

Wrapped in Tin Foil: A Report from the Balkans
By Emily Watlington

I relate to David Maljković's (b. 1973 Yugoslavia, present day Croatia) characters in *Scene for a New Heritage* (2004-2006) (Figures 1-3), a video trilogy set in the year 2045 about young men—"heritage-seekers"—on a road trip to Vojin Bakić's 1981 *Monument to the Partisans* at Petrova Gora (Fig. 1). I, too, grew up surrounded by monuments to a repudiated regime—in the Confederate capital—troubled and confused by their presence.

Like the Confederate monuments, the *spomenik* (monuments) represent contested ideologies, which raises questions about their preservation—many of them have been destroyed, and those that remain are nearly indestructible.¹ Unlike the Confederate monuments, however, they are non-representational. To many non-locals (and in Maljković's film, to citizens of the future) their aesthetic power and feats of engineering overshadow their ideological underpinnings—*Petrova Gora* was built in praise of socialism at a site of fascist resistance.²

Inspired by such films, I traveled to the Balkans—the former Yugoslav territories—to think about problems presented by monuments to repudiated regimes in a new context and through film.³ Considering non-representational monuments through their audiovisual dissemination allowed me to address issues beyond the preserve/dismantle binary that drove much debate surrounding the Confederate counterpart by way of their visual and discursive cultural dissemination.

While there, I ended up learning as much about methodologies for cross-cultural research as I did about films and monuments. The Western reception of films such as Maljković's made clear how artists from marginalized regions are burdened with the task of representing their nation and are often pressured by institutions to make work that translates cross-culturally. Their work is especially tokenized when it reinforces the "other"-ness of its author.⁴

Scene for a New Heritage gained popularity in the West—MoMA named a 2015 show *Scenes for a New Heritage: Contemporary Art from the Collection* after the work, which is in their collection. Its reception amongst an audience for whom many historical references remain undetected speaks volumes to the broader themes the film evokes about cultural memory. The Western viewer's experience of confusion is mirrored by heritage-seekers', who ask when faced with the monument, "What is this except that it's big and build [*sic*] in a strange place?" Another replies, "I think it carries a strong message." But, "If it were strong, we would see it!" While the trilogy indeed considers the slippage of historical facts, the monument's history is still well known to Maljković's local audience—many of whom were bused to Petrova Gora as schoolchildren. Western critics tend to view the monument with the same stupor as the heritage-seekers. After meeting with monument scholars from the region, it was clear that the incorrect Western perception of Bakić's monument via Maljković's trilogy as abstract, abandoned, and apolitical necessitated revision.⁵

For instance, critic Nicola Bozzi wrote of the heritage-seekers' soccer games at the site, "The ideological space of the *spomenik* is reclaimed by little crowds of people that casually hang out around it, turning it into a public area for informal socialization" (Figure 2). Bozzi's interpretation: "Amnesia accomplished."⁶ Yet the monument's project

statement reveals that it was actually intended as a site for casual socialization and leisure, in addition to education and commemoration. Today, many *spomenik* frequently host barbecues. *Petrova Gora* sought to pass down memory by tapping into personal imagination and emotion, which new generations would engage with their bodies and intuitions—it intended leisure as a non-didactic means of commemoration, rather than as a means to forgetting.⁷ The *spomenik* do not declare what they commemorate in a literal way. Instead, they prompt intrigue and participatory engagement. And, while Maljković considered what it might be like if the political history of such monuments were forgotten, full amnesia has yet to be accomplished.

The derelict futurism of abandoned socialist architecture has long inspired Western mythologization by way of the camera. Jan Kempnaers (b. 1968 Belgium) helped to make the *spomenik* internationally known through a 2009 photo book.⁸ But the project commits the sin of what Jamie Rann calls post-communist ruin porn—“the marriage of trendy post-industrial ‘ruin porn’ with the ongoing ‘othering’ of... Eastern Europe.”⁹ The mythologizing reception of the trilogy is also implicated in this. Maljković is among the most internationally well-known living artists from the region—some locals speculate that this is because he capitalized on the undeniable pleasure that accompanies ogling at socialist ruins.¹⁰ But the film still mocks this problematic impulse; the tin-foil wrapping of the heritage seekers’ car caricatures *Petrova Gora*’s aluminum façade, both naïvely desperate to convince viewers that they are futuristic (Figure 3).

I am clearly not the first Western scholar to be captivated by the monuments’ allure. Whether intentional or not, Maljković is wise to exploit the problematic gaze these amazing structures solicit to critical ends—a gaze I am guilty of initially committing. It is a discomfiting realization, but rather than suppress such discomfort, I ask myself how I can, like Maljković, use such allure to critical ends as I write. I proceed to grapple with how one addresses cross-cultural scholarship without reinforcing difference. For these are not merely formally astonishing feats of engineering; they are ripe objects for investigation.

¹ *Spomneik* means monument in Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, and Bosnian. It has, confusingly, been adopted by the English-speaking world to refer to the series of non-representational monuments built during the Yugoslav time at World War II sites. This is because Jan Kempnaers’s photo book depicting them was titled *Spomenik*.

² Sanja Horvatinčić has remarked that many of these monuments had to scale their ambitions for lack of funding, reflecting the gap between ideology and economic reality in the socialist time. Sanja Horvatinčić, "Monument, Territory, and the Mediation of War Memory in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Zivot Umjetnosti* 96, (June 2015).

³ I spent the summer of 2016 based in Zagreb, Croatia, thanks to the Donis A. Dondis Travel Fellowship from my *Alma Mater*, Massachusetts College of Art and Design. The films were my entry to the discourse in the region.

⁴ This is not the fault of the artists, who are already afforded so few opportunities to get ahead, but rather the of demands that the system places upon them. For a consideration of the tokenization of identity politics work, see: bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. (New York: New Press, 1995).

⁵ Much of the misconception that the monuments are abandoned, without narrative, and apolitical derived not only from their nonrepresentational forms, but also from the limited availability of scholarship or primary sources in English. Further, shortly after the war,

few local scholars were tackling this history. I am thankful to many monuments scholars, who spoke to me about their research (in English), especially to Sanja Horvatinčić.

⁶ Nicola Bozzi, "Re-imagining Utopian Futures." *Domus* (January 9, 2013).

⁷ The monument did originally house an educational exhibition inside, but it was primarily a territory marker. "This space is not a park, although it may resemble one and may be used that way," it reads. "It leads to the monument and serves it in the same way as the monument needs it—to be a social junction and a place of repose, and not merely a symbol." Project statement translation from Sanja Horvatinčić, "Monument, Territory, and the Mediation of War Memory in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Zivot Umjetnosti* 96, (June 2015): 32.

⁸ Jan Kempnaers and Willem Jan Neutelings. *Spomenik #1-26*. (Amsterdam: Roma Publications, 2010).

⁹ Jamie Rann, "Beauty and the East: Allure and Exploitation in Post-Soviet Ruin Photography," *The Calvert Journal*; The genre works like porn to both worship and shame their reduced and aestheticized subjects.

¹⁰ If this is the case, the fault is not the artist's, but rather that of the system, which required this of an artist to be recognized. If Maljković exploited this intentionally, I applaud him for gaining an edge and remaining critical in a corrupt system that one cannot work outside of.



Figure 1. Still from *Scene for a New Heritage* (2004-2006). © David Maljković. Image courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.



Figure 2. Still from *Scene for a New Heritage* (2004-2006). Image courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.



Figure 3. Still from *Scene for a New Heritage* (2004-2006). Image courtesy Metro Pictures, New York.