

Yugoslavia as Science Fiction

by Jasmin Mujanovi? - Friday, January 17, 2014

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Over the past two years, a collection of photographs of WWII memorials from (the former) Yugoslavia has made the rounds on social media. Popular sci-fi and fantasy blog io9 [reported on it](#) and [this post from Crack Two](#) appears to have been "liked" over 173,000 times on Facebook alone. And here is the same article, with more or less the same perspective, on [a blog](#) from BiH. This process of "re-discovery," however is to me the truly fascinating aspect of this phenomenon. The authors of these articles, as well as those leaving comments, repeatedly refer to the monuments as "bizarre," "haunting" or, at best, as "modernist," which one can safely interpret to mean "weird." This commentary is essentially an inversion of the Stalinist insistence on "socialist realism." We are now surprised that a society once existed, some long ago civilization which we relate to as though it were an artifact of Tolkien lore, which was capable of producing *abstract representations of real events*. What does it say of our societies that in the second decade of the 21st century, we consider symbolic representations to be "strange?"

As it concerns the Balkans, this fascination is emblematic of the virtually [wholesale dissolution of culture and art in the post-Yugoslav space](#). It reminds us, I argue, of the anti-political nature of the post-Yugoslav, neoliberal-nationalist political order.

On the one hand, the eternal specter of "joining the EU" has been revealed as illusory not only because of the global financial crisis but also because former socialist states and now EU members like Romania and Bulgaria, as well as former Yugoslav republics like Slovenia and Croatia, appear no closer to resolving their internal political contradictions in 2014 than they were in, say, in 1984. Oligarchy still defines these political systems and kleptocracy their economies, as I continually stress. Whereas they previously felt themselves marginalized by Moscow and Belgrade, they are now marginalized by Brussels. Incidentally, was this not also the central motif of David ?erný's brilliant [EU installation](#) from a few years ago? The rage comes precisely from the realization that this abstraction reveals much more of our sordid reality than the neoliberal insistence on no possible alternative to the EU project.

On the other hand, the nationalist dream of ethnically pure "nation-states" constitutive of the Yugoslav dissolution but also of the anti-migrant and anti-Roma policies of most of Europe is likewise a bankrupt one. As we are asked to engage in successive rounds of purges of [insert preferred current national enemy here], we seem to come no closer to resolving the underlying problems of our societies. And as "new" terrors emerge, with new grievances (e.g. the LGBT movement), the true intent of the national dream reveals itself. It is to fundamentally deny popular participation in politics, to crush dissent and debate.

Yes, we are invited into the streets to defend our communities from the enemy but we are presented with a finished program. We are asked merely to become grave diggers and executioners not citizens. And when the Muslims are gone, we'll turn on the Roma, and when the Roma are gone we'll turn on the homosexuals...and then? Then it's the turn of the domestic critics, the liberals and the communists and perhaps our own selves because by this time the "purging" seems never ending and the factories are still shuttered. Wasn't it the fault of the Muslims and aren't they gone now? The Roma too, and homosexuals and liberals and communists. They're all gone, the factories remain shuttered and yet there's still shining BMWs among the wreckage. And to ask to whom these belong is to find our own selves declared national enemies, in turn.

So perhaps those photographs reveal all this in of themselves, but what is that *we* see? I am particularly interested in the "local gaze," that is of the (former) Yugoslavs themselves.

The sight of these monuments is a moment of dislocated recognition. As we are still unable to really talk about the horrors of the war, nor the horrors of the post-war period, to accept and acknowledge the suffering of our former friends and neighbors, we remain largely frozen in place. In this frozen space, trauma is dealt with differently; anger, suspicion and paranoia fester but the the freeze remains. And yet when presented with these photographs we are haunted by a suspicion. The suspicion that what was necessary to create these monuments was a complex society, one we have forgotten and were forced to forget. A complex society which had memorialized the past, however problematically, and devoted most of its energy on imagining a future. A "self-managed society," where we were political agents and if we felt frustrated by the *actually existing* imperfections of this system, the solution(s) were self-evident; it was not to dissolve the system but rather to insist on the [actualization of its ideological principles](#).

The mere recognition of these monuments' complexity, however, allows for a kind of mourning that has otherwise been denied to us. Their now crumbling edifices allow us to mourn for the future that was taken away from us, to mourn all that which we individually and collectively lost, without having the process interrupted by emotionally charged questions of who did what to whom, when and how.

Beside the overt chauvinist implications of many [contemporary monuments](#) in the Balkans, their primary failure is that they are essentially ahistorical constructs or, at least, this has been their intent. They memorialize a kind of ethereal suffering that serves not to turn us toward reconciliation but rather to keep us frozen in trauma. Whereas the Yugoslav monuments were massive, abstract, leaping out of the earth with little to hide precisely because this was a society with a future that allowed for participation and interpretation (a truncated kind, granted), the contemporary monuments are small and literal. They are our tombstones not memorials in the true sense.

The Western fascination with these installations is by comparison much simpler: a long-standing Oriental fixation on the East, their odd customs and spectacularly horrific political systems. If they are beautiful,

they are either beautiful in a vacuum or in the way the [Ryugyong Hotel](#) might be deemed spectacular. This is not to accuse individual viewers of these photographs of racism. The monuments *are* beautiful. But it is to point to a generally banal conception of Yugoslavia in the Western imagination, which naturally places all "socialist experiments" on a spectrum between Stalin and the Kim dynasty. Hence, the likening of these structures to UFOs as though the whole of the Yugoslav period was not merely one of fiction but of spectacular *science fiction*.

Yugoslavia was real, once. And it once had a future. It was a society capable of producing complex structures and systems: political, economic, cultural. These structures and their remnants ought to be taken seriously on their own terms precisely because they point to the absence of all these phenomena in our present. A fact worth mourning, indeed.

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