
Book Reviews

Mitja Velikonja, *Post-Socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe* [Southeast European Studies] (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 226 pp.

Perhaps due to some international traffic regulations or in reminiscence of the former socialist regime that extensively promoted “brotherhood and unity” of all Yugoslav people, traffic signposts in Bosnia and Herzegovina are bilingual. As somebody who has often driven south from Sarajevo (in Bosnia) to Herzegovina, I must admit that seeing the Cyrillic alphabet crossed out on the signposts with the names of towns and villages ceased to be surprising long ago. When I headed east, from Sarajevo to Belgrade, I noticed the opposite, that is, the Latin alphabet was crossed out in a mirror-like reflection of what happened in Herzegovina. Script and language thus become victims of the local bearers of nationalist sentiments, who demonstrate their ethno-political convictions through their graffiti-like interventions on traffic signposts. This comes as no surprise, as societies in Bosnia and Herzegovina are deeply divided on ethno-political grounds, but that is another story.

I also remember that, at the time of my frequent travels to Belgrade (i.e., in 2009), the neighborhood of New Belgrade, where my aunt lives, was “covered” with graffiti stating “Pravda za Uroša” [Justice for Uroš], a 20-something, baby-faced boy who was turned into a symbolic figure worth defending. The graffiti demanded justice for Uroš, who had been detained, charged, and eventually sentenced to ten years of imprisonment for assault and attempted murder of a police officer. Essentially, young Uroš, as the judgments stated, tried to shove a burning torch into the officer’s mouth at a soccer match that took place in Belgrade in 2007. Uroš’s actions resulted in the officer losing sight in one eye. After seeing numerous instances of graffiti containing Uroš’s name, one could seriously wonder who the actual victim was in the described brutal events from the Belgrade soccer match. This blurring of the line between victimhood and accountability, as in many examples throughout former Yugoslavia, led me to think that inflicting deserved punishment on those who committed a brutal crime could lead to the (self-)victimization of the perpetrator. I became even more convinced of this when I found “Justice for Uroš” in Zvornik, a town in Bosnia and Herzegovina near the border of Serbia. This city was notorious for war crimes against civilians in the 1990s, for which a large number of perpetrators were never held accountable and there was also widespread, silent social support for the perpetrators. In places such as Zvornik, in addition to the obvious campaigning for Uroš, such graffiti perhaps has an additional social message and political connotations.

Mitja Velikonja’s book, *Post-Socialist Political Graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*, represents a thorough collection, compilation, systematization, and analysis of graffiti that surrounds us at every step, yet something that we easily grew accustomed to seeing and often passed by. One might say that these are the natural landscapes of the Yugoslav post-socialist condition. However, there is nothing natural in either the graffiti or the messages they generate. In fact, they are man-made material traces combining visual and textual components, sometimes using either one or the other component, placed at a wide variety of spots, with varying lifespans. Some are sophisticated visual elaborations, while others are quite rudimentary. As visual clues of messages

with wider ideological implications, the graffiti is a site-specific form of minimalistic intervention. Often relying heavily on written language and wordplays, the interpretation of graffiti requires access to wider historical, social, and political references, in addition to the ability to understand the language in question.

For years, during his *flâneries* on the streets of Ljubljana, Belgrade, Beirut, or New York, Velikonja encountered, observed, photographed, compiled, and archived examples of graffiti such as [Pravda za Uroša] mentioned above. The *flânerie*, being an observational process and certainly much more than just an idle stroll, does not fully reflect the methodological rigor applied by Velikonja in his endeavor to study political graffiti and street art during his free time, with minimal resources. This book provides the reader with a detailed analysis of an undeservedly under-researched area combining visual and material culture in public spaces. Despite being mostly focused on the author's home country of Slovenia, the book looks more concretely at case studies from Central Europe and the countries of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The rigor, first applied at finding graffiti and street art images, as well as documenting and archiving them, and subsequently at dissecting their messages and broader connotations in detail, helps amend the existing need for assessing this overlooked part of our daily encounters.

Although never explicitly mentioned, the understanding of graffiti as material culture, rather than mere vandalism, opens the possibility to appreciate it as an integral part of humans' need to leave a trace, intervene, disrupt, and eventually modify the space in which they live. Despite their transience and fragility because they exist in open space, and can easily be altered, destroyed, or simply painted over, some of these interventions (whether in the form of graffiti or the stickers of soccer supporters that Velikonja also duly analyzes) prove to be resistant to time and changes of regime and provide a glimpse at a not-so-distant past (p. xii).

Art historian Jules Prown writes that "all tangible works of art are part of material culture, but not all the material of material culture is art."¹ That might partially explain why the *graffitology*, which Velikonja poses as an academic inquiry, had been overlooked. Essentially, Velikonja grounds graffitiology on three epistemological bases: "the context, the intent, and the reception of graffiti" (p. 6). Graffitiology is fundamentally interdisciplinary; it can offer a window into the analysis of urban subcultures as well as provide an opportunity to interpret current shifts in nationalism and xenophobia regarding the "others"—particularly the refugees and migrants who traverse Slovenia and the Balkans on their way to reach the safety of Western and Northern Europe. As a discipline, it can look at graffiti as a materialization of nostalgia for the past (i.e., socialist Yugoslavia)—the nostalgia being a form of dissatisfaction with present-day living conditions.

According to the number of instances of graffiti that can be categorized as pro- and counter-Yugoslavia, and the polarization of Slovenian (and post-Yugoslav societies in general), two different yet complementary strategies are applied in the public space: on one side is the ethnonationalist and hegemonic (anti-Yugoslav) faction and

1 Jules Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17:1 (Spring 1982), pp. 1-19.

on the other, the counter-hegemonic and pro-leftist (pro-Yugoslav) faction. Velikonja writes that on one hand, “anti-Yugoslav, antisocialist, and nationalist graffiti are in actuality just a street appropriation of dominant political discourses, contemporary hegemony the ‘street way’” (p. 75); on the other hand, the presence, in higher proportion according to Velikonja’s data, of pro-Yugoslav graffiti reflects the marginal status of ideas (historically) associated with Yugoslavia in the policies of the states that emerged following its disappearance. As such, pro-Yugoslav graffiti has overcome a position that is “plagued with a communication deficit in the mainstream cultural domains of expression” (p. 76). Accordingly, the ideological division that operates on the satisfaction/dissatisfaction with present-day conditions is transposed into streets and public spaces; such divisions become tangible by means of traces that are materialized via these physical interventions.

Reading this book on a field that certainly deserves full academic attention is not only eye-opening, it also inevitably makes you look differently at the surrounding space, especially for someone like myself who is engaged in teaching visual arts. I hope readers interested in exploring issues of material culture and visual communication through political graffiti and street art will find this book as inspiring as I did. Apart from the familiarity of some topics that Velikonja explored in his previous work on nostalgia [*Titostalgija—A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz, Ljubljana*: Peace Institute, 2008], this book will certainly provide additional valuable input for students and academics researching the entanglement of visual culture, social classes, Balkan nationalism, xenophobia, and ideology in general.

JASMINA GAVRANKAPETANOVIĆ-REDŽIĆ