

# Rememorizing Memories

**Ksenija Vidmar Horvat**

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

ksenija.vidmarhorvat@ff.uni-lj.si

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This edited volume presents a diverse body of work dealing with cultural legacies of socialism. It covers a wide range of topics (from communist comics to partisan art, the avantgarde movement and children's literature, etc.) which could be, more or less comfortably, inserted into the field of (post-socialist) memory studies. Post-socialist memory studies, a fresh branch of the well-situated memory studies (Assman and Czaplicka 1995), itself has been an assorted conglomerate of (mainly) case studies of how, in different regions of the former socialist Eastern Europe, communities in transition towards Western-style democracy have remembered their immediate past (Berdahl 2010; Bernhard and Kubik 2014; Mihelj 2016). The quest for the memory itself has played a critical role in this intellectual endeavour. Early on, Todor Kuljić (2017), a leading scholar in the ex-Yugoslav region, warned how the culture of remembrance would become a prime stage on which the emerging ideologies of nationalism and historic revisionism would play out their scripts. Considering the growing atmosphere of 'anti-fascism as a useless past' in the post-Yugoslav space, as Kuljić observantly put it, as well as a present day pan-European culture of amnesia as concerns the lessons of WWII, the early fears have proved to be far from a futuristic paranoia. In the last decade, they have formed the backbone of a new political condition in Europe, and, with the rise of far-right authoritarian leaders, across the globe. This new reality calls for a renewed chapter in dealing with the memories on socialism. Indeed, we are in dire need of critically rethinking – and intellectually rememorizing – the (post)socialist memory itself. This collection of essays provides some signals as how to embark on this task.

The initial interest for the socialist world which followed the fall of the Berlin wall focused predominantly on popular sentiments and daily life (Svašek 2006). Marginal, sometimes bizarre cultural practices of living behind the 'Iron Curtain,' as in Drakulić's *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (1992), debunked the monolithic view of the socialist bloc; in some cases, as in *Cinderella Goes to Market*, the stereotypes

persisted (Einhorn 1993). A rather brief period of this investigative engagement, with its focus on living with thrift but also on practices of resistance, coloured the previously grey zones of passivity and subjugation with brushes of vitality and agency (Reid and Crowley 2000). Avantgarde art movements in socialism formed an additional provocative insight into a West-East critical dialogue during the Cold war era (Bryzgel 2017). For a moment, it seemed that post-socialist studies could become a new cross-disciplinary global paradigm (Forrester, Zaborowska, and Gapova 2004), open to combining its own research agenda with post-colonial studies, critical feminist theory, cultural studies and cosmopolitan/multicultural topics (Jansen 2008; Spasić 2011; Vidmar Horvat 2012).

Soon, a new strand of research followed, enmeshed in the investigation of collective yearning for the past. After the initial widespread euphoria collapsed into passages of disappointments, topics of nostalgia prevailed. Post-communist nostalgia (Todorova and Gille 2010), Yugonostalgia (Volčič 2007; Velikonja 2009), Titostalgia (Velikonja 2008), and Ostalgia (Boyer 2006; 2010) took the centre-stage of both popular and scholarly attention. Socialism, through this revisit, emerged as a new promised terrain, worthy to be re-claimed, re-imagined, refashioned: indeed, re-memorized. It appeared, though, that the appeal of the socialist past was limited to the region. While the West turned towards its own imagined past, an imaginary land of retrotopia (Bauman 2017), in the East, we settled for a nostalgic constellation. The retrotopian citizen has dreamt of a nationalist fantasy of ethno-racial purity in a deglobalized world of small-town communities. Hoping to regain a sense of dignity and agency (Pillbrow 2010), the post-socialist nostalgic citizen begins to look back to past promises of social justice and solidarity.

This, of course, is a caricature reading of the emotional landscape which crystalized in both the West and the East once the fantasy of the end of history lost its persuasive political force. Regardless, it is a testimony of an impasse where the anxiety-ridden struggle for the future is replaced by regression into the idealization of the past.

In this sense, if judged merely by their commitment to revisit socialism, the contributions presented here could be read as yet another exercise to provide content to post-socialist studies in order to respond to the demand for alternatives. They explore, charged with the individual intellectual curiosity of the next generation, cases of cultural creativity and artistic sabotages of the socialist political regime of the previous generation. Importantly, in the second aspect, they depart from the main epis-

temic centre of post-socialist memory studies, namely its ambition to un- and re-cover aspects of past life to assure a more accurate picture of the post-wwii history of the region. To the contrary, the binding thread of the papers in this bloc is that they are neither concerned with the history as such, nor are they explicitly regional.

To begin with the latter, a tangible predicament of the post-socialist memory has been that it appeared to be a region-specific research topic. Involuntarily, this reiterated the Cold War academic legacy of *area studies*. A product of the 1950s, area studies compartmentalized the global geopolitical map with the ambition to make the world ideologically governable when isolated in capsules of regional identities. The socialist bloc presented one such capsule, ‘frozen’ in its own political histories and cultural idiosyncrasies. Upon the ‘defrosting’ decade of the 1990s, the narrative of ‘catching up’ to the West was born, suggesting an evolutionary view of global history whereby the East needed to let go of its own pathologies, developed during the socialist experiment (Štiks and Horvat 2015; Vidmar Horvat 2020). Retroactively, this view affirmed a perspective of post-wwii Europe, divided into two halves with no cross-border communication nor critical exchange of ideas.

The West and the East of the Cold War era, as Slovene writer Marjan Rožanc indicated soon after the collapse of the Berlin wall, both strived to define the type of modernity which would emancipate the individual. The research in this volume confirms the point. In their analyses of comics, Cvar and Žbontar (2024), Mudry (2024), and Komel (2024) uncover an intriguing terrain of a hidden political conversation performed by comic artists in either visual appropriation of Western cultural codes (comic books about Slyboots, *Muriel*) or by direct translation of the comic book into a new ideological context (*Alan Ford*). Importing Western references into the socialist cultural text allowed the artists to conduct a secretive debate with their respective socialist regimes. Considering his complicated relation with the socialist project, as Cvar and Žbontar refresh the memory, Miki Muster’s visual ‘westernization’ of his comic characters offered a subtle ground to open up as well as disturb the ruling political space. In Czechoslovakia, comic artists Saudek and Macourek, the authors of the graphic novel *Muriel*, used a similar strategy of appropriating American comics’ visual references to interfere with the communist jargon and its underlying cultural politics. It was the implication of the distance from the state-authorized discourse of Western bourgeois degeneration, implicit in Saudek’s visual rephrasing of the American superhero

plot (Mudry 2024). At approximately the same time, on the other side of the Yugoslav border with the West, *Alan Ford* by Luciano Secchi and Robert Raviola unravelled a satirical dialogue with capitalism. Yet, when translated for the Yugoslav publics, the same text of ridicule became a comic critique of socialism. ‘How can one satire of society become such an effective ironic critique of two such different ideologies?’ Komel asks (2024, 198). Through a detailed analysis of the work of the translation itself, the author argues that the perverse logic of capitalism, where the poor are exploited in favour of the rich, and the perverse logic of socialism, where the poor are exploited by themselves, in a cross-border setting, encapsulate the ‘paradoxes or embodiment of class struggle itself’ (p. 201).

Cross-border trafficking with cultural references allowed for the articulation of political opposition which disturbed the ideological landscape in a controlled way – and safely below the sensory system of the repressive state. In the Yugoslav translation of *Alan Ford*, it was only implicit that the comic book was a satire of socialist society, Komel writes (2024, 204) ‘as if the comic book enabled an indirect satisfaction of an unconscious desire to ridicule a system that allowed none.’ Unfolding under the historical contexts of the Soviet occupation, in a similar way, Saudek published a comic story ‘full of scathing socio-political and ideological criticism, [...] full of irony, inter-iconic and -medial citations and Western, mostly American references.’ *Muriel*’s universe includes versions of a different utopian future where communism seems to have been fully realised,’ Mudry (2024, 173) observes.

If one is to accept the author’s point, the entanglement with Western visual culture was not about the idealization of the cultural space across the border, but a form of artistic exploitation to articulate a different utopia in the East. Tepina and Grafenauer’s (2024) mapping of activist aesthetics, starting in the 1960s, corroborates the point. ‘The majority of avant-garde poetics were based on the global desire to change the world and use art to establish a different system of both values and relationships,’ the authors write (p. 39). Again, global aesthetic avantgarde references were mobilised to critique bourgeois cultural and sexual hypocrisies of the ruling party (Šuvaković 2007 in Vidmar Horvat 2020). In the post-socialist political constellation, the creative energies of the socialist experimentation with an alternative communist future, which unfolded via the contact with the Western iconography, have been suppressed under the overarching mantle of depoliticization and amnesia. Critical poten-

tials of the evolving alternative public sphere in post-socialism have faced pop iconographic transformation into a cultural curiosity of past artistic struggles to survive amidst the socialist aesthetic regimes. Questions of how the creative art of the West and the East served each other as a reference point to carry on the dialogue with oneself, slip away from the radar of remembrance.

The cross-regional cooperation, be it deliberate or involuntary, in critiquing the two systems of political subjugation, sits uncomfortably amidst the narrative hegemony of the transitology discourse (Štikš and Horvat 2015; Vidmar Horvat 2020). It complicates the clear-cut landscape of the Cold War border and its post-socialist passage to the debordering towards the Western norm of emancipation. The same holds true when considering the historical travel of the modern Eastern European citizens from their socialist to the post-socialist constitution. The contributions by Kirn (2024), Kobolt (2024), and Tepina and Grafenauer (2024) all speak of the legacies of civic engagement which stand in sharp opposition to the moral, political and cultural space of the post-socialist neoliberal subject. With her focus on children's literary education, unfolding through practices of cultural participation and agency building, Kobolt contests the leading commemorative narrative of socialism, which relies on the stereotypical image of collectivization of the socialist youth. In literary education, Kobolt writes (2024, 118), 'promoting literary agency does not appear only as some activity useful in education processes or in spare time, but as one of the vital aspects of literary systems and also of other cultural and artistic production fields and by that also for broader cultural and social development.' By reflecting on the past modes of literary education in reference to cultural agency, she adds a fragment to the understanding of the multiplicity of aesthetic education in socialist Yugoslavia as well as illuminating the focus on participatory politics in cultural production.

Kobolt's point is reinforced by both Kirn's and Hofman's research. Kirn (2024) returns to the partisan legacy. He expands on his previous work on the partisan transformative politics of solidarity through creativity, this time focusing on anonymous cultural voices of often illiterate and/or poorly educated partisan artists. Engaged in multiple artistic practices, from theatre, drawings, poems and film scripts, the resistance fighters against fascist forces also developed a peculiar solidarity with nature and animals. Identified by Kirn as partisan ecology, this new poetics and ethics of co-habitation contributed to an evolution of political subjectiv-

ity which, Kirn proposes, could be re-integrated into present ecological struggles for global justice.

Ana Hofman's (2024) investigation of amateur cultural activities in the post-WW II socialist context of cultural pedagogical work unveils a compelling picture of democratic participation of people across a social and cultural spectrum of talent and skill, regardless of education background and professional artistic expertise. Considering the recent 'rediscovery' of the self-taught artists and indigenous art by the established museum across the globe, this socialist legacy of authenticity as concerns cultural expression, coupled with the overall project of the state-run socialist emancipation, provides an interesting entry point to confront the hegemonic boundaries of art, class and (cultural) capital.

Last but not least, Tanja Petrović (2024) and Igor Štiks (2024) observe the eclipse of socialism into the post-socialist ideological landscape. Štiks calls it hypochondria, a profoundly fearful obsession with purity and contamination, which builds on racial and ethnic cleansing of both the ethnic others, and the socialist identity which was built precisely on erasing ethnic, religious and cultural divisions. Tanja Petrović (2024, 131) returns to the post-Yugoslav comics which complicate the neat division between 'good boys,' modern, listening to rock music and having 'western' values, while 'the enemy' is homogenized, presented in a stereotypical, caricatural way as primitive, dirty, cruel and grotesque. Her analysis proposes the need for a nuanced approach to the experience of war trauma, suffer and sacrifice which cuts across the warring lines and, again, contest the purifying discourse of the post-socialist nationalism.

To conclude, the present volume provides an entry into the annals of post-socialist memory (studies) in a way which surpasses the intellectual care for the historiographic complexity of socialism. By contesting the lines of demarcation of both space and time, they serve as a potent ground to start remembering the memory – away from the legacies of the transitional narrative and back towards the chapters of socialist history which were concerned with the future: subversive, creative, and emancipated from both the West and the socialist East.

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