941, and Pierre Lepetit had made a copy of the statue.<sup>16</sup> The bronze statue of Fourier had originally been removed by the Vichy government and sent to Germany where, along with a number of other statues, it was molded into ammunition for Hitler’s army on the Eastern Front. From October 1941 to August 1944, according to historian Kirrily Freeman, the Vichy government collected at least 1,500 statues in France that were sent to Germany.<sup>17</sup> Considering how many statues and monuments either consist of melted down cannons or depict weapons and war equipment, it is not as strange as it may sound that the French collaborationist government, on its own initiative, collected the many sculptures and sent them to Nazi Germany in support of the Nazi war machine. As W.J.T. Mitchell, among others, has described, monuments are historically inextricably linked to war and violence. “From Ozymandias to Caesar to Na-



Communards and Gustave Courbet pose with the statue of Napoléon I from the toppled Vendôme column, Paris 1871.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

oleon to Hitler, public art has served as a kind of monumentalization of violence.”<sup>18</sup>

## Fourier

This was not the case with the Fourier statue. It had been erected as a tribute to the utopian socialist who has inspired generations of revolutionaries – from Marx to Benjamin, Marcuse and Norman O. Brown – with his ideas of free sex and a radical rethinking of work through play. We can hardly get further away from emperors and kings than Fourier.

The statue of Fourier itself had been erected in 1899 with funds raised by a small group of enthusiastic Fourierists in Paris. The statue showed an elderly, seated Fourier wearing a long coat with a cane resting on one arm, looking thoughtful. It was the work of the anarchist sculptor Émile Derré, who had modeled the statue on a painting of Fourier by Jean Gigoux from 1835, a few years before Fourier’s death in 1837. The location of the statue in Place Clichy was quite fitting; Montmartre was at the time a working-class neighborhood where many artists hung out, and Fourier was buried in the Montmartre cemetery just around the corner.

The Situationists loved Fourier. He was at the centre of the anti-Stalinist revolutionary tradition in which they saw themselves. Fourier was an early critic of industrial capitalism and its forms of wage labor, which, he argued, destroyed people as well as nature.<sup>19</sup> Capitalist organized wage labor was nothing less than contrary to the order of the universe, according to Fourier, whose critique of early industrialization had a distinct metaphysical dimension. It was morally necessary to reject wage labor, according to Fourier. Man was a creative and collective being who had to express himself in community with others and seek to satisfy his needs. If the worker did not want to go to work, it was work

that was the problem, not the worker. This was an important critique of wage labor, according to the Situationists, who fought fiercely against the sacralization of work that had occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when European social democrats and Leninists alike glorified wage labor and made it a cornerstone of their political projects. For the traditional labor movement, it was about producing a new world in which workers took control of the productive apparatus. Such a project, however, had nothing to do with communism, the Situationists argued, citing both Fourier and Marx: communism was the abolition of both wage labor and the nation state. It was not the workers taking control of capitalist production.

**FOURIER'S CRITIQUE** of wage labor and his ideas about the creative qualities of man made him an ally in the Situationists' struggle against the falsification of communism. Along with Marx, Bakunin, Luxemburg and German-Dutch council communism, Fourier was part of a repressed wild socialism that the Situationists orientated themselves towards and tried to practice at a time in the 1960s when a booming economy allowed capital to strike a deal with local working-class representatives in the West, offering workers access to culture, education and consumption. The Situationists famously saw this development as a "colonization of everyday life", where colonial plunder and factory exploitation were complemented by the alienation of workers in their free time. More and more aspects of human life were commodified and took the form of commodity images. It was therefore necessary to intervene into and try to scramble the new world of images, to show that the new abundance, all the new commodities, washing machines, cars and cigarettes, were in fact weapons in an image-political struggle for the consciousness of the proletariat. All the many images made up a new world that threatened to erase any alternative and sever the link to previously unrealized historical potentials, such as Fourier's utopian socialism.

## Symbolic reproduction

The spectacle or the spectacular was a description of the shift in which images became the material that politics necessarily was made of. Political events have always had a visual dimension, of course, but during the 20<sup>th</sup> century this dimension was greatly accentuated and tended to transform politics altogether. This is what the Situationists tried to describe with terms such as spectacle and the spectacular. It was not least thanks to new technologies of reproduction such as radio, film and television that this metamorphosis took place. But it cannot be reduced to the emergence of new media; what matters is how society creates images of itself through concepts, notions and all the many media at its disposal – from statues to television and the internet.

For the Situationists, the new, of course, was the medium of television. They saw de Gaulle addressing the nation and the individual Frenchman through television. He appeared on the

screen and spoke directly to the citizens. But they also saw how the new consumer goods, from Coca Cola to washing machines, record players and cars, created a new mesmerizing world of objects and goods that promised happiness, comfort or excitement. All you had to do was choose. The many commodities all promised a new life, or at least a moment of pleasure or distraction. Instant satisfaction. The spectacle was a new phase in the terrible subsumption of life in the service of capital, where the boundary between "reality" and "the spectacular" was dissolved. Culture merged with capital and citizens were integrated from above. The individualism of mass culture was a pseudo-individualism, the result of the fusion of artistic techniques and advertising.

The Situationists' analysis of the coming into being of new forces and means of symbolic reproduction was to a large extent the inspiration for Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum and Fredric Jameson's use of the notion of postmodernism. The dramatic changes to the conditions of the production of the image transformed politics.

The storming of Congress on January 6, 2021, was in many ways the paradoxical culmination of this process, with fascists and conspiracy theorists entering Congress and disrupting Senate approval of Biden's electoral victory. Trump's motley storm troopers, dressed in Braveheart costumes and camouflage, entered the capital and stormed the "Winter Palace". And took selfies while they did it. Not only did we all see it, they saw themselves doing it. And the event will probably act as a mobilizing factor for the late fascist movement in the US. It was probably less the end of the Trump presidency than the beginning of a new phase of colonial-racist violence. Late fascism is by no means defeated, and the storm was a charivari, a noisy example of what it is capable of and how it has already spread its tentacles far into, for example, the police, who did very little to stop the attack. Events like the attack on Congress help make previously unthinkable acts possible and introduce ultra-nationalist and racist ideas into a mainstream culture already characterized by an almost narcotic addiction to images of violence (against women and non-whites).<sup>20</sup>

**IT WAS THE EARLY** phase of this expansive visual culture that the Situationists were trying to catch up with. What happens when political events take place as image events, when the political is not just mediated by images, but is images? And how do you fight this dominance of images? The Situationists understood it, as I said, as a colonization in which the commodity subordinated more and more parts of human life, including art: Spheres and practices which, for various reasons, previous modes of production had not subsumed, but which now, in this phase of capitalism, were beginning to enter into the reproduction of capitalist society. The grandiose and desperate tone that pervaded the texts of the Situationists has to do with this process, which the Situationists perceived as a closure. History is quickly being

**"CULTURE  
MERGED WITH  
CAPITAL AND  
CITIZENS WERE  
INTEGRATED  
FROM ABOVE."**

emptied of content and becomes a dead postcard time.

But the Situationists sought to activate history against the spectacular, “fanning the spark of hope in the past”, as Walter Benjamin puts it.<sup>21</sup> They sought to intervene in the spectacle against the spectacle. To create confusion among all the many images and false promises. The spectacle was everywhere, it was a global totality, there was nothing outside. Even the media of art such as painting or happening were passive spectacular relations, therefore the role of art as a transgressive act was now to dominate these media as means of propaganda. Art had become an art of war, where those who were formerly called artists used all available means, including what was left of art, to propagandistically create unrest and fight the spectacle.

**THE COPY OF THE STATUE** of Fourier was an intervention in the spectacle. And the authorities were not slow to react. As the Situationists wrote in their journal, a policeman was immediately placed in front of the statue until it was removed two days later. The Situationist command had put the statue in place in fifteen minutes using wooden beams. The authorities, on the other hand, used a crane and 30 police officers to remove it again, the Situationists noted with great satisfaction in their account in their journal.<sup>22</sup> The action was considered a success by the Situationists. It was an example of a heavy-handed *détournement*, where the iconoclasm of the state was momentarily challenged by an iconoclasm from below. And the attempt to quickly remove the traces of the replica of the statue of Fourier and its reactivation of the events of the previous year confirmed the Situationists’ analysis of the French state as a new form of colonization. De Gaulle was Pétain, and there was no essential difference between Vichy and the V. Republic.

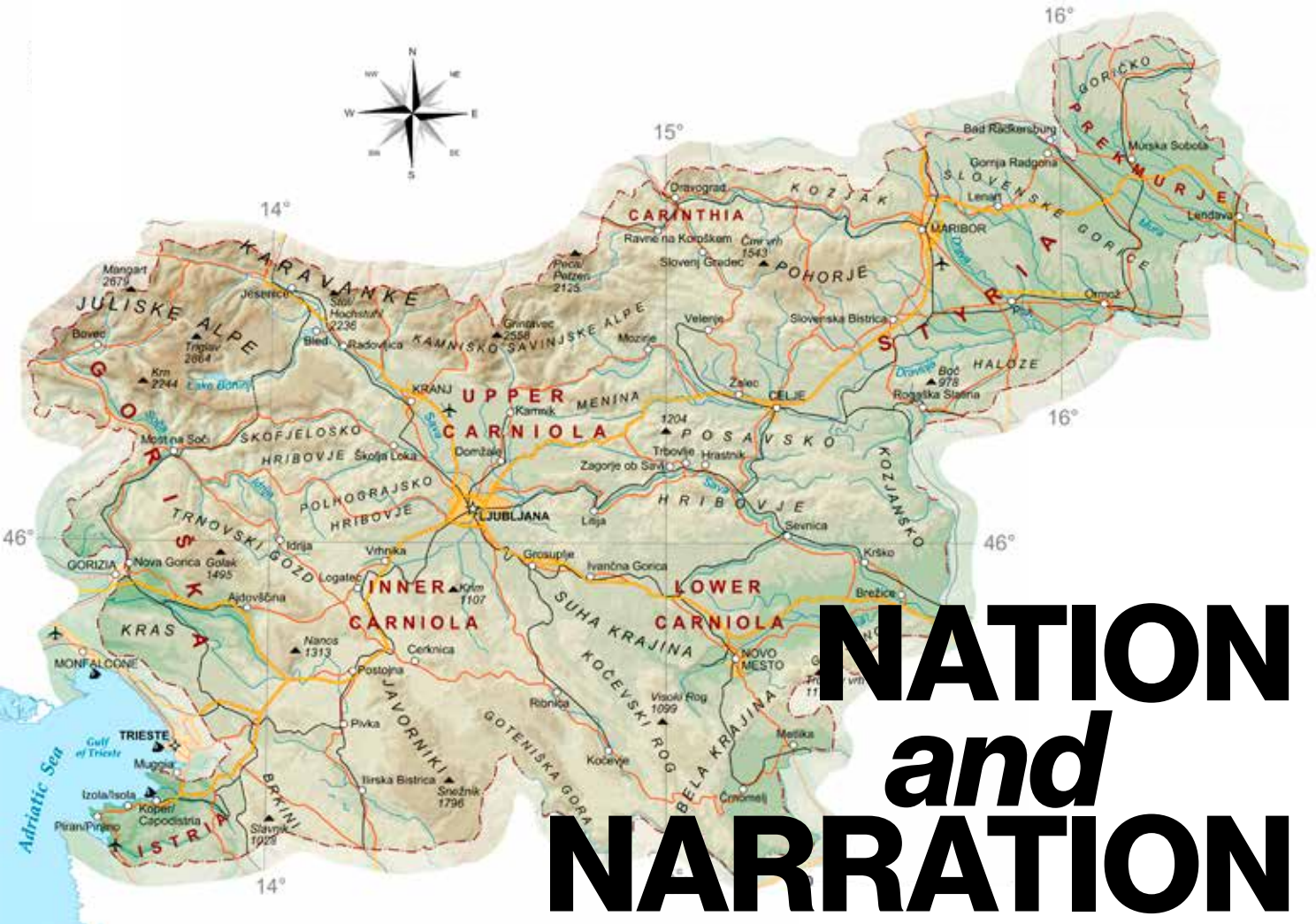
For the hundreds of people who saw the Situationists lift the statue back into place, the city was suddenly different. And passers-by could laugh at the policeman in front of Fourier in the days that followed. Not that the Situationists imagined that the action would bring about any major changes, of course they didn’t. The action was a revolutionary practical joke, and they were fully aware of the need to carry out a much more comprehensive attack on the spectacular commodity economy beyond any reference to notions of aesthetic qualities. It was important which statues stood in the city squares, but the project was not to put up any other statues, the project was to change the city. ❌

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MAP: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

by **Mladen Dolar**

## abstract

Nationalism always relies on certain ways of historical narration. The history of a nation is made in narration, and narratives retroactively create a homogeneous mythical history that is used for the present political purposes. The article considers the emergence of nationalisms during the period of the downfall of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and concentrates on the formation of Slovene nationalism through the spyglass of historic narration. The Slovene case may provide some general lessons as to how, in national narrations, history is retroactively homogenized: all significant landmarks of Slovene history that now form the core of the narrative presented at the time the major breaks with the then standards of Slovene national identity. Everything that is now considered the epitome of "Sloveneness" was at the time seen as an import of a foreign intrusion, changing the very standards by which "Sloveneness" was to be assessed. Thus the fidelity to the Slovene national identity can only be achieved by the courage of putting it into question. The last part of the article addresses the larger question of how the nationalisms of that period have in the course of the last decades evolved into the new populisms which no longer try to present a coherent narrative but functions rather as the managements of rage, based on the fantasy of the theft of enjoyment.

**KEYWORDS:** Historical narration, nationalism, Slovenia

**N**ation and narration make a good rhyme, and a semantic connection is at hand. One can easily see that there is no nation without narration, and that narratives, stretching back to some mythical origins and never quite free of the mythical background, form the very substance of nationhood. Imagined communities tend to have far more traction than the supposedly real, historical, empirical ones – provided that one can ever fall back on the real historical empirical objective account that would dissipate the appeal of narrations, fantasies and myths and debunk them as myths. But can one ever disentangle the real communities from the imagined ones? The latter actually enabled the formation of the former, by providing them precisely with a narration: "illusions" have material consequences. I guess that this was the weak point of the sociological-scientific approach to the question of national narrations, namely the illusory idea that illusions are mere illusions, and that they can be dissipated by the insight into true facts, by confronting the narratives of mythical fabrication with historic reality. Why do narratives and fictions tend to win in such a contest? Why does one tend to underestimate and dismiss the sheer force of narration and the enjoyment it can conjure? How is it that the question of the nation can never be reduced to the ascertainable objective parameters of common territory, geography, common language, common history and tradition, common economic interests? This alleged factual background

tends to be superseded by narration, which selectively includes or excludes “facts” and embroiders upon them, gentrifies them, in order to create a totalizing narrative, with all its retroactive fabrication and omissions. No national identity without this narrative surplus, without this gesture of totalization/exclusion, and without the surplus of passion that fuels, and is fueled by, narration. The surplus of narration over a “factual historic account” corresponds to the surplus enjoyment, a “politics of enjoyment”, as it were, that is at the core of all nationalism. If one considers the drastic falling apart of some socialist countries on the basis of ideologies driven by nationalisms and their capacity of narration, one can see that the national question was the blind spot of socialist political thought all along (something that Slavoj Žižek called “enjoyment as a political factor”, in the subtitle of his book *For they don't know what they do*).<sup>1</sup>

I THOUGHT I HAD invented a felicitous wording, a well-sounding phrase, with my proposal of nation and narration, but one always disappointingly finds out that there is nothing new under the sun; the phrase has been used before (I guess perhaps quite a few may have had this idea), most notably as the title of a collected volume, *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi Bhabha.<sup>2</sup> This is an illuminating collection, with a number of different perspectives on this very tricky topic. As felicitous expressions go, Homi Bhabha proposed another one, “nation and dissemination” (or more briefly, *DissemiNation*),<sup>3</sup> to counteract the implicit script implied by “nation and narration” (I guess this is not surprising given Bhabha’s Derridean affiliations, and his well-known general line on hybridization). The volume takes as its point of departure the ambivalence of this syndrome “nation-narration”. Benedict Anderson, the great classic on the question of nation formation and the origins of nationalism, put the paradox this way:

**The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. [...] Few things are suited to this end better than the idea of nation. If nation states are widely considered to be ‘new’ and ‘historical’, the nation states to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and glide into a limitless future.<sup>4</sup>**

Nation would thus be a double creature of enlightened rationalism and its dark flipside, where the dark flipside is born out of the spirit of the Enlightenment. Or as Tom Nairn put it: nation is “the modern Janus” (the Roman double-faced deity), and “the ‘uneven development’ of capitalism inscribes both progression and regression, political rationality and irrationality in the very genetic code of the nation.”<sup>5</sup> There is an ambivalence, the Janus-

character, that one must keep in mind and pursue, for nation, with its narration, is not simply “bad” and to be condemned and dismissed; it actually points to a real that enlightened rationalism both produced and was not capable of addressing and dealing with.<sup>6</sup> One cannot simply say: “Let’s keep the good side and be rid of the bad flipside”; they have the nasty tendency to stick together, and one should rather take narration not simply as a confabulation, but as a terrain where the ideological battles have to be fought. – But this is not the place to expound on the general theory of nation and nationalism.

Homi Bhabha’s volume appeared at a particularly significant historic moment, in 1990, and it deals with many aspects of nation-formation and its concomitant narrations in England, France, Latin and northern America, Australia, with the colonial legacy, India, Africa – but there is a part that is conspicuously missing, namely the emergence of nationalisms at the point of the collapse of socialist regimes, the falling apart of the Soviet “empire” and the looming falling apart of Yugoslavia. This was in 1990, exactly at the moment when this process was dramatically taking place, but out of the field of vision of this largely post-colonial take on the question of the nation. Another volume would be needed to deal with this new installment of the ‘Enlightenment and its flipside’ story, now under the guise of “socialism and its flipside” – and socialism was conceived as the continuation of the Enlightenment project, however badly it turned out.

But I don’t want to address these larger perspectives which would demand a lot of additional reflection. I would like to concentrate on the case of my own nation, Slovenia, and its homegrown nationalism which largely accompanied the whole process of Slovene independence in 1991, the establishment of this new rather tiny nation state, the independence hailed and celebrated as a great heroic historic achievement. It was part of the larger process of nationalisms getting the upper hand at the point of the collapse of socialist regimes, all of them proposing narrations, a great part being invented and concocted in this new situation while claiming to have been there since time immemorial. New power structures were significantly based on retroactive histories – but the appeal of their narrations was very hard to undo.

### **“Balkans” as the Other**

The first thing to be considered, but this is more of an aside, is the function of the signifier “Balkans”, with all the imaginary ramifications of this disorderly tribal cut-throat fantasy land, supposedly still stuck in a Hobbesian cut-civilized state. “Balkans” is the Other of “our” national community; it starts on the other side of the border. As the joke goes; on the Austrian side of the border with Slovenia, they will tell you that the Balkans begins over there; on the Slovene-Croatian border the Slovenes

**“NATION WOULD THUS BE A DOUBLE CREATURE OF ENLIGHTENED RATIONALISM AND ITS DARK FLIPSIDE, WHERE THE DARK FLIPSIDE IS BORN OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT.”**





Roman empire 264 BC.

MAP: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Map of the former Yugoslavia, showing national borders as they existed before Serbia and Montenegro separated

MAP: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

will tell you that the Balkans begins on the other side; on the Croatian-Serbian border they will tell you that the Balkans begins on the other side; on the Serbian border with Kosovo they will tell you that the Balkans begins on the other side ... But if we thus progress eastward we finally get to Greece, the extremity of the Balkans, which happens to be the cradle of “our” European civilization. The joke has its moment of truth: It demonstrates, by somewhat crude means, the mechanism of the expulsion of the Other, its dislocation and relocation, but also keeps the Other as something we badly need in order to be ourselves. This presents a bit of a caricature at the core of Slovene identity: we are not the Balkans, we belong to central Europe, we are the last bastion of European values against the East, epitomized by the Balkans (the proverbial Balkan tribes). Ironically, the geographical dividing line, the somewhat arbitrarily convened border of the geographical Balkans, is the Ljubljanica River which runs through the middle of Ljubljana, so Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, appears as the split city sitting on the borderline, a city separated from itself, just as Ljubljanica runs roughly through the middle of Slovenia (prolonged by the Sava River) and splits the whole country into two. It’s an identity which dwells on both banks of the river, however much one tries to expel the Other.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, Slovene national identity relied largely on culture, Slovenia having never possessed serious economic, military, and independent political power. It was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, always governed by foreign rulers. It was the culture that kept the Slovene language and tradition alive, so culture is at the core of a narration based on the formidable achievements of Slovene cultural figures and movements. This is a retroactive narration construed as a continuous narrative of the development and defense of Slovene national identity, the rampart of Slovene national substance – and curiously the term “national substance” emerged at the time (of independence) and played a major role. The question was how to protect the substance from accidents, to use the Aristotelian parlance.

## Slovene history: Course and ruptures

How to counteract this narrative, this retroactive continuity serving to build up the national substance? This is where the Slovene history provides some resources which I hope are not just a Slovene specificity but can perhaps serve as a wider model, a paradigm of an argument that one can propose in many similar cases. As opposed to this narration, my thesis is very simple: *all essential points that form the core of Slovene national identity have been precisely the breaks with what at the time was seen to constitute our “authentic” national identity.* What is retroactively considered as continuity is actually a series of breaks with continuity. – In order to elucidate this a bit, I must give a very short and cursory rerun of Slovene history, a crash course.<sup>8</sup>

**TAKE CHRISTIANITY** to start with. Christianization of this part of the world brought about the violent annihilation of the pagan tribal unions with their many gods and homegrown Slav myths. It was a bloody affair, an alien external force supported by superior foreign military powers, suppressing the relative freedom of the then Slovene community, and subordinating it to foreign rule. This was a drastic end to the first forms of Slovene communal organization, which is now retrospectively much celebrated by the dubious myth of its incipient democracy, the short-lived country Carantania (precursor of Carinthia). But Christianity at the same time also produced the first written document of Slovene language, the so called *Freising Manuscripts*, dating to approx. 1000 CE, which are actually the oldest preserved Latin-script text in any Slavic language. Christianity presented a violent break with our previous identity and introduced a new kind of social bond. There is already a paradox – are we ordinary pagans or are we Christians at our core, the latter having eradicated the former? So how can we be both? – Take Protestantism five hundred years later. It brought about a break with the community of medieval Christianity, established over centuries



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Anton Tomaž Linhart as depicted on a portrait from the collection of "Image archive of the Austrian National Library" in Vienna.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The first Slovene theatre piece was Linhart's adaptation of Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, [*Matiček se ženi*], 1789.



PHOTO: NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF SLOVENIA

Manuscript of the Opera *Črne maske* [Black masks] from 1928 by Marij Kogoj.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Image of the Slovenian composer Marij Kogoj (1892–1956) taken in the 1920s.

– once again as a foreign ideology imported from the outside, armed this time not with weapons, but with the new resources of the printed word (instead of sword). Inspired by the idea that the holy scriptures should be translated and made available in national languages, the Protestants produced the first Slovene printed books (in 1550, with *Catechism* and *Abecedarium* by Primož Trubar, inaugurating literacy), the Slovene translation of the entire Bible and the first Slovene grammar (in 1584). The Protestant period was short-lived, but in the half century of their concerted and dedicated efforts they flooded the country with a whole library of Slovene books. The Slovene printed word was proving to be fatal for the previous Slovene authenticity, but then the Counter-Reform endeavored very hard – in a further radical cut – to erase all Protestant traces. It amply ensured that all Protestant books were burnt (except for the Bible; only a few specimens survived) and as a consequence almost no Slovene book was published for more than a century and a half (1600-1750, with very few exceptions). This is when and how the country turned adamantly Catholic, which is henceforward supposed to define our national identity. – To pursue the paradox: are we Protestants (epitomized by the establishment of Slovene language, the book culture) or are we Catholic (doing everything to eradicate this)? How can we be both?

**TAKE ANTON TOMAŽ LINHART**, the first Slovene playwright and the beginning of Slovene theatre,<sup>9</sup> the key representative of the Slovene Enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth century. The first Slovene theatre piece was, unbelievably, Linhart's free adaptation of Beaumarchais's *The Marriage of Figaro*, [*Matiček se ženi*], set in the Slovene countryside, written in 1789, the year of the revolution. It's still a cause for celebration whenever it is produced in Slovenia, and it is produced often. But what was Linhart if not an "epigone" that followed – with great courage and

## "SLOVENE CULTURE, SUPPOSED TO BE THE BASTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY, WAS ACTUALLY ITS HARSHEST CRITIC."

against all odds – a foreign model, the hottest European play of the time? All this presented a radical break with all previous Slovene identity. Linhart was an importer of foreign ideas and ideals, not a guardian of Slovene substance; he was reputed to be an atheist and a freemason, he was denied a Christian funeral, and was treated as an outcast. – Take France Prešeren, the Slovene national Romantic poet, and his brave rebellious attitude against the conservative nature of the then Slovene identity, the liberty with which he reached for foreign expressive forms and made them his own, enormously widening the limits of the previously possible. He too was treated as a dangerous crank. – Take the

Slovene Modernists, especially Ivan Cankar, the most important Slovene writer, but who was accused of following decadent foreign ideas at the turn of the century, so foreign to the Slovene national substance that he had to be met with fire (in 1899, the Catholic church dignitaries bought the entire print-run of his book of poems *Erotika* and had it burnt).

To make things worse, he was the first promoter of socialist ideas. – Take all in-

novative art movements in the twentieth century: scandals that accompanied the first exhibitions of Slovene Impressionists, or the utmost liberty of Srečko Kosovel's constructivist poetry collection *Integrali* (*Integrals*, which was relegated to a drawer and published only forty years after his death), or Marij Kogoj's opera *Črne Maske* (*Black Masks*, 1929, Kogoj was Schoenberg's pupil), or Anton Podbevšek and Avgust Černigoj in the 1920s – examples are numerous, and always the same story: the intrusion of the foreign, a break with the current standards of Slovene identity. This continued also at the time of socialism, when the avantgarde movements of the sixties (the poet Tomaž Šalamun, the artist group OHO, the journal *Perspektive*, the theatre group *Pupilija Ferkeverk*, later the group *NSK-Neue Slowenische Kunst*) were all met with the same hostility, chastised as the alien bodies disturbing what was now seen as the socialist identity and its



values – very different from the Catholic ones, but the same logic applied.

If a gallery of great Slovenes is now formed in retrospect, the parade of the brave fighters for the Slovene identity, the icons forming the core of our national substance (Trubar – Linhart – Prešeren – Cankar – Kosovel and so on), then the counter argument is very simple: what they all have in common is only the fact that each of them at his own time presented a radical break with what was considered to be the Slovene identity of the time. The ideological operation is obvious: the retrospective constitution of the Slovene national identity/substance consists almost exclusively of cases that prove the opposite, namely that one can only attain important landmarks of national identity by calling into question the very standards of national identity prevalent at the time. Everything that is now considered truly Slovene was at the time seen as an import of a foreign intrusion, changing the very standards by which “Sloveneness” is to be assessed. Slovene culture, supposed to be the bastion of national identity, was actually its harshest critic. Or to put it more pointedly: one can only be true to the national identity by having the courage to call it into question.

## Socialism, the massive break

Take, finally, socialism, the massive break, a cut into the national substance on the political, cultural and economic levels, a radical undoing of all previous substantial ties. In the post-independence national narration this period is heavily vilified and demonized. Of course its legacy is highly mixed, with on the one hand, its universalist ideas of social justice and a community not based on national identities (but this came back with a vengeance in the bloody falling apart of Yugoslavia), and on the other hand, its actual form which fell far short of democracy and human rights. But whatever one may think about its course and results, its cut is irreversible; there is no return to some mythical pre-socialist community that the nationalist stance dreams about. This cut has become a part of the Slovene national identity, one more in the line of cuts and breaks that constitute it. This is where the narration has a big problem: no amount of vilification can obfuscate the fact that the socialist time has utterly transformed the country and established new standards of measurement.

To resume this quick and cursory panorama of Sloveneness in a few simple points, one could say the following: one shouldn't simply dismiss the idea of national identity and its narration, but rather show that its narration is contradictory at the very core. It will never do for national identity to take support in tradition, to celebrate its landmarks, to defend the domestic against the alien. Every identity worthy of its name requires an act – both at the individual and the collective levels – that demands the departure from the hitherto known and accepted, the estrangement of the domestic. In psychoanalytic terms, every identity is identification, that is, a risky and contradictory process with uncertain outcome, and not a state or a possession. The safe shelter of homeliness and tradition is the certain way to betray national identity; it can be kept alive only by the courage to ‘betray’ it.



Primož Trubar (or Primus Truber, 1508–1586) was the founder of the Slovenian literary language, a Protestant priest and a leader of the Protestant Reformation in the Slovenian lands. Trubar was the author of the first printed book in the Slovenian language, a Catechism and Primer (Tübingen, 1550) intended for the education of all Slovenians

Those who do not want to accept this, and point the finger at the presumed traitors, are certain to fail it.

It follows that the talk of national identity should abandon the discourse of a measure for delimiting the domestic and the threatening Other. It can make sense only through acts that subvert the very measure. Nothing threatens the national identity more than talk about the threats to national identity. Rather than abandoning narration, one should rather try to bring it to the point where it starts functioning as its own dissemination (to use Homi Bhabha's parlance). One should work with its contradictions and ambiguities, build on discontinuities, try to provide an alternative narrative, push identity to the point of it undermining itself. This leads to the “million dollar” question: how to provide a counter-narration of emancipation that would be capable of engaging passion and tackling enjoyment? Why is it that nationalist narrations tend to be more successful?

## The nationalist moment comes to an end

This narration of Slovene national identity was a hot topic at the time when the downfall of socialism coincided with the surge of nationalisms. It seemed that the universalist idea promoted by socialism had no chance against nationalist agendas – and Yugoslavia was precisely conceived as a nation state beyond nationalities, encompassing different nationalities with radically different traditions, histories, religions, and social structures; it was supposed to be the showcase of transcending nationalisms. Then the nationalisms based on newly construed narrations, retroactively establishing concocted national traditions, eventually got the upper hand, emerging as if from nowhere, and managed to present universalist narratives as a pipedream. – But this historic nationalist moment is over, it pertained to the

post-socialist “transition”. It was bad enough, but it seems that it has now given place to something worse, namely the surge of new populisms, whose trademarks are obscenity and cynicism. One can even in retrospect see in the nationalist moment a degree of pride and devotion, however misguided, but now this rather turned into the question of the management of rage. One can briefly say that depression and rage are the two opposite affects produced by the decades of neoliberalism, two sides of the same coin, where depression functions as rage stuck in the throat. Both are not merely widespread feelings, but necessary structural effects of the last decades, now turning into the major driving force of new populisms which are able to provide an outlet. National narration has become secondary, it has been relegated to a sideshow, yet one can detect a continuity concerning the core element: the persistent core is perhaps most easily designated as the fantasy of *the theft of enjoyment*. The others enjoy at our expense, they prevent us from being ourselves or what we should properly be. At the time of the heyday of the nationalisms of the nineties the privileged others were the neighboring nations (hence the bloody wars). Now the others have become expandable and expanding – most obviously and conspicuously migrants, then cultural Marxism, Islam, LGBTIQ+, climate movements, the deep state, China ... The targets are movable, narration has no need for consistency, while the rage is growing. One can feel – almost – nostalgic for the times when one could argue about the inner contradictions of the nationalist narrative; now contradictions are freely exhibited and enhance the economy of enjoyment and its theft which easily translates into new forms of racism and segregation.

### Predictions of the future

Let me finish with Lacan, and with a very general point. Lacan practically never undertook the risky business of predicting the future, except, perhaps astonishingly, with his predictions of the rise of new racisms and the increase in segregation. As early as 1967: “Our future of common markets will be counterbalanced by the increasingly crude expansion of the processes of segregation.” He related this to “the consequences of the way that science rearranges social groupings, and in particular the universalization it introduces.”<sup>10</sup> He would return to this in the famous television interview in 1973<sup>11</sup> and several other times. There is the implementation of science, of universalization and at the same time, concomitantly, of common markets and globalization, but the more these processes progress, the more the tension will intensify, the more the problem of surplus enjoyment will increase, the bigger the danger of segregation. The more the problem of the theft of enjoyment and of those others who enjoy at our expense spreads, the more globalization will erect new walls against the segregated. Lacan’s predictions are, of course, very general, but we can see that they have unfortunately come true. How can psychoanalysis still serve as a critical tool to counteract this prospect? ✕

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- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *For They Don't Know What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1994).
- 2 Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 3 I guess puns easily proliferate once one starts on that slope: contamination, alie-nation, combi-nation, determi-nation, discrimi-nation, elimination, imagi-nation, imperso-nation, resig-nation, subordi-nation ... So many threads that can illuminate nation formation and the vicissitudes of its narration. One shouldn't dismiss puns too easily, they can serve as a weapon of dispersal of unitary meaning, given that the defense of unitary meaning is one of the core concerns of all nationalisms.
- 4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), 19.
- 5 Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London: Verso 1983), quoted in Homi Bhabha, “Introduction” in *Nation and Narration*, 2.
- 6 It's illuminating to use the Freudian conceptual pair *heimlich/unheimlich*: “The *heimlich* pleasures of the hearth, the *unheimlich* terror of the space or race of the Other” (Bhabha, “Introduction”, 2), a good way of formulating the paradox of the nation. With nation, the uncanny structurally appears at the core of the ‘homely’ – maybe all nationalisms can be conceived as ways to tackle this extimate kernel.
- 7 As a denizen of Ljubljana, I now live on the European side, but I grew up on the Balkan side, where my parents lived. My Croatian mother was from the Balkans, but my father stemmed from a place very close to the Austrian border, a vintage central European. I am literally a Lacanian split subject.
- 8 Of course there are innumerable sources for the very brief, selective and simplified account that follows. Perhaps the most comprehensive survey of Slovene history available in English is Peter Štih, Vasko Simoniti & Peter Vodopivec, *A Slovene History. Society – Politics – Culture* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino – Sistory, 2008).
- 9 Technically preceded by the *Škofja Loka Passion Play*, a penitential Passion procession in Slovene first performed in 1721, featuring the world's oldest preserved director's book for the performance.
- 10 Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 257.
- 11 Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 534.

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