Yugo-Nostalgia: Cultural Memory and Media in the Former Yugoslavia

Zala Volčič

Media and other cultural practices are being mobilized in former-Yugoslav communities in an attempt to re-create a shared cultural memory. Yugo-nostalgia paradoxically harkens back to a shared cultural history, even as it provides the raw material for new forms of national identities that continue to divide the former-Yugoslav republics.

Keywords: Yugoslavia; Memory; Socialist Culture; National Identity; Nostalgia

If, to paraphrase a paraphrase, all world historical personages appear twice, in the contemporary context we might add: first as tragedy and the second time as advertising. So it was in 1999 that, in the emerging capitalist economy of Slovenia, the marketing industry reclaimed the disowned specter of socialist Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito, to hawk luxury cars.

The former leader was portrayed, perhaps not incongruously, as the most discerning of consumers. As the ad put it, he had “everything”—not just the leadership of all the Yugoslav republics, his own yacht, his own castle, and an island, but also the car appropriate to his high-class status, a Mercedes. It was perhaps the final sign that Slovenia had become a full-fledged consumer society freed from the anxiety of sliding back toward its socialist past. Consumer societies have long marketed nostalgia for a lost, idealized past whose best attributes might be (or so the advertisements suggest) recaptured through consumption (Jameson, 1991). The irony of using Tito to sell cars was perhaps not lost on those who remembered the prosperity of the 1970s and 1980s, which, more than anything else, had laid the foundations for the independence movement and the fall of Yugoslavia (Debeljak, 2004). If socialism relied on the promise of a Utopia yet to come, capitalism feeds on a sense of loss—a lack to be filled in with consumer goods

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ISSN 0739-3180 (print)/ISSN 1479-5809 (online) © 2007 National Communication Association
DOI: 10.1080/07393180701214496
(Ugresic, 2002). If nothing else was retained in the appropriation of the socialist past as advertising image, perhaps the single ingredient that consumer society lacked, utopian ambition, could be salvaged from the wreckage. The collective desire for a better future invoked by the decontextualized image of Tito was condensed for mass consumption into the image of his gleaming Mercedes. So, stripped from its historical moorings, the Yugoslav past has become one more free-floating signifier of consumer desire. If a savvy, disillusioned public can no longer sustain a naive hope for a multiethnic socialist Utopia, the marketing industry can at the very least, harness a sense of nostalgia for a period when such hope had been possible. To say that such nostalgia is false—that it romanticizes the past—misses the point. The sense of loss, while perhaps misconstruing what was lost—nevertheless is real enough to shape and complicate contemporary understandings of national identity and to haunt the struggle for national autonomy by the former Yugoslav republics. It is the complex and powerful role of memory in the contemporary formation of national identities that I consider here in detail.

After a historical discussion of Yugoslav identity and a theoretical discussion of nostalgia, I explore contemporary forms of so-called Yugo-nostalgia. Just as the six republics that comprised the former Yugoslavia had their own experiences of the post-Yugoslavia era, various expressions of Yugo-nostalgia have different inflections.1 I examine some selected examples of Yugo-nostalgic public rituals, exhibitions, and media representations organized in different parts of the former Yugoslavia. I address specifically how these nostalgic practices are embedded in the shifting social, economic, and political context of the region. I conclude by addressing some recurring questions in the former Yugoslav countries, i.e., how to refine the theory of memory, identity, and media culture in ways that might help to challenge the manipulation of cultural memory and popular discourse by those who seek to exacerbate the forms of nationalism and hatred that have divided and destabilized the region.

**Theoretical and Historical Mapping: Yugoslav-Mediated Communities**

Yugoslavia came into existence in 1946 as a federation of six so-called republics within a system that prevented domination by any single national group.2 The doctrine of “Titoism,” named after Yugoslav founder and president Josip Broz Tito, assumed that economic and political unification could transcend ethnic and religious differences, leading to the creation of a pan-Slavic workers’ state (Banac, 1984; Woodward, 1995). As a socialist state, Yugoslavia was formed with the notion that a shared sense of class identity—the comradeship of the proletariat—would transcend more local forms of identification tied to ethnic and religious identity. The hope—one that came violently undone in the 1990s—was that Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, Serbs, Montenegrins, and Macedonians would be able to combine a strong sense of their specific “national” identity (the artifact of a combined sense of religious and ethnic specificity) with an overarching identification with the Yugoslav state. Literally, Yugoslavia means “the land of south Slavs.” As a political entity, it was arguably3
conceived as a pan-Slavic federation combining groups whose ethnic and religious identities were tied up with a sense of belonging to a specific “nation,” although few of the republics had the historical experience of being an independent nation state. Slovenes, for example, thought of themselves as a nation long before their republic became an independent entity in 1991. The Yugoslav federation built on this ingrained sense of national identity in each of the republics, allowing them to foster a sense of identification with each republic within the context of belonging to an overarching Yugoslav state. The Yugoslav state embraced two types of what might be described as national identification: the first with what were described in the Yugoslav federation as “republics” (the republic of Macedonia, for example), and the second with the Yugoslav state. In order to negotiate this dual sense of identification, I refer to identification with a particular republic as “nationalism” (in its various forms, including “nationalistic” and so on) and identification with the Yugoslav state as Yugoslav identity.

The commonly accepted scholarly perspective (Banac, 1984; Sekulic, 1997; Thompson, 1992) argues that Tito managed to control various nationalistic interests through a combination of socialist ideology and personal charisma until his death in 1980. During that period, different Yugoslav rituals were manufactured, all part of the state’s ideological machinery, in order to frame the creation of Yugoslav subjects. Youth Day is one such example: Every May 25 (on Tito’s birthday), a relay of Yugoslav youth ran through the country with a white baton, symbolizing the country’s unity. This ritual, which received ongoing state media coverage, encouraged Yugoslav citizens to connect themselves across geographical space to an imagined common cultural history.

Yugoslavia is unimaginable outside its positioning vis-à-vis the East and the West. In 1948, it broke with the Soviet Union, legalized international travel for its citizens, and introduced the socialist model of self-managed workers’ economy that combined elements of both the Soviet system and the Western free-market economy. It decentralized some aspects of power on regional levels and created a more open society with regard to both communication with the outside world and the expression of different opinions internally. With the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s, the “neither-East-nor-West” positioning became one of the main mantras of Yugoslavia’s political identity.4

As Denich (1994) points out, the former Yugoslavia was, crucially, about a specific cultural space, a civic space that was based on the socialist culture of daily life. Some of the main markers of Yugoslav identity were its unique rock’n’roll, Pan-Yugoslav news media outlets and film, distinctly Yugoslavian consumer products, and sports. Yugoslav rock music, represented by bands including Elektricni orgazam (Electric Orgasm), Bijelo Dugme (White Button), Idoli (The Idols), and Sarlo Akrobata (Acrobatic Sarlo), was seen linking the youth cultures of the different republics. Pan-Yugoslav films and television shows in particular were crucial in mobilizing a sense of Yugoslav identity. These media positioned and addressed the citizens of Yugoslavia’s six member nations as Yugoslavs and could arguably shape their attachment to a common Yugoslav space. Pan-Yugoslav media outlets such as the daily newspaper...
Borba (Struggle), the news agency Tanjug, Radio Yugoslavia, and the short-lived TV station Yutel attempted to hail and position the members of different nations as Yugoslavs. “Programming was never critical of the government and, although it was considered bland, the programming showed the commonalties of the Yugoslavian people rather than focusing on the differences” (Taylor & Kent, 2000, p. 357).

Before the 1980s, the symbolic division of Yugoslavia into its northern (Slovenia, Croatia) and southern (Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro) parts was not regarded as irreconcilable. Each republic was seen as an integral to Yugoslavia and thus as a part of a cultural whole which, although internally diverse, strived to share a common but special Yugoslav identity (Bringa, 1995; Cohen, 1993; Hayden, 1996; Ramet, 1992).

Both the death of Tito in 1980 and the collapse of the Yugoslav economy during the 1980s threatened to destabilize a shared sense of Yugoslav imagined community and its supranational sense of identity (Godina, 1998; Guzina, 2003). Especially at the end of the 1980s, the feeling of a supranational sense of belonging and of Yugoslav collective identification slowly changed in all the former Yugoslav republics. The internal diversity of Yugoslavia, especially among political elites in Slovenia and Croatia, began to be framed as a barrier to the republics’ further development. Yugoslavia began to be perceived as an incomprehensible mixture of incompatible civilizations, religions, or cultures: Western ones and Eastern (Balkan) ones (Bakic-Hayden & Hayden, 1992; Ugresic, 1996).

Thus, it was precisely in the field of culture that the Yugoslav “imagined community” was first questioned and contested. Arguably, the media provided one of the main spaces within which a new sense of national symbolic belonging was regularly asserted in public political and intellectual discourses (Devic, 2000; Reljic, 1998; Skopljanac Brunner, Gredelj, Hodzic, Kristofic, 2000). Mihelj (2004) suggests that a whole range of media contributed to the overall shift from the promotion of a supranational sense of Yugoslav identity to the more local nationalisms of the republics. Some of the examples she cites include the formation of national cultural journals, the renaming of streets, the more frequent use of the republics’ (as opposed to Yugoslavia’s) “national” symbols in media representations, the resurgent popularity of local cuisine, the staging of theater by national playwrights, and the redesign of bank notes. Each of these cultural forms played a particular role in the nationalization processes in each republic, promoting the sense of an exclusive and homogeneous ethnic belonging. Ugresic (1996) says removal of monuments and the changing of street names were small but telling acts, the “invisible losses” (p. 32) that helped to erase a sense of common Yugoslav supranational identity and belonging.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new framework of internally unified, integrated, and homogeneous nation-states emerged in which anything Yugoslav had to be assimilated or destroyed. In particular, national television stations in all the former republics invited their viewers to become part of an ethnically pure national family. In Slovenia, national state television (RTVS) helped to unite the ethnic Slovenes into a Slovene nation, encouraging them to differentiate and distance themselves from the rest of the republics, which were designated as representatives of an uncivilized,
barbaric “Balkan Other” (Bakic-Hayden & Hayden, 1992). RTVS journalists reimagined Slovene identity for their audiences as something that belonged to a “civilized” Western Europe rather than to its less civilized and less developed Eastern counterpart (Volcic, 2005). Milivojevic (2000) claims that reports in mainstream Croatian and Serbian news reports started to refer to their nations’ “glorious histories” in order to assert their superiority with respect to the other republics and to forge a sense of national pride and patriotism.

The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, however, revealed the sinister and destructive side of this resurgent nationalism and helped foster a sense of nostalgia—at least in some quarters—not just for the dream of pan-Slavic harmony fostered by Titoism, but for the relative peace and prosperity of the 1970s and early 1980s. It is this sense of nostalgia that was seized upon by the emerging commercial culture in the postsocialist era, which mobilized the sense of lost past (that it had helped displace) as a means of promoting consumption. What we witness during and after the nationalistic wars in the former Yugoslav republics is the nostalgic reappropriation of Yugoslav symbols, rituals, and products. Starting in the end of the 1990s, the nascent commercial culture in the former republics was characterized by a rising tide of former-Yugoslavia-themed television shows, as well as the reinvention and rebranding of nostalgic cultural products including Yugo-films and Yugoslav music. I attempt to explore here how Yugo-nostalgia mobilized and commodified a sense of longing for a time before national independence in the early 1990s—a time when nationalistic tensions and conflicts were, if not eliminated, at least suppressed by the image of an imagined Yugoslav community.

Some Notes on Nostalgia

Nostalgia is often defined by the invocation of medical metaphors. Boym (2001), for example, describes nostalgia as “the incurable modern condition” (p. xiv). Stewart (1993) characterizes nostalgia as a social disease. Yet, the imagined past it re-creates is very different from the products of recollection. Nostalgic visions establish an emotionally charged relationship between an individual and the past insofar as nostalgia complements rather than replaces memory. As much as nostalgia expresses a love for the past, it can also serve as a vehicle for xenophobia, anger, fear, hatred, and anxiety. Nostalgia offers an idealized version of an unattainable past that can stunt the cultural imagination by discounting and excluding real viable options for social change.

Emphasizing the inauthenticity of nostalgia, Jameson (1991) argues that nostalgia transforms “real” history into entertainment and mere spectacle; nostalgia becomes an “embarrassing … cultural fantasy” (p. 170), a “costume-party self-deception” (1989, p. 536), and, consequently, an obstacle to historical knowledge rather than a resuscitation of historical understanding. Jameson sees nostalgia as a part of a larger problem, that of a sense of alienation and a lack of historical consciousness fostered by contemporary capitalism: “We seem condemned to seek the historical past
through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson, 1997, p. 25).

Most scholars employ language expressing the now-clichéd paradoxes of nostalgia, referring, for example to a “modernist nostalgia,” a “nostalgia of style” (Ivy, 1995, p. 56); “the cutting edge of retro” (Rachman, 2000, p. 52), or “an ‘absent’ present” (Ritivoi, 2002, p. 35). Yugo-nostalgia also functions in a paradoxical fashion, invoking a longing for the very past whose destruction engendered it. The continuing focus on contradictions and irony to explain nostalgia suggests that nostalgia is a self-contradictory phenomenon. At the same time that knowledge of the atrocities committed during the former Yugoslav wars was being made available to the public, the nostalgia for the clichés of Yugoslav culture was on the rise.

Writing about nostalgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Boym (2001) distinguishes between two narratives of nostalgia that frame feelings of dislocation. She defines one mode of nostalgia as “restorative,” because it feeds upon a sense of loss of unity and cohesion. The other mode, which she terms “reflective,” is more critical, since it calls the truth into doubt. Boym grounds her distinction on the etymology of the term nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia, Boym argues, “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” or nostos, while reflective nostalgia “thrives in algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately” (p. xviii). Restorative nostalgia “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition,” while reflective nostalgia “rests on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (p. xviii).

In discussing the postsocialist nostalgia of Eastern Europe, many scholars cite the 2004 German film “Goodbye Lenin” in which a young East Berliner rewrites history to shelter his ill socialist mother, who has emerged from an eight-month coma into a newly reunified Germany, from the shock of the historical transition. The film highlights the tensions at work within contemporary nostalgia for the East German state. On one hand, the film portrays Ostalgie as a response to East German fears that their culture was gradually being erased. The message of the film was that the East German communist past was more than just a political episode consigned to the dustbin of history. It was, for those who lived through it, a part of their personal and cultural life—a period in which they lived out their passions and fears, their personal triumphs and failures. In short it was, literally, the time of their lives. The film explores the ambiguous nature of communist nostalgia at the moment when Ostalgie was reduced to a commodity, and it suggests that nostalgia is always a crucial element in the creation of invented national memory.

Some argue that Yugo-nostalgia corresponds to what Germans call Ostalgie, nostalgia for life in communist East Germany (Bach, 2002). However, Yugo-nostalgia differs from communist nostalgia in the rest of Eastern Europe. Specifically, Yugo-nostalgia is a historically and geographically distinct phenomenon from Ostalgie—the commodified romanticization of the GDR. The former commemorates a lost wholeness, a period before the fragmentation of a united entity of “southern” Slavs. The latter commemorates a period prior to national reunification, with its attendant
economic and social problems. Moreover, one of the key components of Yugo-
nostalgia is the fact that socialist Yugoslavia was not under the control of the former
U.S.S.R. Rather, it established its scrappy independence and nonaligned status in the
thick of the Cold War, perhaps representing a “third-way” whose failure becomes
pogniant when read against the declared triumph of Western capitalism. Finally,
whereas the U.S.S.R.’s dissolution was characterized by a largely nonviolent series of
“velvet” revolutions, the break-up of Yugoslavia was bloody and contentious. Postwar Yugo-nostalgia and its commodified representations are thus tainted by that
brutality and the subsequent rekindling of ethnic and religious hatreds. This violent
history perhaps fuels nostalgia for a time before the wars of the 1990s. These
differences between Yugo-nostalgia and Ostalgie are crucial: the former Yugoslavia is
the one place in Europe that generated destruction and ethnic cleansing in the wake
of the collapse of socialism.

Some scholarly approaches tend to downplay the importance of nostalgia because
of its lack of authenticity. Some argue that Yugoslav nostalgia has detached itself
totally from any material and historical signifiers to create a ‘free floating past’
(Debeljak, 2004). Hart (1973) argues that nostalgia “does not have the original
givenness of the actually really existing” (p. 406). Jud (2001, p. 8) claims that it is
“cool to be a Yugo-nostalgic today, but the coolness will disappear by tomorrow.” Ilic
(2005) is even more dismissive of Yugo-nostalgia, claiming that “it just does not make
any sense . . . and we should all just ignore and forget it” (p. 14). Dismissing Yugo-
nostalgia as inauthentic or historically bankrupt may be accurate, but it misses the
real social significance of such “inauthentic” and romanticized cultural formations. I
suggest that the imagined community of the former Yugoslavia already blurred this
distinction insofar as it was based on the constitutive fiction of a viable supranational
sense of unity. It remained, from its inception, an unfinished project, whose unity was
predicated not on what it was, but what it might become. Yugo-nostalgia is then,
arguably, less a longing for a real past than a kind of longing for the desires and
fantasies that were once possible.

Ugresic (2002) defines Yugo-nostalgia as a productive revisiting of the collective
experience of citizens whose individual lives were embedded in the social life of the
collapsed state. She understands Yugo-nostalgia as a vital, productive tool in the
emotional reconstitution and preservation of histories. I agree that many layers of
Yugo-nostalgia are characterized by the production of interesting and creative
narratives. These should be acknowledged and analyzed. If this nostalgia is escapist,
maybe it provides useful resources for citizens in a time of turbulent transition. To
understand nostalgia in this way suggests that nostalgia is (politically) productive.
Yugo-nostalgia can indeed be a vital tool in assisting former Yugoslavs to negotiate
the historical tensions that all too often manifest themselves in contemporary
conflicts. In Skopje, Macedonia, activists have organized an ongoing public event
called “Yugoslav memory,” in which passers-by are invited to share their memories in
an interactive art exhibition that allows them to temporarily revisit the Yugoslav era.
Similarly, artistic projects initiated by Slovene video-producer Marina Grzinic and
Serbian avant-garde performance artist Marina Abramovic prompt the question of
what is to be done with Yugoslav memories after the Yugoslav crisis and bloody wars. Such memory projects have also migrated online. The website www.cyberotpisani.com is a self-described “ghostwriting organization” that published an online version of *SFRJ za ponavljanje* [Yugoslavia for Dummies]. Available in hard-copy in bookstores all over former Yugoslavia, the book became a popular “tourist guide” to the past. The author (Novacic, 2005) humorously describes Yugoslavia as a “country of six republics, five nations, four languages, three religions, two alphabets, and one love: Yugoslavia.”

However, in what follows, I take a more critical position on the celebratory, entertaining, and commercial aspects of Yugo-nostalgia, especially in light of the wars of the 1990s and global capitalism’s subsequent production of what might be described as a “nostalgia industry.”

**Yugo-Nostalgia—The Commercial (Re)production of Yugoslavia**

Three (often overlapping) aspects of Yugoslav nostalgia are now evident in the region:

1. *Revisionist* nostalgia is primarily a political phenomenon. It mobilizes the promise of the past as part of a political program of reunification. In so doing, it partakes of some of the other aspects of nostalgia described below by rewriting history and issuing the call for the renewal of a shared sense of belonging to an imagined Yugoslav community. This revisionist form of nostalgia presupposes the existence of a verifiable historical reality in order to transform and reshape it in accordance with contemporary political priorities. It is invoked by politicians within the context of public debates.

2. *Aesthetic* nostalgia is primarily a cultural phenomenon calling for the preservation of an authentic Yugoslav past. It purports to revere Yugoslav culture and its socialist past as something sacred, to be cherished, but not exploited for political or commercial gain.

3. *Escapist, utopian* nostalgia is a commercial phenomenon that celebrates and exploits the longing for an idyllic Yugoslav past. This type of nostalgia tends to be the most ahistorical. It eschews historical narratives, relying instead upon commodified symbols of Yugoslav identity.

Yugo-nostalgia has come to characterize diverse events, spaces, identities, and media representations, and has even made its way onto the Internet. The popular Josip Broz Tito memorial website titoville.com was set up in Slovenia in 1994 by two Ljubljana University students. According to one of them:

Tito seemed just controversial enough to attract visitors in cyberspace. We were building a Web site for a dead personality who could, in this way, continue his life and maintain its cult of popularity in cyberspace. We knew there was plenty of Tito material out there—photos, books, speeches, movies etc. We created the site as a chat-space . . . where Tito directly addresses the visitor. We thought there would be some kind of feedback from browsing visitors and we were right: it really came in
strong! All different kinds of offended and affirmative voices started to trickle in. The site really works as a way of reminding people of lost memories and forgotten states of mind. (Personal interview, May 20, 2005)

The creation of a newly proclaimed “country” called “Yugoland” in a suburb of the village of Subotica, Serbia, followed in 2003. Yugoland’s founder Blasko Gabric is a businessman who was apparently so sad when Yugoslavia collapsed that he decided to recreate it in his Subotica garden. Visitors to Yugoland from all the former Yugoslav states are greeted by a band playing the Yugoslav anthem while they line up to buy back their Yugoslav citizenship. An actor dressed as Tito shows them around this minicountry, where they can visit a museum dedicated to Yugoslavia’s worker-heroes, listen to Yugoslav music, view photos and flags from the Yugoslav past, watch old films and television news programs, and buy Yugoslav products. A couple of other Yugoslav “states” have been created in cyber-space, including Cyberyu.com (http://www.juga.com/), and RepublikaTitoslavija.com (http://www.titoslavija.com/). These offer visitors Yugoslav cyber citizenship and a virtual escape into the Yugoslav past, “where we were all so happy” (from the Cyberyu.com discussion board). These websites serve as global social networking sites where people—including members of the Yugoslav diaspora—share photos and recollections and participate in chat-room discussions and online bulletin boards.

The fall of Yugoslavia left hundreds of socialist monuments and statues in squares and parks scattered across different cities and towns. Many of these have been purchased and collected by private companies that rent them out for display at various annual socialist festivals, such as the May 25, Youth celebration in Skopje, Macedonia, and in Sarajevo, Bosnia. There, even in the postsocialist era, the festivals of the Yugoslav era live on, and Yugoslav sentiments are expressed and celebrated. One of the tourist agencies in Ljubljana offers customers what it describes as “a real Yugoslav experience.” The goal is, according to the owner:

To turn the clock back before 1991 . . . and . . . to travel back into the Yugoslav past, as we lived it. . . . [W]e attempt to re-invent Yugoslavia as we remember it today. As in any other business, we attempt to brand Yugoslavia . . . in an emotional sense . . . for the Yugo-nostalgics. And we end our trip in Belgrade where Tito is buried . . . at the Tito Memorial Centre. (Personal interview, January 13, 2006)

In an unabashed attempt to capitalize on the region’s socialist past, the agency wants to build a Yugoslav tourist museum. This may include a classroom decorated with socialist Yugoslav flags and poems celebrating the heroic achievements of World War II. There may be an engineering workshop, with propaganda music streaming from a transistor radio. And, there may be a typical socialist shop, with old Yugoslav products for sale (Personal interview, January 13, 2006).

Throughout the former Yugoslav republics, entrepreneurs have attempted to open bars, coffee shops, museums, and restaurants based on themes related to the Yugoslav era and its culture. For example, the Serbian cities of Kragujevac, Uzice, and Belgrade all have Yugoslavia-themed restaurants. Skopje, Macedonia has both a restaurant (Kod Tita) and a coffee-shop (Broz cafe) devoted solely to Tito’s memory. In each
case, the interior spaces of the shops are decorated in a style meant to recall “the good old days” of Tito’s Yugoslavia. In the Skopje restaurant, the waiters wear the uniforms of Tito’s pioneers, the socialist youth group to which all Yugoslav youths belonged. For those who grew up in Yugoslavia, the uniforms recall a sense of their lost youth in a country that no longer exists. Even in Croatia, seemingly characterized by an ambivalent and often hostile relationship to its Yugoslav past, the politician Zlatko Canjuga suggested opening a Tito-themed restaurant in the capital city, Zagreb, in 2000.

Many contemporary popular cultural products in the former Yugoslav republics (including films, television series, and music as well as consumer goods and tourist travel packages) invoke fond memories of the Yugoslav era. A rising tide of Yugoslav themed TV shows, pop-music compilation albums, and films are turning Yugoslav nostalgia into mainstream entertainment. For example, a popular Serbian radio station called Radio Nostalgia plays only the songs of the Yugoslav era (www.nostalgie.co.yu). Below, I discuss some differences between a few representative examples of popular Yugo-nostalgic cultural practices, in order to show how particular ways of relating to the past became dominant.

Specifically, I am interested in probing how nostalgia is enlisted in the postsocialist commercial rehabilitation of “Tito,” who represents, metonymically, an entire constellation of associations with life in the Yugoslav era. Everywhere in the former-Yugoslav republics, Josip Broz Tito seems to continue to embody Yugoslavia that many people remember in a positive light. He has become the theme of songs and musical performances with titles including, “Tito is still alive.” Street demonstrators carry his portrait in support of demands for working rights and raises in salaries. One recurring form of graffiti in the former Yugoslav republics is the humorous but telling “Tito vrati se, sve ti je oprošteno” [Tito come back, all is forgiven].

Accordingly, cultural and political associations in the former republics have been founded to honor Tito’s memory. People flock to his grave in Belgrade, Serbia and his birthplace in Kumrovec, Croatia, where former Yugoslavs gather each year on the day of his death (May 4) to pay their respects. Across the road from Tito’s house, a pub named Tito attracts crowds of former Yugoslavs by drawing upon the memory of the former Yugoslav leader as a tourist attraction. Tito’s summer cottage on the outskirts of the Kumrovec village was turned into a hotel. The “Tito Memorial Centre” in Belgrade has similarly become a popular tourist spot for former Yugoslavs. And his summer residence at the Brijuni Islands in Croatia, where he entertained high-profile guests ranging from Sofia Loren to Fidel Castro, has become an expensive tourist destination, where the wealthy can sleep in Tito’s luxurious villa and drive his Cadillac.

In 2005 Tito’s private train—called the Blue Train—was refurbished as a novelty attraction: a historic theme-park ride, as it were, for the Yugo-nostalgic. The train, complete with private compartments, fully fitted bathrooms, and a conference room, was built for Tito shortly after World War II. One can now rent it for private parties, or just purchase a ticket to travel from destination to destination. In other Tito
“news,” when authorities in Sarajevo, Bosnia wanted to rename the main street after a Bosnian leader, public resistance forced the municipal administration to keep the street’s current name—Titova. In Slovenia, the actor Ivo Godnic built his career solely by playing the role of Tito in movies and on TV. He is still frequently invited to public festivals and private parties to perform the role of the (increasingly elderly) leader. Cati, a Slovene advertising company, published a 2005 report on the branding potential of famous personalities. It predicted that the “Tito” brand would be particularly lucrative in Slovenia (Menih, 2005). The rehabilitation of the former socialist leader as a lucrative brand name is deeply ironic. Like the Nike swoosh or McDonald’s golden arches, the former champion of the international proletariat has become one more way to sell cars (Slovenia), wine (Croatia), coffee (Macedonia) and mineral water (Serbia, Macedonia). Unlike these other brand names (but similar, perhaps, to the famously marketable image of the communist revolutionary, Che Guevara), Tito originally signified the opposition to all things commercial and capitalist. The revolutionary promise has been coopted by a marketing “revolution,” ostensibly to “empower” consumers through the (commercial) consumption of history. The political dream has been reduced to yet another marketing appeal.

Images and Sounds of Yugo-Nostalgia

Perhaps the shared dimensions of Yugo-nostalgia across the various republics can best be approached through the realm of cinema, which has served as a form of reflection upon the Yugoslav past. The space of Yugoslav cinema has, in the postwar period, proven to be a fruitful one for critical reflections on the past and its undoing (Iordanova, 2001). Several film directors claim that Tito’s personality is worth revisiting. The 1993 political comedy Tito i Ja [Tito and Me] by Serbian director Goran Marković, features a 10-year-old boy obsessed with food and Comrade Tito. He wins a school essay contest on the topic “Do you love Comrade Tito and Why?” and gets included in a communist youth brigade students’ “march around Tito’s Homeland,” that challenges his enthusiasm for the socialist heroes of the past.

A 1994 pseudodocumentary film Tito po Drugi Put Medžu Srbima [Tito Among the Serbs a Second Time] by Serbian director Želimir Žilnik, opens with archival footage of Tito. Then, an actor, dressed as Tito in military uniform, walks around the city of Belgrade, stopping to converse with people in a playful, ironic tone about politics. “Is it better or worse since my death?” Tito asks. Most of the people he speaks with express Yugo-nostalgic sentiments and claim that the situation had rapidly deteriorated with the rise of the Milosovic regime in the 1990s. Slovenian filmmaker Maja Weiss’s 1997 documentary Cesta Bratstva In Enotnosti [The Road of Brotherhood and Unity] echoes Žilnik’s film. Her documentary was made by traveling through the postwar former Yugoslav republics and recording the Yugo-nostalgic stories and memories of the people she encounters. The Croatian film Maršal, directed by Vinko Bresan in 2000, has as its central character the ghost of Marshal Tito, who suddenly appears on a small Croatian island during the funeral of an old communist veteran. Old communists and new capitalists alike try to take advantage of the situation. For
example, the mayor decides to introduce “socialist spiritual tourism,” with an idea of creating a haunted Marxist Disneyland.  

It was in Skopje in 2004 that the Macedonian television producer Zoran Ristoski introduced the first Yugoslav reality show, *To Sam Ja [That’s Me]*. He described the show as an attempt to reconnect the former-Yugoslav region through popular culture after 10 years of wars. The reality show—a variation on the popular *Big Brother* franchise—hosted 12 participants (two from each former republic), who shared a home for 95 days in Skopje, Macedonia. The organizers received more than 50,000 applications from citizens in the former Yugoslav republics for the show’s 2004/2005 season. Although the show’s participants represented the typical reality TV demographic—mostly in their 20s—it attracted a strong following among viewers in their 40s and 50s who, unlike the cast, had grown up during the Yugoslav era.

*That’s Me* was more than an experiment in negotiating the Yugo-nostalgia triggered in part by the difficulties of the post-Yugoslav era. It also offered a mediated and commodified representation of Yugoslav coexistence. The show was broadcast in all the former Yugoslav countries on various commercial television stations. All five languages from the former Yugoslavia were spoken in the house (Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian (Serbo-Croatian), Macedonian, and Albanian). Part of the show’s marketing appeal lay in the ostensibly democratic promise of participation—an afterecho of the utopian unity envisioned by Titoism. In reality TV, if not in reality, everyone could be included, both by proxy in the TV show’s microcosm and by directly participating in the voting process. The Yugoslav promise, thwarted or perhaps impossible to achieve in historical reality, was resuscitated for reality TV. As Ristoski told me (personal interview): “This is very different from socialist former-Yugoslavia. . . . Now, we are allowed to vote, encouraged to be active, and participate in the process. . . .” But the equation of democracy and the new “interactivity” observable in Ristoski’s claims and in the current pop cultural obsession with reality-based programming remains little more than the latest interactive incarnation of the marketing industry (Andrejevic, 2004). *That’s Me* markets nostalgia for the past rather than promoting historical understanding. The invitation to cast members (and viewers by proxy) “to live like it was in Yugoslavia” amounted to little more than the promise of access to the reality of historical manipulation. The “microcosmic” perspective adopted by the show allowed its producers to abstract away from the real historical tensions that plagued the Yugoslav republic, to offer a commercialized version of reconciliation for popular consumption. Reducing the tensions of competing nationalisms to the conflicts of individuals in a staged “household” allowed the show to cultivate the tempting illusion that brutal conflict was little more than a matter of communication breakdown. According to Ristoski:

> The show is about communication and entertainment. People need to communicate after the wars . . . and they need to communicate especially when economic co-operation is in question—then, there are no borders and limits. The show is about entertainment. . . . It is practical in that it gives people what they want to see. (Personal interview, February 4, 2006)
The promise to viewers of experiencing a mediated, microcosmic version of “the real Yugoslavia” was effectively commodified and commercialized, allowing producers to bypass any engagement with the actuality of Yugoslavia or the reasons for its collapse.

In the arena of popular music, Yugo-nostalgic festivals continue to draw crowds in many former Yugoslav cities. There is a move to reclaim a sense of Yugoslav identity through the spirit of Yugoslav music, especially the rock music that was popular in the 1970s and 1980s (Gordy, 1999). The revival of Yugo-rock has sparked the passionate appropriation of aspects of the “Yugoslav/Balkan” lifestyle. Compilations of Yugoslav-era popular music are being released, and 1980s-era rock acts have been rehabilitated to tour the former Yugoslav states. The tour of the most famous former Yugoslav band Bijelo Dugme (White Button) in the summer of 2005 attracted thousands of fans when they performed in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo. According to some reports, more than 200,000 concert-goers attended the Belgrade concert (Mladina, 2005). One of the fans I interviewed said the concertgoers came to remember and preserve “what was so special about our Yugoslavia.”

Several recently created Slovene rock bands play contemporary rock music with a distinctive “Balkan/Yugoslav” flavor. The lyrics, in the now defunct Serbo-Croatian language, are explicitly nostalgic for the “good old days” of the former Yugoslavia. Even the mood of the songs replicates the hedonistic, subversive rebellion of rock in the socialist era. The paradox of this nostalgia, of course, is that it harks back to a culture of resistance to Yugoslav socialism—albeit one that was, for the most part, tolerated by Tito’s regime, which discerned, even in the music’s rebellious spirit, overtones of revolutionary Slavic unity. While celebrating Yugoslav identity, the music scene of the 1980s also provided a site of resistance to the prevailing political climate and nurtured the hope for positive social change. Perhaps the change, when it finally did come, did not live up to expectations, rendering the hope of the 1980s more poignant, and, in the newly capitalist era, more commodifiable, cast adrift, as it were, from any political program (since the regime that it thrived on rebelling against had become a thing of the past). The imagery of “Balkan/YU” music recalls the clichés of 1980s-era rebellion, with musicians and fans sporting unshaven faces, black leather jackets, and red star insignia as they consume cigarettes, coffee, and alcohol with abandon.

The pop cultural resuscitation of Yugoslav rock ’n’ roll does little to question, challenge, transform, or resist the “Balkan/YU stereotype” of the “rebel soul”: wild, untamed, hedonistic, and irrational. The appropriation and celebration of the Yugoslav Balkan rock, and of the concept of “the Balkans” more broadly, reproduces the existing stereotypes of “Southern Slavs” as examples of a romanticized and exoticized “otherness”: passionate and sometimes “dangerous” (Erjavec, 2003; Kiossev, 2002). Yugo-nostalgia within popular music hearkens back to a shared cultural history even as it provides the raw material for new cultural identities and
practices, as well as new stereotypes and forms of exclusion. In this regard, the mass production of collective memories continues to both unite and divide the former Yugoslav republics.

Yugo-nostalgia, as it plays out in all its complexity, opens up many possibilities for coming to terms with the Yugoslav past and its tragic consequences. The movement of nostalgia in contemporary consumer culture has, however, an additional important consequence in the region. Yugo-nostalgia paradoxically sides with populist discourses that frame the Yugoslav past and Yugoslav culture as essentialized, dangerous and exotic.

Herein lies the need to understand the ambivalence of Yugo-nostalgia. Even if these nostalgic practices ostensibly celebrate the possibility of a redeemed future built on ingredients from the utopian ideals of the past, they run the danger of defaulting to empty marketing hype. Tito’s creation was not an empire proper, despite the strategies he deployed for preserving the balance of differences within his overall vision for the unification of the southern Slavs. Nevertheless, perhaps Yugo-nostalgia might be characterized as “imperial” in the sense invoked by the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo: “In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people and imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 70). Rosaldo further argues that imperial nostalgia looks back at something that it helped to destroy and mourns this loss, as in the case, for example, of British portrayals of Indian culture (in, for example, Merchant Ivory films). Arguably, Yugo-nostalgia, as imperialist nostalgia, revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody, writes Rosaldo (1989), and then mourns their victim. One can understand Yugoslav nostalgia as adopting the pose of an innocent and pure yearning for the past in order “to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (p. 108). As a post on CyberYugoslavia.com reads, “I find it strange that the former Yugoslavs now want to experience what they have helped to destroy. . . .” It is as if the Yugoslavs had to destroy their country in order to truly appreciate its possibilities by confronting the prospect of living without them.

Instead of being politically questioned, challenged, or negotiated, nostalgia-inflected memory becomes detached from political and historical life to be packaged and sold for hard currency. Without doubt, images of unity in the former Yugoslavia generate discourses of healing and produce new, commodified versions of belonging. The discourses surrounding these images fail to raise crucial political questions about the destructive aspects of nationalist discourse, the divisive memories of the wars of the 1990s, and the framing of the grief they caused. The threat of nostalgia lies in its benign form, which allows the various social actors to rewrite and repackage for resale the years of Yugoslav unity. It also allows them to continue to deny responsibility for the wars and their aftermath.

Yugo-nostalgia mobilizes a sense of loss that is, ironically, borrowed and exploited by the postsocialist promoters of capitalist commerce. These celebrants of Yugo-
nostalgia suggest they can resuscitate what was best about the old Yugoslavia, now that it has been destroyed. In this respect, Yugo-nostalgia serves as an avoidance mechanism that postpones indefinitely a crucial reckoning with the socialist past and the role it played in exacerbating the tensions that erupted in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The alacrity with which the market commodifies memory and stimulates nostalgia as a marketing strategy bolsters the forms of deferral associated here with Yugo-nostalgia. Creating a marketable version of the past requires smoothing over its rough spots and filling in its contradictions in order to consume it rather than engaging with it. The politics of Yugoslav identity have not been eliminated but transformed and commodified within the context of political and economic globalization. Capitalism warps the past in order to commodify it. This impairs the chances for the emergence of real democratic reform based on the historical struggle against authoritarianism.

Notes

[1] Slovenia, for example, which has prospered economically in the post-Yugoslav era, generates forms of nostalgia that counter the current bare-knuckled competition of its aggressive form of “catch-up” capitalism.

[2] These republics were Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Serbia (with the autonomous provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina), Montenegro, and Macedonia. Citizens defined themselves as belonging both to their own republic and to the Yugoslav state.

[3] As with virtually every element of Yugoslav history, the claim that Titoism was meant to allow the coexistence of a sense of identity to a particular republic with an overarching sense of Yugoslav identity is contested. Some would argue that Titoism was a homogenizing force that suppressed the identity of each of its federated republics (see more in Mestrovic, 1993). However, in this regard, my interpretation follows the arguments of Banac (1992) and Woodward (1995).

[4] U.S. and U.S.S.R. mainstream views alike understood Yugoslavia as a vacuum between the two military-political blocks. Official anti-Stalinism was central to the Western and U.S.S.R. identification of Yugoslavia as being separate from other Eastern European nations that were subordinated to the Soviet Union. This neither/nor mantra required a lot of ideological work, but Yugoslavia remained autonomous in foreign policy, relying on its formal leading role in the nonaligned movement (Hoffman & Neal, 1962; Woodward, 1995).

[5] The death of Tito on May 4, 1980 marked the beginning of an essentially new stage in the political life of the Yugoslav society.

[6] Some scholars saw the idea of a Yugoslav community as providing a means of self-identification (Godina, 1998). However, not until the collapse of Yugoslavia did scholars start to explore the structures of feeling, discourses, and interpretations of identities of former Yugoslavia (e.g., Ballinger, 2003; Bowman, 1994; Denitch, 1994; Hayden, 1996; Ramet, 1992, 1996).

[7] The wars in Croatia, Bosnia–Herzegovina, and Kosovo have taken their toll on the civilian populace, especially refugees. It is estimated that there were over 200,000 deaths, and approximately 3 million refugees and war-affected people in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone (see more in Taylor & Kent, 2000).

[8] On the anniversary of Tito’s death in 2003, more than 200 people gathered around his bronze statue and commemorated Tito’s life.
Slovenian political journal *Mladina* every five years measures Slovenian attitudes towards Tito. In 2001, 79% have viewed Tito positively (accessible at http://www.mladina.si/tednik/200120/clanek/tito/).

Even straight-on documentaries about Tito are appearing. *Tito* (2000) made by Janja Glogovac, for instance, captures the Tito who loves blood sausages for breakfast, meals cooked by Sophia Loren, and Hollywood Westerns after his dinner.

This is a Sarajevo band, led by Goran Bregovic, featuring Bosnian Croats, Serbs, and Muslims.

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