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NON-COMMEMORATION AND THE NATION: MEMORY AND FORGETTING IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

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Abstract: *The concepts of monumentality and collective memory have not been neglected by discourses concerning national identity. However, insights favouring forgetting and counter-memory are considerably new approaches reconstructing identities and redressing tragedy after pronounced violence. Erecting monuments is often a strategy towards building and inciting public memory and defining the nation, but they can also be used as a means of masking histories and manipulating national narratives – this is seemingly the case in a number of post-war monuments throughout the former Yugoslavia. The interplay between cultural heritage, memory, and space is a huge component of national identity; the installation of monuments memorializing non-Yugoslav celebrities throughout the newly defined states serve as a means to reconstitute identity, redefine heritage and avoid the celebration of a painful past. This paper will examine the potential consequences of manipulating public space through the erection of structures that function to disguise. By discussing the way in which identities can strive to strategically avoid the state in the ‘non-commemoration’ of the nation and its inflicted traumas, I hope to demonstrate that the state is always present: That even through neglecting it – it is always referenced, that the academic conceptions of the state can operate, not just by identifying and treating the state as an actor, but also by simply acknowledging the state as spectre. By comparing these contemporary structures to the numerous national monuments dedicated to victims of fascism built after the Second World War, I will show how the relationship between the state and memory has shifted in some regards and stayed the same in others.*

“In assuming the idealized forms and meanings assigned this era by the state, memorials tend to concretize particular historical interpretations. They suggest themselves as indigenous, even geological outcroppings in a national landscape; in time such idealized memory grows as natural to the eye as the landscape in which it stands. For memorials to do otherwise would be to undermine the very foundations of national legitimacy, the state’s seemingly natural right to exist” (Young 178).

The day before what would have been his sixty-fifth birthday, a bronze statue of deceased kung-fu hero Bruce Lee was unveiled. It did not stand in his

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birthplace of San Francisco, nor was it located in his resting place of Seattle. It did not stand in Hong Kong, from where his family hailed – though a memorial was erected there the very next day. On November 26, 2005, the first public monument to the Chinese American martial artist was unveiled in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The differences between the two Bruce Lee statues – the one in Mostar, and the other in Hong Kong – are more apparent from their context than from their content. Both statues are similar in size, they are both bronze, they both feature the star in a classic martial arts pose in near-identical attire. Context, or more explicitly, their place, is where most of the diverging meaning between the two statues can be derived. Unlike Hong Kong, Lee did not have any evident roots in or connections to Mostar. And while the memorial statue in Hong Kong was the project of the *Bruce Lee Fan Club*, an homage to the star himself, the movement to erect a Bruce Lee monument in Mostar was less inspired by *who* Bruce Lee was and more because he was not a Bosnian, Croat nor Serb.

To a casual observer, the Bruce Lee statue in Mostar likely appears random. However the seemingly haphazard use of public space is incredibly strategic – an attempt to reconceive and avoid national narrative, as well as to unify the city through the non-commemoration of tragic national pasts. Young, in the quotation this paper opens with, reminds us of the state's role in the production of memorials, and thus the perpetuation of national narratives – what, then can be gathered from commemorative politics that deliberately neglect the state? At this point we can begin to think of Mostar's Bruce Lee monument as more than just the embodiment of kitsch, globalization, or postmodern aesthetics but more accurately as a mode of politics of identity, memory and a means of contesting classical monumentality as well as the state itself. Regarded as “Turbosculpture” by artist Aleksandra Domanović in her 2009 video piece of the same name, the Bruce Lee statue is one of several similar projects erected throughout the former Yugoslavia. Though my analysis informs similar conclusions for a number of the monuments, due to the limited length of this work, I can only speak of a single one in detail.

Perhaps the content of memorials no longer even matter – in their volume and concentration they represent, as John Gillis contends, “a forest of monuments... so dense that it makes it virtually impossible to decipher their historical references” (Gillis 15). In postmodernity, with the end of the original reference, the monument becomes so distorted that the only means (or hopes) for veracity of memory is to acknowledge uncertainty, reject the direct reference, and imply the significant through erecting the banal. Martha Minnow asserts that “remembering requires deliberate hard work to reconstruct what happened and to do so with full emotion” (429) – however this is not necessarily true. When the burdens of ideology and the politics of trauma are constant, the difficulty of remembrance can lie in forgetting. This exploration of the dynamic between remembering and forgetting is increasingly becoming an important fixture of memory studies. Premised on the idea that “new memories require concerted forgettings,” (Gillis 7) processes of remembrance are inextricably linked to what is forgotten. As much as

commemorative processes can promote, instill, and inspire memory, they can also serve to manipulate, disguise, and oppress remembrance.

Through a discussion of the way in which identities can strive to strategically avoid the state in the ‘non-commemoration’ of the nation and its inflicted traumas, I hope to demonstrate that the state is often present beyond its ontic form: that even when neglecting it – it is often referenced, and that certain academic interventions should move beyond simply identifying and treating the state as an explicit actor, but also acknowledge the way the state exists as spectre. In exploring the more subtle ways through which the nation operates – narrative, memory, identity and not just policy, legislation, and structure – we can move beyond the debate of the state as alive, dead, or in decline, and examine the permanence of the state in its phantom form. Often theorized as continually disappearing in light of globalization, the state can be reified, remembered, and thus can endure as spectre in the memories of citizens.¹

Enter the Dragon (Into Mostar)

Mostar has never suffered from an absence of symbolic capital, and it is often agreed that there is high value, and risk, in the symbolic exchange in the city. In speaking of the Bruce Lee monument, Mostar Urban Movement, the group that proposed the statue, iterates two different intentions behind their move to commemorate the kung-fu star. First, that he is a champion of justice – a nostalgic relic of childhoods bygone, “whose ethnic background is absolutely irrelevant” (Raspudić qtd. in Blažević). Describing Mostar as being overburdened by politics and ideology as a result of the continual reference to the trauma of the war, Nino Raspudić, one of the founders of Urban Movement, argues that the monument serves to represent the commonalities between the citizens of Mostar – the lowest common denominator of sorts. The second intention, “to question the significance of monuments and symbols” (Raspudić) is tied to the group’s mission statement of “overcoming national mythologies” (Urban Movement). Their former argument, that the statue exists as a representation of justice and unity, is almost entirely undermined by the group’s more powerful assertion that it also serves to question grand narratives. This is not to say that it cannot do both, but rather that it cannot serve both intentions equally. I argue that the monument to Bruce Lee serves to negatively mark trauma that could never be rightfully referenced, as well as to mark a void between citizens’ experiences and competing national narratives. After all, monuments’ “form and features may [often] in no way resemble what they are expressly built to recall” (Lowenthal 321).

Mostar Urban Movement considers having to explain the Bruce Lee monument as similar to having to explain a joke. In this sense, we must consider what is simultaneously being implied and eluded in the commemoration of a film star with no explicit ties to where the memorial exists. Linda Hutcheon defines irony as “simultaneously being both disguise and communication,” (88) and it is through this mode that the Bruce Lee memorial operates. The memorial employs

¹ See, for example, Manent and Strange.

both high and low stylistic registries – the low being the reference to “mass-culture, kung-fu, childhood” and the high being represented through “monuments, grandeur, bronze” (Raspudić). To Raspudić, irony is at play in the juxtaposition of the ‘high’ with the ‘low’. Though this is certainly valid, I believe the substantive irony of the work operates through the placement of such a banal reference point into a city, nonetheless a region, so overwhelmed by the trauma of the most recent war.

Countermonument

Pierre Nora’s assertion “the less memory is experienced from the inside, the more it exists through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs” (13) premises the discourse and practice of countermonumentality. The idea that “with audacious simplicity the counter monument flouts any number of cherished memorial conventions” (Young 30), is imperative when thinking about memory work in the former Yugoslavia as it informs similar criticisms of classical monuments and national narratives as does strategic non-commemoration. Following the logic of Foucauldian counter-memory, the countermonument operates through active remembrance that decries dominant historical narratives.

In spite of making no claims of specific formations, except for an expectation of ‘openness’, the countermonument, has, at least in practice, become an increasingly common architectural trope dominantly portrayed through “the language of ‘voids,’ ‘absences,’ and ‘blank screens’” (Thakkar 2008). And while the Bruce Lee monument certainly counters particular classical implications of monumentality, it also fails to emulate the same memory experience that the countermonument promotes.

Where the countermonument acts through unconventional non-descript forms, with no explicit reference, as a means to provoke the viewer to interact with remembrance, the Bruce Lee monument operates in a virtually opposite manner. It is not a blank slate onto which memory is projected – it is bronze, it is literal, it is explained: “BRUCE LEE/1940-1975/YOUR MOSTAR”. It offers relief from both the present as well as the not so distant past by inciting a childhood nostalgia dissociated from the trauma of the war. It does not follow the mantra of “never forget” and it does not ask the viewer to commit to remember. James E. Young communicates what the countermonument exists to do and what it deters against:

Its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by passer-by but demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desanctification; not to accept graciously the burden of memory but to throw it back at the town’s feet. (Young 30)

However, the Bruce Lee statue, does not provoke but consoles; its bronze and literal form was intended to be fixed and everlasting; its banality makes it easily ignored; it was intended to remain shiny and pristine; the intent of its design was explicitly to accept graciously the burden of memory, and to refrain from throwing it back at the town’s feet. In this sense the Bruce Lee monument cannot be thought of in these terms.

Michael Kimmelman asserts, “Minimalist abstraction, with its allegorical pliancy, turns out to function in a memorial context as the best available mirror for the modern world” (qtd. in Doss 123). However, it can be questioned whether the “allegorical pliancy” of minimalism, just by nature of being abstract, is substantive enough to resist speaking through specific narratives. Even if one were to follow the claim that categorical implications are absent in minimalism, Slavoj Žižek reminds that extra-ideological spaces are, in fact, still ideological. More true to the point however, is that minimalism is, in actuality, explicitly loaded with ideology.

This is not to imply that experiencing the Bruce Lee monument does not entail memory work for some – rather, my argument is that the memory work that is encouraged by it is different from that which is roused by countermonumentality. The countermonument is open to all interpretations and all subjective experiences and in this sense countermonument and the idea of a cosmopolitan memory go together well. Cosmopolitan memory is argued to encompass “the search for new certainties, replacing those provided by the state in First Modernity,” (Levy and Sznajder 26) placing it alongside countermonumentality as a non-statist mechanism of remembrance. In operating outside of the national reference, the countermonument has seemingly become a transnational mode of commemoration and though there may not be anything inherently problematic with the idea of expanding collective memory beyond the limits of the nation state – we cannot consider a cosmopolitan vision of memory that implies universal access to subjective traumatic experiences. The tendency of countermonuments to imply that any individual has the ability to tap into specific memories is absurd and problematic. Countering national narratives certainly requires more than simply operating beyond the geographic nation state.

A more responsible approach to cosmopolitan memory requires negotiating subjective experience for the international spectator. In April 2007, another monument sponsored by the Sarajevo Centre for Contemporary Art’s De/construction of the Monument project was unveiled. The ‘Monument to the International Community, from the Grateful Citizens of Sarajevo’ was a flippant critique of the international humanitarian effort during the Bosnian war. In the same classically monumental form as the Bruce Lee monument, a golden model of a can of European Union sanctioned beef stood atop a marble base. Though the dedication implies it has an international audience, what the monument actually speaks of, is the subjective experiences of those who were part of the Bosnian War that cannot be experienced by anyone else. It does not serve to provide an experience of remembrance to those who did not experience it, rather, as Anne Sheftel argues, “the monument subverts colonialist notions of a people being ‘grateful’ for the assistance they received by focusing on its inadequacy” (13) - a reference to trauma only accessible to those who experienced it directly.

The Bruce Lee monument operates through uncanniness. It incites confusion, not meditation. It is familiar, but absolutely foreign. The impression of non-belonging, and the resulting confusion experienced by the viewer is the memory-work that the statue intended. And, as Max Pensky argues, the absence of explicit answers as to why it is there and exactly what it means is the actual

significance of the statue (266). In spite of cosmopolitanism's normative value, I argue that the operationalization of cosmopolitan memory rarely entirely eludes national narratives or assumptions, and that the Bruce Lee monument cannot be thought of as embodying an overly idealized form of the concept.

Tito's Spomeniks

The assertion that nation building is also nation destroying is considerably important when thinking of former Yugoslavia² – especially when moving the discussion onto monumentality prior to disintegration. The contemporary turbosculpture phenomenon is only a novelty in its disregard of the national via banal, seemingly Western, references. However, the region's contentious use of strategic non-commemoration is not new. Following the Second World War, Josip Broz Tito commissioned several monuments to the fallen victims of fascism. These monuments, presented as memorials from the victims of the War, were an integral part in promoting the Communist Party's slogan of "Brotherhood and Unity". Yugoslavia's stability, a constant balancing act of conflicting nationalisms, rested on the construction of an image of a unified nation. The ethnic tensions that exploded during the Second World War had to be restrained, unified, and disguised – the new national monuments served to construct a Yugoslav national identity to supersede the vestigial nationalisms of the country's constituents. These national monuments are profoundly different from the non-commemorative memorials that have been erected throughout the former Yugoslavia in recent years, but in spite of these differences, the structures operate in similar ways – simultaneously disguising certain pasts by evoking others, and subduing specific nationalisms in order to promote unity.

Tito's monuments, served as a means to address the national problem – to "overcome the memory and history of the first Yugoslav experience... while at the same time masking the ethnically based violence that occurred during the war" (Neill 88). Tito's tight hold on memory, specifically over the remembrance of the events of World War Two, had both positive and negative repercussions. Seemingly having restrained ethnic tensions in the region during his presidency spoke to a certain success of the Yugoslav myth, but dissolution of the country after his death is often thought to have been triggered by the national neglect of certain traumas. The national monuments to the victims of fascism, accompanied by a national narrative of omission – one that did not speak of "who killed whom", offered the ambiguity modernist commemorative forms are often argued to have. However, in spite of the absence of explicit references, the monuments' meanings were fixed to serve the Communist Party's political purpose.

In contesting the effectiveness of the countermonument I questioned the mutability of minimalism. Tito's national monuments serve as an example of how, in spite of the minimalist form, abstract commemoration is often utilized alongside complex narratives that counteract any "allegorical pliancy" in remembrance. Form can only go so far in constituting memory. In the case of Tito's monuments the

² See, for example, the respective works of Connor, Smith, and Mayall.

narrative of the Yugoslav myth allowed no room for narratives of truth. Bogdan Bogdanović, the architect of a number of the national monuments argued, when interviewed about the works, that because of their modernist form, “there was little risk that they would be hijacked by national triumphalism” (qtd. in Mirlesse), and while the monument was not necessarily hijacked, it was built to directly speak of the Communist ideal of “Brotherhood and Unity” and to deflect competing interpretations of events by neglecting commemoration all together. The monuments’ minimalist form failed them twice; firstly through the inability to completely deflect an obviously nationalist purpose; secondly, that once the structures’ context of ‘Brotherhood and Unity’ disintegrated, the ‘pliancy’ of minimalism lent them to be perceived as “abandoned and mysterious” (Vollmer), “soviet buildings [sic]” (TOM) after images of the “spomeniks”³ spread over the internet.

Yugoslav nationalism is a contentious assertion. Evidently it is a failed concept, if it ever existed at all. From Titoism, to national communism, to Yugo-nostalgia; not since the fall of the First Yugoslavia (the Kingdom) has “Yugoslavism” been terribly explicit. In spite of this, I argue that there was still a national narrative at play – a “negative nationalism” or a national narrative by omission that was used strategically to conceal the fragmented nationalisms embedded within the region. Tito’s national monuments to the victims of fascism demonstrate the shortcomings of both classical and contemporary monumentality. The monuments operated in both a positive and negative fashion; they were utilized as a means to disguise the ethnic violence of World War II while promoting the vision of the Communist Party.

The Turbosculpture movement, and the erection of numerous memorials to non-political celebrities, is not simply an allegorical cargo cult of Western reference and Hollywood obsession. The movement is not simply a mode of the cosmopolitanization process of hypermodernity, even in spite of the “universal hero” rhetoric from those who supported the Rocky Balboa monument in Žitiste, Johnny Weissmuller (Tarzan) in Medja, or Bruce Lee in Mostar. These statues represent a form of strategic non-commemoration – where through ironic representation of non-political celebrities in ideologically overburdened spaces, the statues in question serve as a means of simultaneously referencing and eluding the national narrative. Strategic non-commemoration asserts that the state does not have to be explicitly present, represented, or spoken of to be referenced. Though they avoid speaking directly of the state, I argue that these memorials beg the question of what is not being represented. In this sense I argue that, in spite of the changing dynamic between the relationship of individuals, identities and the nation-state, the state remains present. Though it does not necessarily operate in the ways that it did in modernity – the state, in its embeddedness in society, narrative, and memory, can at the very least be thought of as a spectre.

³ Spomenik, meaning literally just ‘monument’ across former-Yugoslav languages, came to be the popularized term for the structures after they were featured in a book of photographs entitled “Spomenik.” See Kempnaers.

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