POSITION PAPER

Orientalizing Socialism: Architecture, Media, and the Representations of Eastern Europe

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After two decades of being ignored, the architecture of the so-called 'former East' has recently been discovered by global mass media. The photographs of Soviet sanatoria, Bulgarian resorts, Central Asian bus stops, and Yugoslav war memorials can now be seen in print publications, in music videos, and even in sci-fi movies, as well as endlessly circulating within social networks. The phenomenon contradicts the previous negative stereotypes of socialist architecture—the overblown monumentality of the Stalinist period and the drabness of prefabricated mass housing—introducing the formerly adventurous structures of the 1970s and 1980s as objects of genuine fascination. Presented through the seemingly objective medium of photography, however, these buildings are nevertheless firmly inscribed into the old ideological framework inherited from the Cold War that reduced all agency under state socialism to totalitarian control. Contradicting recent scholarship that has revealed a great deal of complexity in the construction of the socialist built environments, these new media representations constitute a novel form of Orientalism. Its object is still coincidentally located in the East—Europe's own East—but this time around the alleged otherness rests on ideological rather than cultural or racial grounds. The paper analyzes two widely known projects responsible for this neo-Orientalist turn, Jan Kempenaers' Spomenik and Frédéric Chaubin's Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed, which pose fundamental questions for the historians of European architecture: Who should have the right to shape the public perception of architectural history? How is architectural history used to maintain the geopolitical divisions and hierarchies within Europe itself?

Introduction

In an art project titled 'Former', British photographer Andy Day explores 'embodied engagement with historicity' by photographing World War II memorials of the former Yugoslavia as the training grounds for parkour athletes. The carefully staged photos show young athletes jumping over massive sculptural objects in order to demonstrate an 'apolitical irreverence for sacrosanct space' (Jennifer 2015). And sacrosanct these spaces indeed are: many are the sites of mass atrocities committed against the civilian population, including those at Mt. Kozara in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Jasenovac in Croatia (**Figure 1**), one of the most notorious concentration camps of World War II.

Although it would be difficult to find more controversial grounds to tread, Day's project has received no criticism. Popular commercial media outlets such as *Vice* and *Designboom* have reported on it without any objection, and even the media in the region have justified it as a way of 'drawing much broader attention to our memorial heritage' (Azzarello 2015; Dorotić 2016). A hint of self-doubt seems to shine through when Day expresses the intention to 'establish a dialogue with academics from the region to ensure that how I'm presenting the project is respectful and appropriate', but the most controversial

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act — jumping over monuments — has already happened. No amount of dialog can alter it.

How is such a blind spot possible? Surely World War II has not become so much of a distant memory that it is now broadly acceptable to exercise 'apolitical irreverence' by literally trampling over the monuments to its victims. Antifascism is still supposed to be the founding block of postwar Europe and practicing 'irreverence' over its memorials should be a cause for controversy. That this is still true was made clear recently when a website provocatively titled *Yolocaust* attracted much attention by mocking the selfies taken by tourists at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Global media have reported on the project extensively, even though some of those publicly shamed on the website have not done much more than smile in the photos (Nicholson 2017; Gunter 2017). The Berlin memorial is not even an actual burial ground; why, then, is it taboo to take a selfie there, whereas it appears perfectly acceptable to practice parkour in Jasenovac?

The answer is simple: unlike the Berlin memorial, Yugoslav monuments are the products of a defunct socialist system, assumed to be emptied of any meaning — as the title of Day's project indicates. They can be admired for their abstract formal qualities, but what they stand for allegedly cannot have any relevance today; empty shells are all that is left of them. However, their arresting shapes are ideal for commodification. The past decade has seen the emergence of an entire new photographic

Figure 1: Bogdan Bogdanović, Jasenovac Memorial Park, Jasenovac, Croatia (1966). Photo by author.

genre that focuses on the mesmerizing forms of late socialist architecture, of which Yugoslav monuments are just one small segment. From Baltic resorts and Balkan memorials to Central Asian bus stops, spectacular socialist architecture is now content much sought after for mass-media circulation. It can be seen everywhere, from print and online publications to music videos and sci-fi movies; something eerily similar to the monument at Mt. Kosmaj near Belgrade has been spotted even in the film franchise *Hunger Games*. The buildings of late socialism, in short, have become a pop-culture phenomenon.

This trend, I argue, constitutes a novel form of Orientalism, one whose object coincidentally lies in the East—Europe's own East—but whose target is essentially ideological. Not unlike 19th-century colonial explorers, a new crop of brave Orientalists, armed with cameras and supported by galleries and publishing contracts, roams the 'distant' and 'desolate' landscapes of Eastern Europe in search of the ruins of a long-lost world.[1] What they find they often describe as 'otherwordly' or 'alien', thus forging a new trope of the socialist world as a land of bizarre, mysterious objects that a rational Western mind cannot possibly comprehend, a trope that has been so relentlessly disseminated in the digital media that it now dominates popular perceptions of socialist architecture, not only in the 'former West', but also in the East itself. Built on the old model theorized by Edward Said (1979), this new Orientalism still represents an East according to its own fantasies of an exotic Other, but otherness is now more ideological than cultural or racial. In addition, earlier Orientalisms were often produced by scholars and academics, whereas this new wave ignores and often directly contradicts the results of scholarly research; it rather aims at a wider audience through collusion with commercial outlets, achieving hegemony over popular perceptions through its suitability for digital circulation. Its underpinnings are fundamentally political: for the audiences in the West, it reinforces the anticommunist consensus forged during the Cold War, whereas for those in the East, it assures that they receive the 'correct' interpretation of their own past, in keeping with the reigning dogmas of the 'end of history'.

Photographic Interpretetations

The trend can be traced back to two photographic monographs published at the turn of this decade: *Spomenik*, by the Belgian photographer Jan Kempenaers (2010), which documented a selection of Yugoslav war memorials, and *CCCP: Cosmic Communist Constructions Photographed*, by the French journalist Frédéric Chaubin (2011), showing various building types scattered across the former Soviet Union. The *Zeitgeist* was certainly ripe, because several other projects with a similar focus were published around the same time.[2] However, it is these two that have become phenomenally successful in capturing public imagination, especially in the digital world, where they continue to be endlessly reblogged. Both projects have been exhibited at prestigious venues in global centers like New York, London, Amsterdam, and Tokyo; they have been reviewed in the media with global outreach, such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*; and they have been endorsed by famous figures (in Chaubin's case, fashion designer Paul Smith). They have also been lucrative: both monographs have sold out their original print runs and are now in renewed editions. Many of the more recent projects, including Day's, cite one or both as inspiration. To their credit, it is through Kempenaers' and Chaubin's eyes that the world got to know late socialist architecture.

Both photographers presented idiosyncratically curated selections of buildings based predominantly on visual criteria, an approach that may defy the standards of historical scholarship, but does not merit serious criticism in itself. However, piggybacking on the images' mediatic success, the two projects have also pioneered what is now a pervasive Orientalizing discourse organized around the

core trope of 'alien architecture'. Its versions were present both in the clever word play of Chaubin's title, where the first C in CCCP designates Soviet architecture as 'cosmic', and in the postscript to Kempenaers' book, in which Willem Jan Neutelings compares Yugoslav monuments to 'Barbarella movies, Paco Rabanne dresses and Lava lamps' (Kempenaers 2010: n.p.). Inspired by such comparisons, mass media and individual commentators now regularly describe late socialist buildings as 'alien', also bringing in further sci-fi references: flying saucers, Star Wars fighter jets, and so on (Surtees 2013). The result are multiple forms of othering: it is not only that late socialist buildings don't seem to belong on Earth — for what is more other than being extraterrestrial? — but they are also excluded from the historically situated cultural lineages and are cast as pure whimsy. Leftovers of a yesterday's future, quaint but inconsequential, they are disqualified from serious consideration as architecture. Evoking 'the air of the morning after a party: the smell of cigarette butts and stale beer', as Neutelings writes, they are as trivial as the expendable products of mass commercial culture. The erasure of their meaning is thus perfectly justified: if the memorial to a concentration camp is as frivolous as a lava lamp and as exhausted as a cigarette butt, its commemorative purpose surely cannot be taken seriously. It can be used as a mute backdrop for a sci-fi movie, or to practice parkour.[3]

The title of Kempenaers' book, *Spomenik*, is especially symptomatic. An otherwise ordinary Slavic word that translates into English unambiguously as monument, the exotic-sounding term, often incorrectly pluralized as 'spomeniks', allows Kempenaers to fabricate a new stylistic category, suggesting that Yugoslav war memorials fall so far outside of normal commemorative practices and of the existing artistic lineages that they require their own special name. But while it may be true that *some* Yugoslav memorials pioneered new forms of commemoration, precisely identifying their contribution is not Kempenaers' concern; instead, he conflates greatly differing artistic approaches and traditions, in effect using the term *spomenik* to brand his own interpretation of monuments as massive abstract sculptures standing isolated and abandoned in distant landscapes. Generating false homogeneity, this interpretation ignores the fact that the vast majority of 'spomeniks' *not* shown in the book do not conform to his vision, or that many of those he photographed engage in a far more complex relationship with both representation and the surrounding landscape than he allows, or that many are not abandoned at all. Chaubin's 'cosmic' label similarly conflates buildings of vastly different architectural lineages, from standard high modernism to explicit postmodernism and the reinterpretations of the vernacular, including a complex that may be described as a Lithuanian version of the Sea Ranch in Sonoma County.

Underlying both projects is the commendable promise to acknowledge the former socialist world as a repository of valuable architecture and art, but that promise is fulfilled only to the extent that it supports the authors' own agendas. To his credit, Chaubin makes an effort to include basic information about the buildings he photographed; Kempenaers, however, never affords his objects any of the minimum obligatory identifiers of actual works of art, including neither their names, nor the dates of construction, nor the names of the artists who created them. Instead, each monument is only assigned a number. For comparison, imagine a book about the pinnacles of postwar monumental sculpture that shows Henry Moore's work, but deliberately omits naming him: something like that would likely be impossible simply due to copyright issues. The real significance of this operation becomes obvious only in the context of Kempenaers' phenomenal success in the digital realm: google the word *spomenik*, and what you now get is page after page of his own photos. The result is not only that a whole body of work is reduced to Kempenaers' own heavily curated version, but also that the sole name associated with it is his own. Is this a post-socialist version of cultural appropriation? For even when it deserves attention, the architectural heritage of socialism appears to be worth knowing only as a Western art project.

A New Orientalism

Here is Orientalism in its classic form: representing a whole complex culture as a homogeneous other, with the effect of establishing hegemonic power over its interpretation. I often hear the argument that such problematic connotations do not really matter as long as the architecture in question is afforded world-wide exposure. Perhaps, but it is Orientalism nonetheless. In addition, more than a decade after the images of late socialist architecture have started circulating in the digital realm, I have yet to witness actual positive effects of such exposure: rather than becoming identifiable in their own right, socialist buildings have only become further integrated into the economy of digital images, with the same anonymous detachment that ignores both their original meaning and their artistic merit.[4] Yugoslav monuments are again a case in point: in addition to being endlessly reblogged with the same canned descriptions, they have come to serve as mute, abstract backdrops for anything from music videos (bands from literally all over the world, from Austria to Brazil and New Zealand, flock here for this purpose), to sci-fi films, and the aforesaid parkour practice. In the process, even the original ambiguously positive connotation gets lost: for example, Dušan Džamonja's *Monument to the Revolution of the People of Moslavina*, one of the most iconic achievements of Yugoslav commemorative sculpture, made it to the top of CNN's list of world's ugliest monuments, together with a garish tribute to Michael Jackson (CNN 2014).

This latest Orientalization of Eastern Europe is related to its previous iterations, which Larry Wolff identified as a 'demi-Orientalization' (Wolff 1994: 7) and which also acquired its specific Balkan versions (Todorova 1997; Goldsworthy 1998). What is new is not only the fact that the target is an explicitly modern culture, but also an ideological dimension inherited from the Cold War: the so-called totalitarian paradigm, a discursive weapon used by the West during the Cold War, which represented state socialism as an almost cartoonish system of absolute top-down control. One of its most effective — and problematic — claims was the equation of communism

with Nazism as two 'twin totalitarianisms', which quickly manifested itself in tendentious parallels between socialist realism and Nazi architecture (Lehmann-Haupt 1954). Historians have challenged such views for decades, and the enormous amount of new multidisciplinary research of the socialist world largely rests on what we might call a post-totalitarian premise. Research into the history of the built environment has been especially fruitful in that respect, highlighting the myriad negotiations involved in the production and occupation of space.[5] Contradicting persistent stereotypes, we now know that the socialist world was not an architectural monolith isolated from the rest of the world; we know that socialism did not cause an absolute rupture in the history of architecture; and we know that architects were not necessarily innocent professionals oppressed by communism, but active agents driven by their own professional ideologies and class interests. In short, we know that the inner workings of socialist architecture were far more complex and diverse than what the stereotypes suggest.

Despite the fact that a vast amount of scholarship testifies otherwise, new Orientalists continue regurgitating the totalitarian paradigm. That is obvious, for example, when Chaubin summarily proclaims the Soviet Union a 'labor camp', a sleight of hand that allows him to interpret the massive rotunda-like Druzhba Sanatorium in Yalta as a Foucauldian panopticon illustrating 'the distance between this structurally disciplinarian society and us' (Chaubin 2011: 17). Facing such explicit othering, one cannot but wonder whether the photographer ever stepped into a John Portman-style hotel, not to mention the fact that Foucault developed his analysis of modern disciplinarian society precisely by studying 'us', that is, the West, including Chaubin's native France. At the same time, the statement reveals the degree to which the neoliberal dogma has become internalized: the extraordinary fact that the resort provided workers with a paid vacation — which from a post-socialist perspective sounds positively surreal — is glossed over, and the whole structure ends up reduced to a mere device of totalitarian control. Similar bias is revealed when, for example, *The Guardian* reports on Kempenaers' photos by making the oft-repeated claim that 'spomeniks' were personally 'planted by Tito' — presumably all several thousands of them — in order to 'demonstrate the strength of the socialist republic' (Surtees 2013). In reality, the memorials were commissioned by a wide range of agencies, from local communities and veterans' associations to the federal government, more often than not in order to commemorate numerous civilian casualties. The initiative often came 'from below' and in some instances even from the artists themselves (Horvatinčić 2017: 52–77; see also Horvatinčić 2018). Proclaiming Tito as the sole dictatorial patron invokes the specter of totalitarian control that wipes out both the complexities of patronage and the monuments' actual commemorative function.

The totalitarian paradigm has recently received a new lease on life in European politics through a series of official measures requiring that communism is remembered in the same way as Nazism.[6] So herein lies a quandary for the photographers: how to capitalize on something that the current ideological climate condemns as unacceptable? Chaubin's strategy is to interpret late Soviet buildings as symptoms of the demise of socialism, as apparent liberating impulses working *against* the system, rather than being its products (Chaubin 2011: 9). It is as if anything worthwhile that came out of socialism could not help but be dissident, even if only in form. Kempneaers', in contrast, makes Yugoslav monuments ideologically safe by emptying them of meaning, by reducing them to 'pure sculpture', supposedly 'forlorn and forgotten' and devoid of any specific symbolism (Kempenaers 2010: n.p.). That such a view is explicitly shaped by the totalitarian thesis becomes obvious when Neutelings, in his postscript to Kempenaers' book, suggests that the desemanticization of Yugoslav antifascist monuments one day may (or should?) equal that of Terragni's Casa del Fascio in Como, which became 'an icon of modern architecture' after 'it … managed to completely dissociate itself from the original clients'. In other words, 'spomeniks' will only qualify as high art once the last trace of socialism has been expunged from them. The trouble is, the comparison implies that not only are communism and fascism the same, but so are fascism and antifascism.

As disturbing as it is, this conclusion, one step away from equating perpetrators with victims, sounds almost quaint in the current atmosphere of rampant right-wing nationalism, which amplifies rather than reduces architecture's meaning. If eight years ago, when Kempenaers first published his book, comparing fascist headquarters and antifascist monuments may have appeared uncontroversial just because the latter were produced under a socialist state, today that is no longer the case. For when Croatian conservative activists install a plaque inscribed with a wartime fascist salute in the town of Jasenovac — as has happened, with a horribly belated official reaction — it is a provocation aimed directly at the adjacent memorial park and its 'spomenik', which still actively commemorates the former concentration camp. When Serbian neo-Nazis scribble 'blood and honor' on the monument to a wartime massacre in the city of Niš — which Andy Day photographed as desecrated, without comment — it is to directly condemn the structure as 'a communist lie'. But in today's polarizing era, there is also a counter-current to philo-fascist revisionism: a grassroots wave of activist projects and scholarly initiatives that aim to preserve the monuments both as physical form and as the repositories of memory, not only of the events they originally commemorated, but also of the lived experience of socialism.[7] They will never gain the global visibility of Kempenaers and Chaubin, but they contribute to a changing climate on the local level.

As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of the collapse of socialism, its architectural heritage condenses the paradoxes and contradictions of the long-standing liberal consensus, which itself appears in collapse today. Architectural historians are facing fundamental questions: Who should have the right to shape the public perception of architectural history? How is architectural history used to support ideologies and geopolitical hierarchies? Can historians wrest relevance from mass media, if access to the dissemination of information remains controlled by powerful

commercial and political interests? As the political polarization sharpens, such questions will be asked with increasing urgency, not only in the East, but in all of Europe.

Postscript

After I wrote the first draft of this essay three years ago, the Museum of Modern Art in New York expressed its interest in the architecture of socialist Yugoslavia. The result is an exhibition that I have co-curated in collaboration with Martino Stierli, which opens in July 2018. Exposure provided by a powerful platform such as MoMA has the potential to be transformative for the perception of architecture, not only in the former Yugoslavia, but perhaps also in the entire former socialist world. With that in mind, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that MoMA's decision to pay attention to the region may have resulted in part from the publicity generated by the projects analyzed in this essay. That fact, however, does not invalidate my argument; as a matter of fact, in some ways we have conceived the show precisely as a remedy for the misrepresentations described above. Whether our efforts will be sufficient to effect a sea-change remains to be seen.

Notes

[1] For the most explicit version of such a narrative, see the text accompanying Rebecca Litchfield's project *Soviet Ghosts* (Howarth 2014).

[2] See Bezjak (2011), Linke and Weiss (2012), and Mihov (2012).

[3] See https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/sankofa-thefilm/sankofa [last accessed June 8, 2017].

[4] A rare exception is *Spomenik Database* (http://www.spomenikdatabase.org/), a project by the 'spomenik' enthusiast Donald Niebyl, who was originally inspired by Kempenaers' images, but whose research eventually led him to contradict many of Kempenaers' presumptions.

[5] Recent literature on the built environments of socialism is too vast to cite here to any extent. For the current state of scholarship, see the recent special issue of the *Journal of Urban History* edited by Daria Bocharnikova and Steven Harris, including their introduction (Bocharnikova and Harris 2018). For a review, see Kulić (2016).

[6] A series of initiatives with this goal were passed in the European Parliament, the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, and other bodies in the past ten years. For a critique, see Ghodsee (2014).

[7] Cases in point are the collaborative projects *Heroes We Love* (https://heroeswelove.wordpress.com) and especially *Inappropriate Monuments* (https://inappropriatemonuments.org/en/).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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