



Petrova Gora, Croatia.

PHOTO: SANDOR BORDAS

From the German Netflix sci-fi series *Tribes of Europa*.

ARTWORK BY LEIF HEANZO

ANIMATING BRUTALISM

– cinematic renderings of Yugoslav monuments

by **Cecilia Sjöholm**

abstract

The study of monuments tends to focus on human agency, in the form of political history, war history, antagonism, trauma and so on. Aesthetic qualities are often seen as superficial and fetishized qualities that belie the impact of the monument in a regional context. The rurally situated monuments of former Yugoslavia, however, must be seen through their extraordinary qualities as works of art, carrying an agency of their own. Rather than restricting the meaning of their impact, their aesthetic qualities and impact in the environment allow them to speak to us today from a new horizon.

KEYWORDS: monuments, Yugoslavia, Spomeniks, commemoration

In recent times, monuments have become an important object of study in the humanities as well as the social sciences; they are part of an understanding of the present that involves outstanding features of the past that have to do with political history, war history, ideological antagonism, trauma and victimhood. The study of monuments, however, tends to focus on the historicity of human agency. Although landscapes and natural sites can also host, or even be, monuments, little research is to be found at the crossroads between human and non-human memory culture.

But there are, indeed, sites that combine landscape, sculpture or architecture and historical claims, for example the rurally situated monuments of former Yugoslavia. These monuments are sites not only of war commemorations, such as concentration camps or uprisings from World War II and the 1990s war in former Yugoslavia. They are also sites of political and ideological conflicts today, vulnerable to disputes surrounding their interpretation, and disagreements about who has the rights to claim the importance and impact of their presence – or to impose their neglect. When they are forgotten, nature takes over: trees, bushes, and wildlife interfere in the forms and shapes that were supposed to symbolize human memory.

Situated as many of them are in a pastoral landscape, these monuments embody an antagonistic relation between nature





The monument Petrova Gora, from Igor Grubic's film *Monument* (2015).



National park Sutjeska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From Jóhann Jóhannsson's film *First and Last Men* (2020).

and culture that has engaged critical and aesthetic theory since the 18th century. What is the aesthetic impact of their presence in the landscape? This is the motive of two powerful cinematic renderings: the film *Monument* by Croatian artist Igor Grubić from 2015, and a film from 2020 by the late Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson, *First and Last Men*.

In this article, I will first give an account of the hesitancy regarding “aestheticization” that is often referred to when it comes to monuments and memory culture at large. What appears to be at stake here is the antagonism between wanting to see monuments as sites of local and cultural communities and seeing them as aesthetic objects from the perspective of a transnational, aesthetically and culturally engaged audience. Can the meaning of the monuments extend beyond the local and communal towards a more indistinct significance, and speak to us today from a new horizon?

Can aesthetic qualities substantiate, or, in contrast, undo the historical narrative that a monument is supposed to tell? Does a focus on aesthetic qualities of a memorial draw attention away from political, social, and local issues, or do they serve as a key to unfold the open-endedness of monument culture at large? These are questions that are continuously discussed with regard to the modernist monuments of former Yugoslavia.

The background of the monument

The interaction between the scene of contemporary art and memorial culture has become increasingly intense in former

Yugoslavia. In the region, many of the monuments that were erected during the socialist era of Tito have been destroyed, or altered, and new ones are continuously created. This is a process that to a large extent mirrors the conflicts that are still ongoing in the region, conflicts that lie at the intersection between political, ideological, and ethnic allegiances, and that are often played out against the historical background of the Second World War. There are certainly differences between the different countries, and the way in which conflicts are played out around the culture of monuments. In certain cases, they have to do with nationalism's input in politics; in others, with the anti-fascist appeal to commemorate partisan battles, murders, and/or concentration camps, battled by neo-fascists. In others yet again, monuments of reconciliation are protested against.¹

ALL CARRY A NATIONAL, regional, and local meaning. Many of the post-Yugoslav monuments, *spomeniks*, embody a scale, magnificence, and aesthetic presence beyond the ordinary. Large-scale architectural and sculptural modernist experimentations produce a stunning visual presence. During the 2000s, these monuments have become the object of increasing interest on the international art scene, as can be seen in and through the cinematic renderings, an exhibition at MOMA and so on.² In popular culture too for that matter: one of the most famous monuments, at Petrova Gora, has a prominent role in the German Netflix sci-fi series *Tribes of Europa*. Knowledge of how to access these sites is being disseminated: an English database to be used as a guide for



National park Sutjeska. From Igor Grubic's film *Monument* (2015).



all international *spomenik* tourists has been set up by an America-based researcher, and guided tours are organized on site.

BUT THERE ARE ALSO discussions on the way in which these monuments should be appreciated and valued: against the backdrop of their growing popularity as aesthetic objects, researchers have spoken out against purely aesthetic veneration since it is seen to produce a kind of cultural and historical depletion. Some argue that this results in an aestheticist fetishization, through an indistinct European modernist legacy. This is contrasted to a regionally and locally motivated form of appreciation maintained by local and cultural communities. The conflict can be seen in terms of the regional against the global, as in the formulation of art historian Sanja Horvatinčić:

The insistence on their exquisite aesthetic features as the only or primary criterion of determining their contemporary heritage status undermines the monuments' immense cultural and political significance.³

The essential feature of Horvatinčić's criticism is not that the monuments are seen as aesthetic objects. Her critique is that they can become indistinct and characterless, whilst at the same time being exoticized as Balkan "others". In this way, they are treated in the same vein as the people, histories and communities in whose names they are erected.

Memory culture as sites of conflict

A similar resistance to the aestheticization of monuments, not with regard to post-Yugoslav monuments specifically but from a more general viewpoint of the status of memorial culture

today, can be seen in the work of cultural historians Cento Bull and Hansen. With their notion of "agonistic memory", Cento Bull and Hansen argue, with reference to the work of Chantal Mouffe, for a memory culture model where a variety of actors develop interventions that are called "agonistic" in and through their reference to specific histories and cultures. As researchers in cultural memory studies focusing on historical and cultural perspectives, Cento Bull and Hansen define two basic models of how a critique of hegemonic memory regimes can be construed and conceived today.⁴

WHAT THEY WISH TO challenge through their critique is, to begin with, what they call antagonistic models. These are simple memory regimes that take certain notions of monumental culture for

granted. Antagonistic models of memory culture assume that memorials and monuments should be conceived in and through distinct communities, such as nationalistic and ethnic collectivities. They are then motivated by a wish for the perpetuation of confrontation, or legacies of violence and suppression such as the colonial heritage. This is an antagonistic stance, in the sense that Chantal Mouffe has proposed. There is always a possibility that collective identities can construe a "they" which in turn can become a locus of hostility: "[...] as the case of the disintegration of Yugoslavia testifies, any form of we/ they relation, whether

"DURING THE 2000S, THESE MONUMENTS HAVE BECOME THE OBJECT OF INCREASING INTEREST ON THE INTERNATIONAL ART SCENE."

religious, ethnic, economic or other, becomes the locus of an antagonism"; that is, as Carl Schmitt has shown, they become integrated into friend/enemy constellation.⁵ Antagonistic forms of memory culture are often evoked by extremists and belong to a fascist legacy.

Such models are, however, not dominant. What tends to be dominant is, instead, a model that is critical of this form of antagonism. In another article, Anna Cento Bull and David Clarke identify a cosmopolitan form of memory culture that holds a

more general view of what is worth commemorating, and how, often placing human rights in focus. It is often victim-focused, and speaks not to a distinct community but to a wider public. It is also a form of memory culture that is distinctly aesthetically elaborated. The model for this form is taken from James Young's classic article on what he called the counter-monument, where he refers to a series of small scale, aesthetically conscious works that were erected in commemoration of the Holocaust.⁶ These works have been consciously made so as to avoid crude forms of representation. They make memory in and through dignified and artistically elaborated forms, whilst at the same time extending beyond those aesthetic forms – memory is construed, so to speak, as something that goes beyond the sheer form of its material and aesthetic appearance. The typical form of the counter-monument is, therefore, abstractly modernist, in the vein of 1960s modernism of concrete and sculpture. The archetypical example is *Monument against Fascism* by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev Gerz, a pillar erected in a square in Hamburg in 1986, that was allowed to disappear into the ground.

Cento Bull and Clarke refer to the aestheticization of counter monumentality today as generally problematic – it refers to an aloof, cosmopolitan, aesthetic audience through consensual ideas of human rights. In this way, it construes a new kind of hegemonic memory regime in which we all seem to agree on what is to be remembered, but the aestheticization of these memorial forms tend to erect not only a false kind of consensus on what we should remember, but also on what memory culture should be, and what it should look like.

CENTO BULL AND CLARKE SUGGEST, instead, what they call an agonistic model as their ideal, a model that challenges both antagonistic models of identification and the fleeting memory of aestheticization. To this end, Cento Bull and Clarke stress the importance of the use of public spaces and institutions, as well as artistic interventions: artists make memory more flexible. They take the example of when the Centre for Political Beauty (Zentrum für politische Schönheit [ZPS]) created a new *denkmal* – modelled after the monument to the Holocaust in Berlin which in many ways today can be said to be the most distinct, modernist counter-monument that we have – next to the garden of high-ranking AfD politician Höcke. Höcke had suggested that the Berlin *denkmal* was a memorial of shame that should be taken away and replaced by a monument in Dresden. This antisemitic and revisionist gesture was then, so to speak, punished by the art activists, who made Höcke view a small *denkmal* every day erected in the garden next to his house.⁷

There are, today, other forms of counter monumentality that are agonistic, produced for instance through the Black Lives Matter movement which challenged, altered or simply removed monuments. To Cento Bull and Hansen, as well as Cento Bull

and Clarke, agonistic memory culture can be defined as multi-perspectival and open-ended, in contrast to both the antagonistic, ideological memorial and the aloof, aestheticized form of counter-memory.

In this way, Cento Bull and Hansen contrast what they perceive as forms of aestheticization with what they see as more meaningful memory practices. I believe that the wariness and suspicion of what is conceived of as aestheticization is quite typical for a progressive discourse in memory culture today, exemplified also by Horvatinčić. In this discourse, aesthetic qualities that are not very distinctly attached to histories or identities are seen as meaningless.

However, the aesthetics of the monument can, in itself, counter its own destiny. Monuments are not always subdued under a symbolic meaning. They can, like art, be multi-semiotic and multidirectional. This has to do with the way in which they manage to achieve a presence in and of themselves, which may take us beyond human agency.

There is a difference between the reading of the past and the multi-perspectival dimensions that art works produce. But sometimes the works can be so strong in themselves that they produce other, new meanings. A reference to the future, perhaps, but also to the environment.

Jóhannsson and Grubić

Both the films *Monument* by Igor Grubić and *First and Last Men* by Jóhann Jóhannsson point to this more-than-human aesthetics. Igor Grubić, the creator of *Monument*, is an internationally renowned Croatian artist. In his film, one monument stands out: Petrova Gora, a monument to the uprising of the people in Kor-

dun and Banija. It is a monumental, futuristic building, constructed over several years during the 1970s and completed as late as 1981, in memory of the Partisan uprising against the Nazi regime in 1941, involving several architects and artists, for instance the famous Serb artist Vojin Bakic. This is a monument that stands out not only for historical reasons, involving both Serb and Croatian history, but also for aesthetic ones: Thanks to its other-worldly features it has been made the home of the heroes in the Netflix sci-fi series *Tribes of Europa*.

Visiting Petrova Gora in 2022, as I did, was not easy. The road from the Croatian side was closed, as was the *spomenik* itself. In its vicinity lies the remnants of one of the biggest Partisan hospitals in the region, now being restored for the purpose of becoming a museum. But nothing gives witness to the monument itself being restored. It is damp, pillaged, withering away unobserved. The walls are full of holes, the steel plates on the outside of the construction have been stolen. Trees, fungus and mold are growing inside the building. It is a monument of corrosion, through its steel and concrete construction. Graffiti reveals that it has been visited, but you need to force

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War memorials in the former Yugoslavia. From Jóhann Jóhannsson's film *First and Last Men* (2020).

entry to get inside. Animals must live there – you can hear their sounds – or is it big drops of water?

THE CONCRETE OF the *spomenik* is brutal in the landscape, but at the same time the building itself contains organic shapes, for instance in the form of an extraordinary spiral staircase of marble, shaped like the one in the Whitney museum. When you look up, it looks like a giant ear, or a flower. The Whitney building was conceived in 1963; Petrova Gora is a collaborative effort that took place a decade later, and it is in many ways a more uncompromising piece of postmodernist architecture.

There are three eras of socialist modernism: the first from the 1950s until the early 1960s, then a more international era took over throughout the sixties, where the brutalist forms that made Yugoslav architecture famous were created. The style was explicitly made so as not to look like social realism; it was New Wave. Petrova Gora appeared towards the end of an era when the partisan monuments (or monuments to revolution as they were mostly referred to) were cutting-edge avantgarde.

In his film *Monument*, where he gives Petrova Gora a distinct place, Ivor Grubić attempts to retrieve its visibility through aesthetic rather than historical means. The film is poetic, metaphysical, contemplative. In the film, the sound predominates. It is a rhythm where the wind, the water, the animals create sounds that are amplified in the large empty rooms of the building.

In Grubić's film, the monuments at Petrova Gora, *Tjentište*, and Podgarić all have characters. They are in natural settings,

alone, abandoned. At the same time they have a profile, which help create a form of narrative together with the seasons: fog, rain, snow. The film is made in a hazy grey tone which only dissipates into a solemn color for certain moments. Vjeran Salomon's soundtrack introduces an other-worldliness into the atmosphere. But what comes across most distinctly is the way in which the monuments, such as Petrova Gora, occupy a solitary location, standing in the midst of a landscape marked by growing vegetation. Grubić creates a profile, as he says, for each monument. The monuments are animated through the seasons, and the sounds of the seasons. Through nature and the atmosphere, they acquire a life that is neither human nor non-human – marked by traces of human suffering, but also acquiring an animated spirit of their own.

In real life, the monument of Petrova Gora is extraordinary in proportion, shining in the sun at the top of a mountain, overlooking the landscape for miles. In Grubić's film, however, there is nothing heroic about it. It is, he says, important to show that these monuments were built in places of real suffering. At the same time, what stands out in the film is not of the memory of what happened, but the life of the monument itself. There are almost no people in the film, and when they appear they are see-through ghosts, transparent without features.

THIS FILM IS dedicated to monuments that managed to escape the widespread destruction that went on during the 1990s war. Socialist monuments were often targeted since they symbolized the rule of Tito. But the antifascists and the socialists are not the same, Grubić points out: to him, the monuments are a part of an anti-fascist legacy which revisionist forces have tried to compromise. The monument in Petrova Gora is antifascist not despite but because of its aesthetic features, which is also part of the legacy that Grubić depicts. It is obvious in Grubić's film that it is the otherworldly aesthetics of the monuments, the shapes and rhythms of their extension, that embodies the memory of the struggle. They are not complicit with the glorification of a régime, or an ideology. Their shapes run counter to what is readily available as narration, and they are placed on their own at sites outside of the urban cityscape that is dominated by political powers.

Jóhann Jóhannsson's film, in turn, is in many ways aesthetically similar: slow moving, meditative, using sound to enhance the experience of the extraordinary features of the monuments that are depicted. His film, however, stresses the feature of eternity that is so specific for the modernist-brutalist monumental style: making the monuments into an inhuman form of creature, and making them speak with monuments from other centuries. In this way, Stonehenge communicates with Bogdan Bogdanović's extraordinary sculpture from the concentration camp of Jasenovac. The wings of Bogdanović's sculpture are well maintained, unlike the architectural monument at Petrova Gora. It offers one of the most famous silhouettes of monumental culture.

Jóhannsson's film is based on a novel that tells of a civilization that mutates, written in 1930 by author Olaf Stapledon. It is a story that stretches over several million years, from the past

into the future. The planet changes, the orbit changes. The film makes sci-fi creatures of the monuments, to the other-worldly beauty of Jóhannsson's own compositions and the voice of narrator Tilda Swinton.

One feature is shared with Grubić's film: the monuments come in somber colors, and they are at times clad in a fog that stresses their aloofness, their distantness, perhaps also the impossibility of memory. In Kenzo Ishiguro's novel *The Giant*, fog is the impossibility of memory: an element that we have to cut and conquer in order to create relations not only with our past but also with each other: not having a memory means not having a relation – neither with the past nor with the living.

In Jóhannsson's film, the difference between the past and the present is obliterated: it is not clear if we are looking into deep histories or distant times to come. The monuments appear like aliens, like posthuman creatures. What is depicted is not a foggy depletion of memory under aestheticized forms and sounds, it is rather an experimental form of commemoration, where the past is intertwined with the future.

Sunken natural beauty and aestheticization

This experimental form of commemoration that takes place in both of the cinematic renderings of these monuments is an aspect which has to do with aesthetic presence: humanoid sculptures in fog, rain, snow, blatant sun. The landscapes and the atmosphere are intertwined with the sculptures.

Bogdanović's sculpture is but a small part of the monumental installation on site. Located at what used to be a concentration camp where the Croatian fascist regime killed around 80.000 people from the resistance, and ethnic Serbs, Bogdanović also used the land around the monument to mark the placement of the buildings of the concentration camp. Shaped as mounds of earth, covered in grass, but mounds placed in holes, Bogdanović's work has the character not only of being a monument, but also a monumental piece of land art, using shapes and natural materials to create the landscape. For a visitor, it is not the sculpture that plays the main role – it is the earth. The memorial carries the signs of a distinct narrative, but it is tied to a sense of time that stretches over generations, and over the dead towards the future. Its aesthetic is tied between the distant past, of the earth, and the future, in the wings stretching towards the sky.

In his volume *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno's classic chapter on "Natural beauty" points to the steep temporality that is tied to an aesthetics of nature:

The image of what is oldest in nature reverses dialectically into the cipher of the not-yet-existing, the possible.⁸

To Adorno, the relation to nature lies at the core of what we call the aesthetic. Artworks belong to the sphere that Adorno calls a second nature: they belong not to the natural world, but to the social world, which has the ability to make things appear natural. What is beautiful in artworks is something that we conceive

of as reminiscences of an age that we cannot seize in the present. Beauty cannot merely present itself to us sensuously. It has to do with ideological investments: what is conceived of as "natural" has to do with the implementation of ideals.

Art imbues the relation to nature with ideological meaning. It is not by chance that nature becomes "aestheticized." We may think of the glorification of the Alps in bright colors, works that were intertwined with German nationalist ideology in the 1930s, for instance. These are not just examples of bad taste, but more or less inevitable developments of the violation done to nature. There is no "neutral" aesthetic ground through which art can relate to nature. On the contrary, art is an agent which uses aesthetic means to determine the fate of nature.

What is violent, contradictory, and frightening about nature becomes instead familiar in art, bestowed with an acceptable face: what is called "second nature" must, so to speak, appear natural. This is why art, or rather what is called "aestheticization", is a production of ideology. What is even worse than an openly nationalist adoration of sentimentalist art, according to Adorno, is the conviction that beauty can present itself naturally, beyond the layer of social and cultural history that he calls a "second nature."

This expresses Adorno's concern with "aestheticization": Artworks are also products of human labour, and of ideas. To Adorno, it is more in line with art's own place in history to make the former demonstrative of the latter: what aestheticization does is to attempt to point beyond history. Here Adorno shares the concerns of memory culture historians such as Horvatinić or Cento Bull and Hansen/Clarke: aestheticization is a kind of ideology that makes us forget the historical and conceptual features of the artwork and look only at sensuous dimensions that make it empty and fleeting.

The idea that the aesthetic lies above and beyond social and cultural relations is, to Adorno, worse than the ideologization of beauty and art.

IF TODAY THE AESTHETIC relation to the past is poisoned by a reactionary tendency with which this relation is in league, an ahistorical aesthetic consciousness that sweeps aside the dimension of the past as rubbish is no better. Without historical remembrance there would be no beauty.⁹

In this way, the aesthetic is contrasted to aestheticization in Adorno's opinion. Art and aesthetics have to do with our world, our history, they give us a sense of what is real and important. Nature, in turn, has a quality that lies beyond attempts to domesticate it. Nature is bestowed with what could be called a natural age, a profound history that leads us beyond modern, human interventions. In this way, nature can harbor both a sense of present history and a sense of deep time.

Beauty and memory culture

In this way, we can also approach the questions of the aesthetics of memory culture from its attachment to nature: The sense of deep time that nature can produce is not about ignoring or undoing historical reality. It is rather deepening our sense of what

Adorno calls natural history: a dimension that we tend to repress in our focus on human agency, but that is intrinsically linked to it. As Deborah Cook writes, to Adorno human history is intrinsically intertwined with natural history. They share a destiny of always being in a transitory state.¹⁰

We cannot stand on nature, so to speak, and create art, without incorporating at the same time a sense of time that goes beyond generations. The beauty of art cannot be conceived beyond a sense of sunken time. Art produces the wounds of history, wounds that make the sunken ideal of natural beauty appear. In this way, objects of memory that stand in a landscape carry many dimensions of time simultaneously.

This is why monuments are also wide open to artistic renderings: their aesthetics create a presence that extends beyond the historical and ideological motivations that lie behind the specific monument. But they also point to a new dimension of violence and ruination: applied to nature as such.

Shaped as otherworldly forms, as they are, in the landscape, the monuments of former Yugoslavia give witness to anti-fascist struggles through their placement, as well as through their brutalist and futurist avant-gardism. Today, their relation to the landscape has acquired a new complexity.

They are too big, brutal in shape and presence. But it is a violence that is not contrasted with the pastoral landscape. It is also echoed in it. These monuments are not only placed on a historical ground, they are also set in a used nature: Petrova Gora in a forest of plane trees, for instance, a fast growing, invasive type of tree. It is also a place of leisure, for citizens from Zagreb who come to take a walk in the forest and eat lunch at the nearby guesthouse. What used to be a place of hiding, what Andreas Malm talks about as a partisan wilderness of hiding and resistance, has now become a different kind of nature.¹¹

But deep time can still be sensed in the landscape. In the films, the cinematic renderings of the monuments make up for the loss of wilderness. Through evocative fog, rain, snow, through the slow movements of its music and rhythms, the images evoke a deep time. But this is done not through nature, but through aesthetic means: Rather than obliterate the historical dimension of the monuments, aesthetics is here used as a means to give a history to the monuments when nature fails to do so.

WHAT ART CAN DO, Adorno argued, is to animate a life that is, so to speak, stolen from nature. Through their cinematography, sound and so on – set beyond time and cultural specificity – something emerges in these films that not only has to do with a general, posthuman, Anthropocene aesthetics, although that is certainly there. What emerges is that the monuments are creatures of their own history. Their shapes and materials speak to us as objects from a past that we cannot fully grasp, and a future that we do not know. And yet, at the same time, they give witness to distinct events and a particular history that cannot be belied or altered.

The writing of history is a process in flux, and when it comes to memory culture, it is also a question of politics and ideology. Setting monuments in nature, however, as objects of the land-

scape, they also acquire a sense of time that moves beyond simple mechanisms of ideology and aestheticization. With the more than human quality of the monuments, they make the memory of events take place between a future and a past that we cannot grasp, giving meaning to events through a sense of deep time. ✖

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