




Retracing Images after Yugoslavia

REVIEW OF

ŠUBER, DANIEL, and SLOBODAN KARAMANIĆ, ed., 2012:

Retracing Images: Visual Culture after Yugoslavia. Leiden: Brill.



Retracing Images: Visual Culture after Yugoslavia is an inspiring collection of essays edited by Daniel Šuber and Slobodan Karamanić which offers a fresh approach to the visual culture of post-Yugoslav societies.¹ As a whole, the book addresses a wide range of cultural products and strategies, from street iconography and other cultural artefacts (including graffiti, films and posters) to the visual aspects of the politics of remembrance. One of the key research questions shared by most of the contributions is how to overcome the dichotomy between the view from below and the view from above. The approach illustrated in the editors' introduction firmly relies on classical and pioneering sociological studies with the explicit aim to contribute to and sophisticate this tradition. The editors articulate this point with a convincing argumentation which, however, could have been even stronger had they also considered the rich tradition of anthropological studies of the so-called circulation of cultures, as this phenomenon already encompasses the kinds of interrelation of high and popular culture which are at the centre of *Retracing Images*.

In the attempt to address these interrelations of high and popular culture, several contributors focus on the dialectic between state and popular initiatives. For example, Isabel Ströhle examines the private initiatives which celebrate the UÇK fighters in contemporary Kosovo (see Šuber and Karamanić 223–50), while Gal Kirn analyses the disputes about monuments to the Partisan fighters and their ideological meaning both in the Yugoslav and the post-Yugoslav period (ibid. 251–81). The tension between high and popular culture is also thematised by Gregor Bulc, who investigates the relationship between subcultural graffiti and high culture (ibid. 107–31), by Šuber and Karamanić, who discuss the relationship between street graffiti and so-called official

¹ The first version of this review appeared in German in *Südosteuropa*, Vol. 61 (2013), Iss. 1, pp. 146–8.

graffiti (ibid. 313–35), and by Mitja Velikonja, who focuses on Yugonostalgia (ibid. 283–312).

In this kind of work, there is no space for simplistic interpretations of the transmission of ideas, as these cannot be treated simply as being imposed from above and then passively accepted by the people. Indeed, the socio-cultural phenomena examined in the volume are not understood as mere reflections of reality; Zoran Terzić, for example, even theorises the usefulness of and even the need for ‘fantasy’ and ‘fiction’ in social research (ibid. 39). So, the contributors clearly share the desire to reveal the constructed nature of social and ideological dynamics behind their apparent ‘natural’ and ‘self-evident’ origin.

The object of the book as a whole is thus to critically defamiliarise certain cultural practices by linking them to their social and historical contexts. However, the appearance of their ‘natural’ and ‘self-evident’ origin is taken very seriously: the aim is not simply to unmask ‘reality’ but rather to deconstruct the relationship between the ‘mask’ and its context, to observe the mask in action. Therefore, at stake is the invisibility of the ‘construction’ of alleged objective representations, such as the ‘ethnic maps’ addressed by Terzić (ibid. 42–4), or capitalism itself, which, according to Miklavž Komelj, has been ‘naturalized’ in its post-socialist neoliberal version and supplemented with the ‘exotici-zation’ of socialism and its arts, to the point that artistic traditions in Yugoslavia have been lumped together with those in the USSR (ibid. 55–79, 62–6). Similarly, Nebojša Jovanović examines, in his chapter on Emir Kusturica, the notion of ‘authentic’ art and critically analyses the myth of the ‘innocent’ artist who is supposed to be synonymous with ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ (ibid. 149–69).

Collective self-representations are critically examined as well. Davor Beganović engages with the socialist ‘formation’ films in Yugoslavia,

in which the heroic fighters engaged in the ideological and military struggle that the audience had known from the epic films on the People's Liberation Struggle were increasingly endowed with tormenting doubts (ibid. 135–47). Conversely, Robert Alagjovovski addresses the Macedonian cinema and focuses on the dominant nationalistic narrative, whose authors defeated their initial uncertainties and discovered their new nationalist sentiments (ibid. 171–92). In her chapter on the Bosniac representations of Bosnia, Elissa Helms identifies various forms of self-victimisation and demonstrates that they are not immune against gender prejudices or political manipulation (ibid. 195–222).

Another achievement of the book is that it is not a mere assemblage of studies weakly held together by the book title; on the contrary, the book really brings the results of what the editors call a 'joint endeavor' (ibid. 1). The book's many common research goals include the criticism of the 'totalitarian paradigm', the approach that has become a commonplace in post-communist studies. The majority of contributors vigorously tackle the epistemological weaknesses and the ideological bias of this approach. 'Totalitarianism' and 'democracy' are theoretical and historical categories which are far from being self-evident. The anti-communist historical revisionism predominant in the post-socialist countries obscures the past (the 'pre-') and with it the present (the 'post-') as it presents various historical experiences in vague metaphysical and apolitical notions. Relying on empirical case studies, many of the contributors to *Retracing Images* critically analyse such collective spectres.

The result is a radically engaged book in which academic concerns are always supplemented with explicit political concerns. The book thus addresses such contemporary phenomena as the 'post-traditional authoritarianism' of peace-keeping missions and the replacement of

‘politics’ with ‘administration’ (see Ströhle’s chapter: *ibid.* 235–7, 248), the policies of ‘reconciliation’ in post-Yugoslav countries and their disregard for the distinction between fascism and anti-fascism (see Kirn: *ibid.* 267–79), the post-Yugoslav ideological disorientation in Serbia and its everyday effects of violence (see the editors’ chapter: *ibid.* 313–5), and the general political apathy of contemporary societies (as tackled by Bulc and many other contributors).

When it comes to artistic practices, which is the main focus of the book, the emphasis is often on their emancipatory potential, which is said to enable us to critically engage with the past, the present and the future and thus to rethink the supposedly clear distinction between ‘democracy’ and its opposite (as the editors do: *ibid.* 320–1), or between the democratic West with its democratic art and the authoritarian East with its restrained art (as Komelj does: *ibid.* 74). Like art, critical research is supposed to problematise exactly such oppositions.

The contributors to this book do exactly that as they focus on ‘visual cultures’. As most of the many studies on Yugoslavia and its dissolution fail to take visual cultures into consideration, *Retracing Images* is also necessarily an attempt to surpass the traditional methodology, mostly by drawing its inspiration from cultural studies and sociology. At the same time it is clarified that the time has not yet come to delineate a definite ‘research field’: as the editors make clear in their introduction, the margins of the field—‘the advancing field of Visual Studies’, as they define it (*ibid.* 3)—are not yet demarcated; there is only ‘a pool of diverging theoretical conceptualizations and methodological accounts’ (*ibid.*). Hence, it is impossible to evaluate the precise range of the book’s innovation at this point.

Finally, it must be said that it is not necessary to establish a new disciplinary academic subfield at all; what is truly important is to ad-

vance knowledge. And this is exactly what *Retracing Images* does. The volume offers topics and interpretative tools which are fresh, inspiring and effective. As such, it represents a relevant contribution to a new understanding of post-Yugoslav societies. ♡

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