

REDISCOVERY OF YUGOSLAV MONUMENTAL BRUTALISM

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Abstract. *Brutalism in architecture, landscape architecture and sculpture seem to be having a global comeback. At least in terms of fascination and urge for its study and rediscovery, the 2019 Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition “Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980” played a big role in capturing the imagination of the global public. Even though there is a renewed interest in brutalist architecture, this paper aims at rethinking the renewed interest in the monumental brutalism, particularly the architectural monuments commissioned and built in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In trying to understand our fascination with the Yugoslav monumental memorial sites, and with their current condition, we will employ one idea of the Japanese culture that was appropriated by the global community. The idea of Wabi-Sabi in Japanese Zen-inspired art is the aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of the imperfect, impermanent, incomplete and transient object. The aim of this paper is to show that our fascination with these ruined monuments of “concrete utopia” stems from the fact that we are living in a particular age of ruin – economic ruin, climate ruin, political ruin – and thus we are finding satisfaction, as well as self-reflection in these Yugoslav brutalist monuments. The contrast between the almost sci-fi utopian ideals with the decayed reality shows us the disharmony of our own world and situation.*

Key words: *disharmony, brutalism, decay, ephemerality, phenomenology, Heidegger, Wabi-Sabi*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years there is a considerable global growing interest in the brutalist architecture, landscape architecture and sculpture. It seems that we are in the midst of a full-blown Brutalist revival. In 2019 the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980" (McGuirk 2018) captured the imagination of the global public. The exhibition put in focus on the Yugoslav monumental sculptural and architectural monuments during 1948–1980. Numerous articles and reviews in the press were published, and additional artistic and research projects were initiated. The renewed interest in Brutalism is probably due to the nostalgia for the material honesty associated with the pre-neoliberal era of social democracy. Interest in Yugoslavia's cultural legacy is possibly due to it being one of the great political experiments of modern era (McGuirk 2018).

Even though there is a renewed interest in brutalist architecture, this paper aims at rethinking the renewed interest in the monumental brutalism, particularly the architectural monuments commissioned and built in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Our main goal will be to understand the global fascination with these particular architectural-artistic objects.

2. BRUTALIST ART AND ARCHITECTURE & YUGOSLAVIA

It should be noted here that the term "Brutalism" is not completely adequate. The term used during their creation was "socialist aestheticism", defined by Sveta Lukić. Today it is considered more adequate to define it as "socialist Modernism" (Prica and Lajbenšperger 2018, p. 75). One of the most influential events that sparked the Yugoslav socialist modernism was the arrival of the sculptor Henry Moore (1898-1986). Many Yugoslav sculptors and art historians agree on his substantial influence in the post-war Yugoslav sculpture, but also the influence of Brutalism and Structuralism (Ibid, 76).

The main idea behind the monuments was to create spaces invoking spiritual experiences but without any religious connotations since Yugoslavia was a secular state (Prica and Lajbenšperger 2018, 75). Doing so in a non-denominational and transethnic manners would invoke shared spiritual experience with the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Yugoslav people(s). The goal was exactly to promote transethnic "brotherhood and unity". After the WWII Yugoslavia not only was not nationally and ethnically unified, but it was also highly fractured. Hence a conscious creation of multinational or transnational solidarity was the core of new socialist Yugoslavia (Kirn 2014, 315).

The land on which these monumental memory complexes were built was considered sacred, since those were places of terrible loss of human lives – civilian and partisan, so a substantial connection between landscape, architecture and sculpture was influenced by the land and environmental art of the 1960-ies (Prica and Lajbenšperger 2018, p. 75). The memory sites were not meant only to mark the suffering of the victims, but also to promote celebration of a universal victory of the oppressed over the oppressors, and to incite a feeling of resistance, modernization, reconciliation and transnationalism (Kirn 2014, 315).

From the 1950s a particular genre of realist monuments emerged. It consisted in sculptures and murals depicting historical battles and national heroes (Kirn 2014, 316).

But after the “Informbiro period” split of Yugoslavia with the Stalinist USSR, not only did the governing party ideology shifted away of the Stalinist ideology, but also there was an aesthetic shift in the public art of the Yugoslav memorial sites away from the socialist realism (Kirn 2014, 317). The new memorial art and architecture was quite unique, exhibiting modernistic symbolic features, but also monumentality, boldness, structurally daring, otherworldly and fantastic (Kirn 2014, 317–318). Most of the artists, different from the other memorial sites in Eastern Europe, consciously avoided using ideological -- communist symbols. This was due to their goal of presenting a universal, transhistorical and eternal story of a fight of good against evil (Prica and Lajbenšperger 2018, 76–77).

The socialist modernist memorial sites of Yugoslavia are not only serving as a memorial to a lost past. In their essence, in their design, through symbolism, materials, architecture, they point to the possibility of a different world (Kirn 2014, p. 335). They are an opening towards the possibilities for transcending the chains of nationalist hatred, victory over an overwhelming odd and a utopian world of emancipation of the oppressed and victims of injustice.

The main question that we pose in this paper is: Why is it that, exactly at this time is there such a fascination with these semi-decayed concrete ruins engulfed by grass and nature?

3. PHENOMENOLOGY OF DECAY AND EPHEMERALITY

One of the aspects of Brutalism was its monumental and powerful materiality, which is in opposition to the lightness and white abstractions of the Courbusian inspired modernism of pre-war 1920s and 30s (Bermudez and Navarrete 2017, 1). Brutalist buildings were intended through their robust materiality to inspire and to point to the otherworldly Other. In their essence, these buildings were meant to inspire spiritual exaltation in the visitor. One explanation for the profound spiritual touch of Brutalism is in the use of tectonics to make ‘opaque’ the existential atmosphere of our lives. This success of Brutalism is perhaps due to its universalist materiality that goes beyond fashion and style (Bermudez and Navarrete 2017, 3). At the same time, Brutalism emerged during the time of prominence of existentialism, the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The elaboration of the worries of the post-war life against the idealistic embracement of rationality and progress of the pre-war era (Bermudez and Navarrete 2017, 4). Merleau-Ponty's *flesh of the world*, Heidegger's *fourfold* (particularly Earth) and existentialist turn are unequivocally present in the brutal and unavoidably physical architecture that touches the deepest dimensions of the human being (Ibid).

The Yugoslav socialist monuments have also been used in science-fiction. For example, Olaf Stapledon's epic future history novel *Last and First Men: A Story off the Near and Far Future* (Stapledon 2014) depicts a story about the fate of humanity throughout the next billion years. It starts in what Stapledon calls “Balkan Europe” (Isto 2019, 299) – a region of conflict between different groups that gets united only when confronted with outside threat. Jóhann Jóhannsson's cinematic adaptation of Stapledon's novel *Last and First Men* (Jóhannsson and Swinton 2020) is also situated in the “Balkan Europe”, but it is visually immersed in the Yugoslav socialist modernist memorial sites. They are used in order to depict an “alien and otherworldly” aesthetics (Isto 2019, 300) of a lost civilization that is at the same time European and completely Other. These monuments are chosen so that they could depict a possibility for communication with a long-lost civilization that far

exceed the scale easily grasped by human experience (ibid). Isto further asks a few questions that can be posed again and again: “What does it mean to read the Yugoslav monuments as science fiction? What are the specific characteristics of this reading? What is obscured and what is illuminated about the monuments in the course of this historical re-imagining?” When trying to find a perfect location for the cinematic adaptation, Jóhannsson upon finding the Yugoslav monuments stated: “I’d never really found an idea that propelled me, and then I saw it. [...] There. Fully formed,” (quoted in: Isto 2019, 300). *First and Last Men* is not the only film using Yugoslav “otherworldly” architecture in science-fiction cinema. Others are: *Sankofa* (Wentzel-Fisher 2014) and *A Second World* (Hudson and Dechamps 2014) are using them in a more post-apocalyptic setting for an alien utopia.

Yugoslav monumental brutalism has been used not only in post-apocalyptic cinematography, but also in other art inspired by ephemerality and fascination with ruin. The ‘ruin-porn’ (Strangleman 2013) is a visual aesthetic that deals with imagery that emerged from de-industrialization in the former industrial powerhouses. This aesthetics has an element of “smokestack nostalgia” (Ibid.) for a past that was lost. This ‘ruin-porn’ aesthetics has been also focused on the post-socialist post-industrial sites (Isto 2019; Kulić 2018; Rann 2014), including the socialist modernist memorial sites of Yugoslavia. Variety of photographs, mostly documentary in nature play a role in the anesthetization of this “post-apocalyptic discourse” (Arnold 2015; Isto 2019). We can also agree with that these monuments are not only a glimpse of the past, but they “are simultaneously linked to the future, but the character of that future is cast into doubt by their visual treatment as abandoned structures akin to ruins. They suggest a promise of memory, but also the promise of radical change, of new social structures” (Isto 2019, 319).

The aesthetic experience of ruin was comprehensively elaborated in Robert Ginsberg’s *The Aesthetic of Ruin* (Ginsberg 2004). His celebration of ruins—the incomplete and the fragmented architectural objects—comes from his understanding that these objects create new unity. For Ginsberg the experience of ruin brings forth “something substantial” (Ginsberg 2004, 1) in the experiencer. This understanding puts Ginsberg in the Kantian tradition of ‘the sublime’ (Trigg 2006b, 118). Ruin in Ginsberg’s phenomenological interpretation creates unity from the disorder which brings us into relation with free creativity which means that that “the soul of the ruin is organic vitality, not dull decay” (Ginsberg 2004, 157). Through aesthetic interaction with the ruins, they are able to change our minds, thus, we can apply this understanding to our topic – through experience of the Yugoslav monumental memorial sites, we are brought in front of a creative interaction not only with the ruins themselves and their disharmony, but also with the disharmony of our ruined world. In order to understand ‘ruins as ruins’ (Murchadha 2002, 10) we are led to experience ruins as something beyond itself. However, it appears that “the ruin is decay itself. Only on the basis of decay can the essence of the ruin be made visible” (Ibid.). In ruins the power of time shows itself. The power of entropy, the power of decay and inevitable finitude of Being itself:

The ruin does not represent the building as it once was. Above all the ruin does not represent the past world: such a world made possible the action of human beings with one another shaped the buildings in which they lived. Ruins, however, embody the impossibility of action. They do not belong to the past world, but show the loss of that world. They do not disclose the action but rather the suffering of human beings. The quiet stillness of the ruin is the stillness of suffering of human beings. (...) In the ruin is

disclosed not so much the opening of a world as a withdrawal of world, not a past world, but the passing of world (Murchadha 2002, 10–11).

Further on, in trying to understand our fascination with the Yugoslav monumental memorial sites, and with their condition now, we will employ one idea from the Japanese culture that was appropriated by the global community. The idea of *Wabi-Sabi* in Japanese Zen-inspired art is the aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of the imperfect, impermanent, incomplete and transient object (Koren 2008, 7). This ideal comes from a place of thinking that is contrary to the Modernist metaphysics. *Wabi-Sabi* comes from a vision of a world where things are either devolving towards, or evolving from nothingness. It is about the transient, the liminal, the delicate traces at the border of nothingness (Koren 2008, 41). The main ideas (Ibid, 42–50) of this view are:

1. All things are impermanent.
2. All things are imperfect.
3. All things are incomplete.

The closest that the Western thinking came to this vision of a transient, liminal world can be found in Martin Heidegger's opus. His thinking about the Nothing is highly informative for our inquiry. The Nothing, says Heidegger strangely attracts the human being. Our insight into Being is at the same time a consciousness of its finitude (Trigg 2006a, 7). All things perish. Human being is a Being-Towards-Death, a constant movement towards the Nothing. Confronting the Nothing, for Heidegger, however, gives rise to the authentic Dasein. But the Nothing is not purely negative. Heidegger concludes: "Dasein [human being] means: being held out into the Nothing" (Heidegger 2008, 103). To be authentic human being means to be constantly conscious of the Nothing, of the finitude and the ephemerality.

4. CONCLUSION

This age of ruin – economical ruin, climate ruin, political ruin - finds satisfaction, as well as self-reflection in these Yugoslav brutalist monuments. The contrast between the almost sci-fi utopian ideals with the decayed reality shows us *our* disharmony. The claim of this paper is that this particular moment in history is attuned to appreciate a particular type of corroded object. Moreover, the cynicism towards the possibility for solidarity, emancipation and a more humane world of the neoliberal era gets diluted when faced with the fantastic faith in humanity and possibility of a new, more humane world, depicted in the Yugoslav memorial sites.

It both opens at least the memory of the striving and faith in the more utopian future. It also confronts us with the impermanence, imperfection and incompleteness of the human affairs – the states, the ideals, the ideologies, are all transient!

The phenomenology of the Yugoslav monumental memorial sites gives rise not only to a deeper engagement of our economic-political circumstances, but also gives rise to a more universal, human engagements with the brutal facts of life. The *Wabi-Sabi* ideal, as well as the Heideggerian thinking, helps us to interpret our mood when confronted with these marvellous objects.

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PONOVNO OTKRÍĆE JUGOSLOVENSKEG MONUMENTALNOG BRUTALIZMA

Tokom posljednjih nekoliko godina uočava se značajan globalni porast interesovanja za brutalističku arhitekturu, pejzažnu arhitekturu i skulpturu. Čini se da smo usred punog brutalističkog preporoda. Izložba Muzeja moderne umetnosti „Ka konkretnoj utopiji: Arhitektura u Jugoslaviji, 1948–1980” zaokupila je maštu svetske javnosti 2019. godine. Izložba je u fokus stavila jugoslovenske monumentalne skulpturalne i arhitektonske spomenike 1948–1980. Objavljeni su brojni članci i prikazi u štampi, a pokrenuti su i dodatni umetnički i istraživački projekti. Obnovljeno interesovanje za brutalizam verovatno je posledica nostalgije za materijalnim nasleđem povezanog sa pre-neoliberalnom erom socijaldemokratije. Interesovanje za jugoslovensko kulturno nasleđe verovatno je aktuelno zbog toga što je to jedan od velikih političkih eksperimenata modernog doba.

Ključne reči: disharmonija, brutalizam, propadanje, efemernost, fenomenologija, Hajdeger, Wabi-Sabi