

BOOK REVIEW

## SOCIALISM REVISITED

Branislav Jakovljević, *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016, pp. 369.

Having experienced, from the perspective of my persona history, a large portion of the socialist Yugoslavia indicated in the subtitle of Branislav Jakovljević's study, I state at the outset that it is hard for me to imagine what kind of impact this impressive book will have among a western readership. It certainly follows, if not surpasses, western standards of scholarly dedication, thoroughness of research, dutiful archival support and theoretical referentiality—among numerous others, Benjamin, Lacan, and Foucault have a place in each of the three chapters. Will this study, however, provide the contextual framework needed to go a step beyond a fascination with the exotic discoveries of (so far) insufficiently visible performance artists? Or will it annoy, with its exhaustive interweaving of an all-too-complex political-economic history, with philosophical treatises, propagandist rallies, protest gatherings and artistic interventions? Will it disturb existing broad ideological divisions between the capitalist West and socialist East, or aesthetic ones between “critical” Western and “dissident” Eastern art, by introducing Yugoslavia as a “third term”, while simultaneously de-romanticizing its reputation for being the rebellious country that dared to say “No!” to Stalin?

Will the book manage to do what it more or less overtly promises, to redress the imbalance of the effects of “Anglo-American” versus local “East-European” intellectual traditions when it comes to a more subtle absorption of the tenets of French Marxism and the Frankfurt School in performance studies?

While reading the book breathlessly as if it were crime fiction, I was continuously haunted by the double bind of recognition, and, appropriately, alienation. With all the post-socialist academic eagerness that I shared with my colleagues from the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in Zagreb to look back in anger at the roots of what befell us in the nineties, and with all our resistance to the argument of “ethnic hatred” that was so dear to western intelligentsia, we somehow let crucial concepts like self-management slip through our analytic grid. The drive to overcome the trauma of bloodshed and “transition” into a market-oriented democracy by doing research and “writing culture” took its toll in Croatia mainly under the guise of passionate war ethnographies and a much “softer” interest in socialist popular culture (Čale Feldman et al. 1993; Čale Feldman and Prica 2005; Senjković 2008; Senjković 2017), which tackled only tangentially the thorny destiny of both discourse on and practice of the Yugoslav political economy. We were much more inclined to personalize and individualize what for decades was the collectivist impulse in writing history; we wanted to adopt a low perspective, and to pick human parts off the broken glass. It was too much for us to be able to take a sober stand and count our long-term losses, so aptly summarized by the art collective *Perestroika Timeline* whose installation is evoked at the very start of *Alienation Effects*: “a severe decline in

healthcare, education, scientific research, and culture" (Jakovljević 2016: 1).

If we neglect the initial intentions, subsequent changes, and nuances of theoretical reflections on the Yugoslav doctrine of self-management and use the book's finale to judge this period, we miss something crucial: the logic of the outbreak of war. Jakovljević insists that beyond its stated pretexts and causes, the war marked the failure of a daring large-scale avant-garde project, whose main task was to conceptualize and actualize the worker as a political subject. The author could approach the issue so ambitiously – and so masterfully – partly because his starting point (and goal) was reflection upon the unacknowledged fate of Yugoslav conceptual and performance art, which constituted a network of artistic breakthroughs that could not be understood outside its specific historical moment, ideological underpinnings and immediate political-economic circumstances. Additional contributors to Jakovljević's approach were the relatively recent developments within the performance paradigm that, with Jon McKenzie, clamorously bridged the fields of art and industry, of propagandist public displays and the organization of labor, and of performance and (human or technological) efficiency. This is the reason why in terms of actual case studies, "the performative turn" in (post-socialist) humanities shines nowhere so brightly as in Jakovljević's text. He meticulously traces the multiple discursive and embodied trajectories of individual "magic" terms (such as the Marxian *alienation*) from the writings of leading Yugoslav ideologues, via bureaucratic forums to philosophical contestations, aesthetic re-appropriations, and detours in translation. The latter concerns Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* which was

misleadingly translated into English as the *alienation effect*, and the Marxian version of the concept, translated equally curiously as *estranged labor*. Jakovljević's study should be praised if only for its sheer breadth in encompassing such an enormous volume of analysis, as a previously unseen demonstration of how the concept of performance can make methodological sense out of apparently disparate currents of human dealings.

The book first introduces the key concepts—"self-management" and "alienation", as well as "cultural apparatus", "art's modes of production", "creativity", and "labor"—around which the author builds his hybrid methodology, which was induced by the very inextricability of "style" and "political economy" that characterized art and culture in Yugoslavia's socialist period. Jakovljević then proceeds in three moves: three chapters in which he analyses three periods as aspects of the intricate nexus of intertwining factors contributing to the uniqueness of the Yugoslavian idea of integral social art practice, and, to some extent, its realization. In the first chapter, entitled "Bodywriting", the accent falls on the first decade, the fifties, and the wholesale revolution of senses the command economy brought by declaratively placing "societal well-being" above "personal gain" (Jakovljević 2016: 9). For Jakovljević, this process was most conspicuously epitomized in public performances such as the annual May celebration of Tito's birthday, a spring ritual of rejuvenation, consisting of a relay race and stadium gymnastic displays. The author connects this to the "choreography of labor" performed during voluntary youth work actions, which, as time went by, were used more for reasons of morale and propaganda than to compensate for the lack of a work

force. The ingeniousness, however, of the author's approach to these phenomena is that he always starts his discussion from a position of hindsight: a later artistic echo, such as, in this case, the Slovenian alternative art association Neue Slowenische Kunst (New Slovenian Art), which in the late eighties dared to blend techniques of Nazi and Soviet propaganda. In contrast to the youth actions, which were abandoned with the arrival of economic reforms in 1965, Tito's birthday continued to be celebrated until 1987, as a central confirmation, partly of the state ideology, but primarily of "how flawlessly and impeccably the state functioned" (Jakovljević 2016: 81), both politically and economically. Jakovljević *effectively alienates* us from the carefully described multi-layered hypnotic strategies of mass celebration, as if predicting the mocking devaluation to which they would be submitted in the years immediately preceding the collapse of Yugoslavia. Outlining their romanticist lineage on one hand, and suggesting that they covered up a state of permanent (or at least repeatedly announced) crises on the other, he opts for the designation of "socialist baroque". This is a characteristic of all post-revolutionary societies willing to "adopt the dynamic model of ruling through participation", a "delicate balance of violence and pleasure", of "novelty and tradition" (Jakovljević 2016: 74–76). However, Jakovljević complements this with "socialist aestheticism", which in his view marks the period of market socialism and budding philosophical questioning of the concept of alienation after Yugoslavia's break with Stalinism. This is seen as a complex negotiation of critical ideas, which reaches and includes the most eminent of French intellectuals—especially the participants of the Praxis Summer School on the island

of Korčula—and generates experimental abstract art from Zagreb's EXAT 51, and the first of Ivo Gattin's Informel canvasses, culminating in Atelje 212's controversial 1956 theatre production of Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) in Belgrade. This period puts an end to socialist realism, although with its "unproductive and voluntary labor of art" it resuscitates the buried demons of forced labor in ustashi death camps. In these burgeoning forms of resistance to *la historia oficial* Jakovljević refuses to see yet another phenomenon of "dissident" art. Yugoslav art critics never fully endorsed the socialist realist criteria, and thus tacitly allowed mainstream culture to comply to the strict division between aesthetics and politics. The author preserves his "alternative" example's ambivalent belonging to the state-encompassed performance "bodywriting", as its "unlegislated regions", the "tears and gaps" in its "fabric of power" are anarchistic remnants of "the social imaginings of equality and freedom" (Jakovljević 2016: 115).

The second part, "Syntactical performances", first reminds us of the proponents of "*praxis* as new humanism", backed by the utopian thinking of Marcuse and Bloch in their refusal of capitalist performative efficacy, and then turns to the rebellious late sixties and the seventies. It lists spirited, allusive, and citation-laden subtitles like "Beyond the Performance Principle", "Cracked Baroque", "Performing Self-Management", "Expanded Media/Constricted Politics", "The Magician as Surgeon", "The Surgeon as Stitcher", "1968/86/89", and "Alienating the Unalienable". I confess a penchant for witty and imaginative titles. Anyone dealing with the human courage and invention demonstrated by Serbian students protesting the socialist

bureaucracy and demanding a return to the revolutionary ideals of the Left, or by emerging artists from various parts of Yugoslavia (such as Belgrade's Group of Six, to whose performance art Jakovljević devotes his most persuasive analyses) should have the capacity to be as linguistically animated and bold as these protagonists of history were as they contested the state and cultural apparatus. This was a sobering period, during which the state showed its uglier face: police assaults on youngsters, hypocritical speeches by the Leader, and various other tactically executed repressive moves. However, it also gave birth to unexpected alliances of communal self-management and artistic festivities, and to new ways of organizing artistic practice that enabled social and intellectual fervor to build around the Student Cultural Center, and allowed encounters between Western and Eastern body artists.

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Following what was outlined in the previous chapter, the discussion transitions to a new kind of subjectivity, induced by the ideological transformation of self-management in post-1968 Yugoslavia: the post-revolutionary "citizen subject", strikingly fitting the first person address of performance art, which broke with the aesthetics and politics of the "receding self", the traditional actor as the child of monarchic societies, the royal subject par excellence. This intriguing hypothesis is corroborated by Jakovljević's engaging demonstration of the extent to which various strategies deployed by Belgrade performance artists could be filtered through Bloch's "distancing mirror" and Lacan's "mirror stage". The theoretical connection of the two alienating effects was, curiously, made in the neuralgic early seventies by Serbian analyst and drama critic Hugo Klein, who proclaimed their union to be homeopathic for

society at large. But the outcome of the tumult of actions and writings that, according to Jakovljević, "sutured" this complex cultural phase—of which only a superficial glimpse is shown here—is the announcement of the looming war that closes the chapter. This time, it is depicted as a picture of perfect harmony among students, workers, politicians and police, marching angrily across Belgrade in open support of Slobodan Milošević's destructive policies.

The book's composition is commendable, as is the pace with which it punches you in the stomach, especially if you were, as I was, glued to the television throughout the late eighties and early nineties in a vain effort to anticipate or magically accelerate the outcome of the crisis. That someone could so originally and thoughtfully insert Yugoslavian conceptual and performance art into the multi-faceted story of reasons for the country's dissolution amazes me. Jakovljević refrains from the pretense of englobing all there was to englobe, and rather (at least in terms of Croatian experimental theater), directs the reader to Marin Blažević's 2012 book. However, it should be noted that Blažević does not go beyond the most general, or the most explicitly involved, political reverberations of the field. If I miss anything from the Yugoslavian period, it is perhaps the Dubrovnik Summer Games, a lavish, state-sponsored festival, which began in the fifties. I mention it in this context because of its environmental poetics, and because of its annual opening ceremony, which was broadcast Yugoslavia-wide as a large-scale political ceremony in its own right. That Jakovljević would stick to what he is best acquainted with is fully understandable. I simply suggest that the Games could have been approached through the

lens of his methodology, rather than through the lens of the crypto-nationalist resentment that fueled Croatian critics of the Games in the late seventies and the eighties. This is partly the reason I found Jakovljević's third chapter, "Disalienation Effects" (in which the light is shone upon Croatian performance artists like Mladen Stilinović) so refreshingly explanatory. Jakovljević elucidates the contemporary artistic, social, political, and organizational undercurrents that these performers fed upon. He includes the eloquent "turn" to, or around, the notion of "interest" deployed in the state-bureaucratic introduction of Self-Managing Communities of Interest, via the intellectual and artistic denunciations of cultural institutions that profited from the artist as worker, to the monetary inflation, which, appropriately, matched the inflation of socialist public discourse.

Of course, the book would not be complete if it did not include Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, but even here it manages to surprise with its interpretations of his experimental poetry, and analogies drawn with Žižek's other theoretical writings of the time. Žižek is synonymous with the overall confusion around postmodernism with which Jakovljević ends his study. Here, however, it appears in its lesser known, socialist variant: the eighties in Yugoslavia saw an unprecedented liberalization of art, and promised a new atmosphere of openness, plurality, and cultural and sub-cultural diversity, with its home in Yugoslav Student cultural centers. But party leaders did not renounce their anachronistic reliance on the modernist project of revolution. The sign of the

times was the aforementioned broader project *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, and its Nazi-Soc-Real iconography, which revealed, as if in an uncanny esthetic nightmare, the return of the repressed, both in political and performative forms. In light of what we currently face in Croatia—the aggressive attempts of right-wing intellectuals and the Church to efface and annihilate any trace of "yugo-nostalgia", leftist inclinations, or sustained cultural dialogue across the borders of newly formed nation states—even Jakovljević's somber reminders that the catastrophe was, to a certain extent, inevitable cannot suppress the feeling of a huge utopian opportunity missed. Fortunately, this comes with gratitude for the fact that our shared cultural memory can be revived by such stimulating scholarship.

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