

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE: MEMORY AND IDENTITY OF THE (POST)COMMUNIST CROATIA

Keywords: *memory; identity; monuments; socialist modernism; nationalism; Yugoslavia; Croatia*

Abstract: *In its post-war positioning in relation to the Western-European space and the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the famous 1948 split, Yugoslavia showed a tendency towards forming a unique, but rather hybrid federative identity. Cultural politics was used as an instrument in breaking from the Soviet prototype model and in adapting to Western values, as manifested in Yugoslavian ethics and aesthetics. In line with tendencies in the West for abstract forms in visual arts, Yugoslavia adopted and applied them in public memorial sculpture. Such monuments represent a unique phenomenon that requires consideration within the context of the so-called "socialist modernism". Consequently, one of the postulates of this research is that the aesthetic category is indeed one of the crucial elements in constituting the Yugoslav identity. Within that framework, I will analyze the notion of 'trauma' as: 1) the place of a previous trauma which is positively commemorated by a certain monumental corpus; 2) subsequently inscribed onto the same memorial place amidst the shifts of political systems.*

The radical shifts in political structures in the 1990s, the demise of the federative regime, as well as the significant number of social norms and convention, were accompanied by the systematic elimination and devastation of formerly communist abstract monuments which were now seen as material reminders of oppression. Destruction thus became ritualistic cleansing, meant to legitimize the newly liberated national entities. Therefore, the replacing of the places of remembrance with the places of forgetting is to be equated with a removal of the symbols of what was seen as the interrupted continuity of a nation.

Public monuments are very common and imposingly visible physical manifestations of the culture of memory. They are, to use Pierre Nora's term, *lieux de mémoire* – locations where collective identity is materialized, functioning as metaphors for a version of history imposed by society when live memory disappeared. That is the reason why monuments are often subject to controversies during periods of political changes, and are often defined in relation to history. On the one hand they represent the official interpretations of a history meant to legitimize the regimes instituted in the post-war period, as is the case of Socialist Yugoslavia, where thousands of memorials dedicated to victory in The Second World War were erected. On the other hand these same memorials would often become places of confrontation, acceptance and finally

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negligence of loathed historical heritage, as was the case after the collapse of Yugoslavia in post-communist Croatia. In other words, monuments function as indicators of the ideological mechanisms constructed by the ruling elites. The article therefore argues that collective memory is shaped by the visual perception of the modes adequate for the projection of the memory crucial for the creation of firmly structured collective identity.

The discussed changes and mechanisms are related to the unification of complex geographical, ethnic and cultural processes which preceded the grand changes on the European map starting from 1989 onwards. Naturally, they are primarily applicable to the Eastern Europe which tended to build broader identities and cultures on top of smaller identities and cultures. Interestingly, the relations among these smaller scale communities were often far from harmonious. The multinational unity had been manifested through specific constructive forms of social memory in the field of domestic, as well as foreign affairs, and thus formed a collective identity. The post-communist or post-Yugoslav period in these countries was marked by the intention to embrace new models of representation and identity formation, *inter alia*, by alienation from socialism that had dominated the previous decades. Among the direct targets of the general tendencies and needs for change were monuments inherited from the aforementioned period which served as one of the main modes of expression of the ideological self-identification discourse, as well as the mode of legitimizing that identity. However, this article will not tackle an analysis of the countries of the Soviet Union, but rather deals with Yugoslavia and post-communist Croatia. The political and social history of Yugoslavia can be divided into several stages: 1) The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, also called the First Yugoslavia, 2) the period of German occupation when the communist revolution began, 3) The Second Yugoslavia – the era of Josip Broz Tito, and, finally, 4) the post-Tito period characterized by the disintegration of the federation.

The socio-cultural and political frameworks of the latter two are the foci of this paper. It is necessary to mention that Tito's Yugoslavia lasted from 1945 to 1980. At the beginning, the newly established country was closely tied to the Eastern Bloc (1941–1948), followed by a period of self-managing socialism in that complex and multi-ethnic country (1950–1991) that had positioned itself between the Eastern and the Western Bloc. It is crucial to stress and reiterate these facts because at that point, Yugoslavia had a foot in each camp, with art and culture being of great significance. That was manifested in the change of the official visual state identity. The federal disintegration, which led to the formation of new national states, whose relatively hermetic cultures marked the post-Tito period (1980–1991) incited wars between the pro-Serbian federal army and the new armed forces.

The objective of this paper is to point out the construction of collective memory by explaining the path of the identity representation manifested in forms and meanings of memorial places. To this end, I will focus on two matters – identity and memory by

means of: 1) the aesthetics of modernism, for which the corpus of Yugoslavian antifascist modernist monuments is relevant and 2) disowning by destruction or negligence of the very same monuments, as well as by ritual cleansing in the midst of collective political euphoria.

The first case is based on the establishing and legitimizing of the Yugoslav identity inscribed in the aesthetic repertoire of modernism, while the second one is based on its deconstruction. In other words, it is based on removing the undesirable memory of the periods that had disrupted the continuity of the Croatian national identity which was, as a consequence, perceived as a chokehold. The case analysis is focused on representative monuments of the late 1950s, 60s and 70s built with a slight abstract touch, which dwindled their direct ideological symbolization. Those are the monuments devoid of references to personality cults or communist motives. Yet they commemorate the partisan victory over fascism and the People's Liberation Struggle (1941–1945) that resulted in the formation of the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia. The continuity in the creation of an independent path to Yugoslav Socialism which lasted from those events onwards faced the split with Stalin in 1948. Political unity and relatedness were of primary importance to the Federation of Yugoslavia, where different cultural and national identities were fused under the dogmatic slogan of brotherhood and unity. Such objectives required the use of transnational ideas like victory in the Second World War, i.e. the socialist revolution as a basic ideological factor of future socio-economic cooperation, and the transitional period that led to the formation of a classless communist society (Kirn 210). The concepts of coexistence and ideological unification were based on these ideas so that the infamous term of "national" was substituted by "people's". In the initial post-war period the monuments convey a see-through symbolism. They are mostly figurative, stylistically derived from known social realist patterns, and sometimes they possess traditional folk elements. What is at stake here is the very heterogeneous, figurative graphic corpus that flooded Yugoslavia. Their aim was to commemorate the local communities' memory of specific events and people related to anti-fascist struggles, which very often led to representations reflecting local stylistic traditions. The initiatives and funding for erecting such formations, in fact, came from local communities and municipalities of the federation. Such practices were replaced by larger scale state orders and tenders which would later on produce larger scale sculptural formations. The new generation of young sculptors emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, and they would carry out the new possibilities in representation, which are primarily explorations of the very medium of sculpture within the framework of an 'autonomous art' which surpassed the dogmatism of the early socio-realistic sculpture. These are, for example, the monumental abstract sculptures of Dušan Džamonja (Podgarić), Vojin Bakić (Kamenska, Petrova Gora, and other locations), Bogdan Bogdanović (Jasenovac), etc., which are part of a unique phenomenon that requires consideration within the context of the so-called "socialist modernism" –

the aesthetics specific of 'Eastern European' countries under socialism, especially of Yugoslavia.¹

A turn in the aesthetic repertoire of the mainstream art production is a consequence of the 1948 split between Yugoslavia and the USSR, when Yugoslavia was forced to choose its own path which entailed balancing between the West and the East, largely due to the origins of the financial and military aids that they had been receiving. The split from the USSR affected the official political viewpoints on the doctrines of socialist realism as early as the 1950s, thus enabling the majority of domestic artists to return to the pre-war plurality of modernist expression.

It was the inclusion of Yugoslavia within the European context, which initiated the "Westernization" project. Culture and art represented an important factor in the process of strengthening the international position of the country and its positioning during the Cold War division of the world. The culture became one of the most important links with the "capitalist countries" during the first decade after the break with Stalinist communism. It was a project whose aim was to establish a (contradictory) "socialist democracy". It was precisely this idea of building a "third way", a Yugoslav socialism constructed on humanism, freedom and equality that was articulated through art, which was now focused towards an unrestricted, abstract visual language.

From there on, the function of the modernist, post-revolutionary production of monuments was to continuously and actively promote the communist ideology, this time expressed through a modern visual (markedly Yugoslav) language, whose purpose was the integration of Yugoslav identity and the self-identification of the Yugoslav socialist society. In relation to the desire of constructing a new identity for the new socialist state, with support from the emancipatory trends in aesthetics and the visual imaginary, it is appropriate to make a reference to Kosta Angeli Radovani who states: "If necessary, and I will repeat it one more time, hundred times over, in art the term "ours" is merely a synonym for authenticity of an artwork both for us and for the whole world" (qtd. in Župan 102). Simultaneously, the aesthetic of socialist modernism was an element of the "self-promotion" of the liberal Yugoslav state, which was part of the strategy focused on building political connections with the West, together with the presentation of a socialist democracy beyond the Iron Curtain (Dedić 68).

¹ Socialist Modernism is a modernist reaction to socialist realism in the Yugoslav art after the 1950s. It occurs in reaction to the turning of the party structures towards the Cominform, and as part of the cultural and political strategies of approaching the West. It is also a reaction to the socialist realism as a dogmatic model of presentation and expression within *Real-socialism*, which is being reflected in the later development of an aestheticized, non-programmatic, ideologically neutral and autonomous artistic expression and presentation. (Šuvaković 581). The actual definition of socialist modernism is partly based on the original use of the term 'socialist aestheticism' by Sveta Lukić, and the later use of the term in the visual arts by Lazar Trifunović, Lidija Merenik, Ješo Denegri, Miško Šuvaković and Bojana Pejić.

In other words, the concept that Bojana Pejić calls *body politics*, which is interpreted as a comprehensive communist body in communist countries, embodied by the leader and the forms of such visual representation that have their foundations in the idea of a unique and perfectly structured socialist society, was put aside as the state expanded the scope of its creative liberties, which were liberated from socialist-realism dogmas and its derivatives (Merenik 29). In art this meant establishing their own visual discourse of modernism that would put forth freedom.

In Yugoslavia, which took a neutral stand in the Cold War divisions, that discourse was defined as socialist-modernist. The abstract monuments are part of that discourse, taking on the role of constructing the visual and historical state identity. Their form was neither a descriptive nor a figurative representation of an event. It could function in an isolated fashion as a pure sculpture in space. From Jan Kempenaers's book *Monument- Spomenik* one learns that a rather small number of foreigners were in fact aware of their existence, while the current citizens of the former Yugoslavia did not wish to be aware of their existence. Furthermore, the author asserts that those monuments were objects of blinding fury, while now they are objects of indifference. What remains is pure sculpture in an empty landscape. The author describes them based on his aesthetic impressions – as objects of extraordinary beauty; he speaks about their abstract geometric shapes that allude to macro-forms of viruses, flower petals or crystals (Kempenaers 62).

The space under discussion used to epitomize an ideological function. However, cleared of any narrative purpose, political specificity, and social significance, these monuments contain nowadays only a tectonic form, suggesting at the same time that the former places of remembrance became places of forgetting. Referring to the Mirčan theory on the aesthetic of memory, Potkonjak and Pletenac suggest that while discussing memory as a process used to establish a relationship with an individual or collective past, we can also talk about it in terms of an aesthetic occurrence, as well as of a means to position oneself within a broader network of social occurrences. The objects with an inherent ideological background – like many monuments erected in communism – are thus a challenge for memory that is manifested as aesthetic-ideological in the moment of the decline of the ideology that had erected them in the first place. Therefore, one must handle the antipathy towards the forms of these monuments with an understanding of the disappearance of monumental places of public negotiations typical after the fall of ideological uniformity.

Furthermore, the critic Grgo Gamulin concludes one of his texts about a monument in Kozara in the following manner: “only that idea that was born in the hidden layers of the spirit, and was manifested in figurative thought like we've never seen before, can last longer than brass” (Gamulin 131). Yet a series of historical events have shown that even the artistic ideas that last longer than brass are not everlasting. In other words, they have shown that monuments are not built for eternity, but are rather instruments and reflections of the memory politics. So in the fairly short history of Croatia's independence, at the very beginnings of the war for independence, we have witnessed a

war against the statues and the architectural symbols, perceived as remnants of the infamous regime, as cult spots of the communist 'religion', including the ones deprived of their ideological marks and regardless of whether they projected the party's political message or not. Alongside parliamentary democracy introduced in Croatia in 1991, a new political imaginary was introduced to support the construction and preservation of national identity. The monuments serve as material examples of this politics-representation relationship. In other words, they are imagined as places of identity where the ruling politics is perceived. The official monuments, memorials, museums etc. play a significant role in the creation of national identity, reflecting how the ruling elites define a nation in the public sphere. In doing so, they often refer to history: heroes and events that had become formative elements in the national identity. In that sense one perceives a certain contradiction here, as nations and nationalism are modern constructs that legitimize their political coherence and social power through historical figures and events. However, it was important that the idea of a nation came forth through dictated representation and education i.e. the idea to unite the nation around historical experiences, achievements and symbols. Through that, cartography and the public space were changed in both a historical and a political sense. Similar methods and needs for the commemoration and the formation of collective memory were applied using public space as part of the new, independent and democratic Croatia.

As Potkonjak and Pletenac imply, that same democracy is no different from anti-socialist, symbolic terror, or rather terror as politics of exclusiveness performed in a public place (universally available in its conception and open to all its consumers) (15). In the post-socialist period a sharp turn took place in the processes of constructing collective amnesia and the mechanisms of erasing the anti-fascist past of the newborn Croatian state. This resulted in the abrupt and violent removal of its remnants, or rather in letting them decay. Throughout the 1990s one can record the destruction of about 2500 monuments and memorial plaques. They were replaced by a multitude of blots on the landscape belonging to a period of anarchical mindlessness during the post-communist transition. We ask ourselves then why previous modernist, non-iconic, and fundamentally abstract formations were destroyed in a similar manner. Their focus was on the formal and expressive possibilities of the medium, the work of excellent local sculptors and architects, like Dušan Džamonja, Vojin Bakić, Bogdan Bogdanović, alongside Ivan Sabolić, Svetislav Ličina, Vanj Radauš, Gradimir Medaković, Miodrag Živković, Jovan Grabulovski, Janez Lenassi, Petar Krstić, Vuka Bombardelli, Boško Kućanskoi, and Marko Mušič.

The rise of nationalist ideology in Yugoslavia beginning with the 1980s, as well as the apparent 'liberation' from repression (under former Yugoslavia) of national identities in the 90s, resulted in new forms and new politics of memory within public spaces, 'minted' at the expense of anti-fascist ideology, which was now being exposed to collective amnesia: negated or entirely deleted. This new politics of memory during the post-Yugoslavian period, was created, as Bojana Pejić argues, through monuments representing a nationalist ideology, which presented the national suffering and the

sacrifice perpetrated by a foreign (mainly neighboring) country (Brumand and Pfeifer Eds. 11) that is now identified with a common “communist” past and embedded in the collective memory, among others, through the legacy of monuments.

The modernist antifascist abstract monuments were substantial features of the communist landscape, the unavoidable destinations of guided tours, school and workers' outings, postcard motives etc. They were, in other words, recognizable and deeply ingrained spots of memory constructed by the state, so that their eradication could have been achieved solely by destruction. One could say that, in the post-communist landscape they occupy spaces marked by a cancellation of time, traumas and contents immanent to them. This discrepancy between their semantics and the anachronism of space, their non-elasticity causes that which is most significantly related to the idea of the loss of eternity, manifested as a loss of the sacredness of the past social ritual connected to the socialist monumental formations (Potkonjak and Pletenac 10).

Unlike the “official” violence of the domestic legislature, which occurred in communist countries after 1989, as part of larger political process, the analyzed type of violence is an “unofficial” one, performed by infuriated masses and resulting in monuments damaged by graffiti, various tools, weapons, and even explosive devices. In some cases attacks on the physical symbols of the previous regime were taking the form of super-imposed symbols representing new nations/states. An example can be observed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Sanski Most, where a Latin cross was erected inside a monument, while the names of Muslim victims of World War II were scraped off the memorial plaque. In the case of Serbia, elements of Orthodoxy were introduced within memory areas, coupled with the building of Orthodox churches close to the monuments. In Croatia there are several tragic cases of mining of monuments like the one in Košute, built in 1961 and dedicated to the fallen partisan soldiers of the Split detachment. The 17 meter high monument, in the form of a triple obelisk had been sculpted by Vuka Bombardelli. In August 1992 a large amount of explosive was placed under the monument, which was also further decorated with the “U” symbol, standing for the Ustashe. Monuments in the town of Knin, liberated from the fascist regime in 1944 had a similar fate. A 25 meter high monument constructed on the Spas hill located close to the town, commemorating the liberation event was violently demolished using explosives 51 years after the liberation of Knin from the Serbian occupying forces. Although the loss of the mentioned monuments is certainly important, the worst fate was reserved to one created by Vojin Bakić. It was a monumental masterpiece of modernist abstract sculpture erected in Kamenska, a village near Požega and it served as a “Monument to the Victory of the People of Slavonia.” It took ten years to finish the monument, in 1968. At the beginning of the Croatian Independence War it was completely demolished, allegedly by members of the Croatian armed forces. A second signature ensemble, located in Petrova Gora, although not demolished, was completely neglected and abandoned. The monument, which was designed as a multifunctional building officially inaugurated in 1981 (even though its foundation stone had been laid in early 1946) was dedicated to the

partisan and civilian casualties of the Second World War. During the War there was a strong presence of partisan forces in the region, together with a number of partisan hospitals, which can still be found deep inside the forest. The monument is 37 meters high and features a communication tower within. It was erected mainly by the townspeople of Karlovac, whose efforts were also endorsed by the flatware factory of Karlovac, which donated the material needed for the coating of the monument with stainless plates. Its coating is the precise reason why the monument is often targeted by thieves of recyclable materials, the result being that the surface of the precious plating is increasingly small (Car, "Zaboravljena povijest"). The listed monuments are part of the ones populating Croatia's post-socialist landscape. From among the abstract ensembles, they represent those bearing the brunt of the ideological shifts associated with the 'damnatio memoriae'.

During the first post-communist years marked by the war in Croatia the ideological turn resulted in the need for a re-creation and re-inscription of identity. As Todorova says, if memory and forgetting are two sides of the same coin, then in this context we are talking about the dialectics of collective memory and collective forgetting (139). Ideological space on the cusp of the Yugoslav and the post-Yugoslav period finds its definition in its positioning relative to partisan struggles. If the late 1940s meant victory over the enemy and fascism, as it brought about the revolutionary establishment of the new Yugoslavia, in the post-Yugoslav period, to use Bourdieu's words, trauma was inscribed into that *event* as a consequence of the oppression of the national identities and, later on, of war struggles. Therefore, the issue of partisanship and, consequently, the communist past still remain hot topics in the public discourse of post-Yugoslav Croatia. In both cases, the stake is the memory of past events and the creation of a national, or rather a nation's identity. It is the attitude towards the war that is to be analyzed as a dominant model of memory, pervasive in the way history is re-inscribed into the monuments. In the former case, the memory of the war as an anti-fascist effort (partisanship) has taken on a mythical dimension, whereas in the latter it is perceived as a traumatic experience and has taken on a victim status. The monuments are, in that respect, infused with ideology more than any other art form, major events, historical victories, sufferings, and finally, collective memories of violence and terror related to the national past.

We can assert with a fair degree of certainty, at this point, that for the Yugoslav communist country modernism was also a means of self-identification. In other words, a specific aesthetics of commemorating public spaces was created, different from both its Western and Eastern counterparts. It was indigenously Yugoslavian. After the fragmentation of the federation and the bloody war, the previously suppressed national identity was reasserted with newly-found strength. It sought a reconstruction of the collective memory and the collective national identity. The latter is manifested in the identification of the Yugoslav past with trauma, to the point where everything related to Yugoslavia gained negative connotations. In other words, one of the 'effects' was the violent rejection of the near past, and the branding of such "memories" as antagonistic. This antagonistic attitude towards the

past and the memories related to it becomes an active element in the process of creating a national and cultural identity. Therefore, even if the ideological strength of a monument has been diminished, the option of politization of aesthetics remains a possibility. This, and not their formal neutrality, is the reason why modernist monuments were targets of vandalism after the 1991. The ritual cleansings in the midst of the war euphoria were performed from the bottom up and not instructed from the top. The purpose of those actions was to expurgate the universalist ideas marked by the antifascist struggles and to eliminate the infamous, because overused idea of brotherhood and unity.

That impressive corpus scattered all over the surface of the former federation is a witness to the mutual past of the newborn countries. However, the particularity of the extreme post-communist nationalism did not find modernist aesthetics relevant. What mattered was what they commemorated and symbolized, and that had to be eradicated, either by natural means, or by following a plan.

As Koselleck maintains, we demolish monuments when we perceive them as a threat or when we want to repress the still existing tradition (*The Practice of Conceptual History* 325). They are “symbolic elements of the inherited memory points of reference of a community” (Nora 1: 30). After the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, the multi-ethnic community created around the tradition of a common struggle and victory over fascism, under the slogan of brotherhood and unity, was replaced by a community of language, religion and customs. However, the period of transition in the former countries of Yugoslavia was accompanied by an escalation of nationalism which transformed the path towards capitalism and democracy into a catastrophe filled with victims, destruction, ethnic cleansing and economic collapse. The discussed monuments, symbols of a communist landscape and remembrance places of a Yugoslav identity, were also located on this path of destruction. The longstanding loathed regime perceived as totalitarian and repressive was smothered in blood. This deconstruction of an identity and collective memory was marked by the replacement of overbearing art defined by the communist party, with the “democratic”/patriotic kitsch, through which a new ideological construct of the nation-state was proclaimed. Ironically, the fact remains that some of the monuments of the long lasting communist regime remained undefeated in times of freedom, which, to paraphrase a poet, has not begun to sing as it used to in times of servitude.

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