

# **Alternative Cinematic and Literary Histories of Yugoslavia and the “Power to Be Affected”**

Tanja Petrović

This chapter discusses two recent artworks that come from the (post-)Yugoslav space and address its socialist past: the film *Houston, We Have a Problem!* by Slovenian director Žiga Virc (2016) and the novel *E baš vam hvala: Smrt bandi, sloboda Jugoslaviji* (Thanks a Lot: Death to the Gang, Freedom to Yugoslavia) by Serbian writer Marko Vidojković (2017).<sup>1</sup> The common aspect of these two cultural texts, which attracted significant attention and enjoyed high popularity, is that they replace the actual historical events with fictitious ones: the film provides an alternative scenario of the Yugoslav socialist past, while the novel uses fictitious events to pave the path for an alternative scenario for Yugoslavia's future. In this chapter, I take seriously the capacity of untrue events, such as those in the film's and the novel's plots, to produce real affects and mobilize political imagination. Thus, I address the following questions: How does the unrealness of the two narratives relate to the affective potential of these two cultural texts and, particularly, to the joy they offer readers and spectators? What are the political meaning and potential of this joy that results from immersing into untrue/non-factual narratives of the past? What does it tell us about post-socialist political subjectivities and conditions in which they exist?

To answer these questions, I lean on the long-lasting history of thought that recognizes the political character of affect. The claims that "our ethical

---

1 This chapter is a result of the research conducted in the framework of the research project "Music and Politics in the Post-Yugoslav Space: Toward a New Paradigm of Politics of Music in the 21st Century" (J6-9365) and the research program "Historical Interpretations of the 20th Century" (P6-0347) financed by the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS).

and political projects must be formulated and conducted as the terrain of the affects” (Hardt 2015, 215) span the centuries, from Baruch Spinoza to Lauren Berlant. At the heart of these projects, as Michael Hardt argues, is the necessity to understand our power to be affected “not as a weakness, but a strength” (2015, 215). This line of thought, promulgated also by many scholars belonging to the “affective turn” in humanities—along with Hardt’s insistence on the Deleuzian concept of “the power to be affected” and his understanding that the joy is “the increase of our power to think and act, and sadness is the decrease” (Hardt 2015, 219)—add a valuable perspective to the ways we can think of the political projects of our time and the role affect plays in them. “The power to be affected” resonates particularly strongly with the post-socialist condition—the same condition that provides a semantic framework for the two cultural texts I am concerned with here. As I focus on the reception and affective potential of *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot*, I observe them as cultural texts, following Ann Cvetkovich, who understands cultural texts “as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (2003, 7).

*Houston, We Have a Problem!* tells the story of a secret space program launched in socialist Yugoslavia that drew on revolutionary ideas about space travel developed by the Slovenian scientist Herman Potočnik Noordung (1892–1929). In the heyday of the Cold War, Yugoslavs sold the program to the United States, which was desperate to catch up with the Soviets in the Space Race. However, once in US hands, it was discovered soon that the program did not work. This enraged John F. Kennedy and his administration and posed serious problems for Josip Broz Tito and, indeed, for Yugoslav foreign policy in general. The film also follows the destiny of Ivan Pavić, an elderly NASA scientist of Yugoslav origin, who returns to Croatia from the United States to meet his daughter for the first time. Ostensibly, he had been forced to leave his pregnant wife in 1957 when the Yugoslav space program was sold to the Americans. Together with 25 scientists, he had been compelled to move to the United States to try and fix the expensive but non-functioning space program. Had he refused,

he would have ended up on Goli Otok, a Yugoslav camp for political prisoners. A car accident was staged on his native island of Pag so that his family would believe he had perished.<sup>2</sup>

*Thanks a Lot* tells of two parallel realities: one in which a Boeing 737 headed to Dubrovnik crashed in June of 1989, wiping out the entire cabinet and the presidents of Yugoslavia's republics, and another in which the crash did not happen. In the first reality, the multiethnic socialist country survives and prospers. In the second, it falls apart in a bloody civil war and is now a ruined post-apocalyptic place where nationalism and corruption flourish. The novel's plot takes place in 2017, in a sci-fi-like reality of the socialist Yugoslavia that survived, at a moment when the country's prosperity is jeopardized because a portal between the two realities has opened, causing their strange intertwining. The novel's main character, Mirko Šipka, a researcher in the Federal Secretariat of the Interior Affairs' Office for Inexplicable Phenomena, is in charge of getting to the bottom of these disturbing intertwinements.<sup>3</sup>

Despite genre-related differences and different temporal orientations, these two artworks have much in common. They are both fictitious yet heavily draw upon the actual history of Yugoslavia, chunks of its everyday and popular culture, national mythology, and discrete experiences of living in socialism. *Houston, We Have a Problem!* is abundant with archival footage, both highly recognizable and lesser-known images from Yugoslav and world history from the second half of the 20th century, all of which are skillfully intertwined with the fantastic story of Yugoslavia being "the forgotten third player in the Space Race between the United States and the Soviet Union" (Kern 2016).

In *Thanks a Lot*, on the other hand, a recognizable language, references to rigid hierarchies of the party, and the atmosphere recalling the popular TV

2 For more details about the plot of *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, see ("Houston, We Have a Problem – Yugoslav Space Program: Myth or Reality?" n.d.), ("Houston, We Have a Problem" n.d.), Kern (2016), and Mochiach (2016).

3 For more details about *Thanks a Lot*, see Miljački (2018) and Sabljaković (2017).

series *Povratak otpisanih* (The Return of the Written-Off) make the reality of the fictitious “super Yugoslavia” from the future feel very familiar to former Yugoslavs.

For both the novel and the film, articulating what was possible/imaginable in the past and what could be possible in the future must be understood within the context of the global modernist orientation toward the future that marked the second half of the 20th century. In David Scott’s words, it was a period when the future was “not merely possible but imminent; not only imminent, but possible” (2014, 4). Even more importantly, it is the distinctive Yugoslav socialist modernity and its promises that define the horizons of possibility and probability in the reception of these two cultural texts. Mari Žanin Čalić emphasizes that the Yugoslav society experienced the fastest urbanization in Europe after World War II and a “deep industrial transformation of social relations” (2013, 257). Rapid urbanization and industrialization were parts of the wider modernization process aimed at collective and individual emancipation in all domains of life (see Petrović 2014; 2021) and inscribed in the country’s “self-management in domestic and non-alignment in international politics” as well as the “internal internationalism” (Jakovljević 2016, 8, 178).

As Harm Rudolf Kern points out, “the history of Yugoslavia in the 1960s perfectly suits [... the] creative narrative” of *Houston, We Have a Problem!* (2016). “Yugoslavia had a unique non-aligned position between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The balancing act between East and West even had certain implications for Yugoslavia’s attitude toward the Space Race. Achievements in space were omnipresent in the Yugoslav media, and the 1969 moon landing inspired a cosmic *sevdah* tribute to the Apollo 11 crew” (Kern 2016).<sup>4</sup> The narrative of Yugoslav excellence in science and technology is grounded in reality as well: as Mićo Tatalović and Nenad Jarić Dauenhauer

---

4 Kern refers here to a jazz-style remake of the *sevdalinka* song “Mujo kuje konja po mjesecu” (Mujo is Shoeing a Horse by Moonlight/on the Moon) from 1969, performed by the popular singer Safet Isović, in which space sounds are integrated to celebrate the Apollo 11 Moon landing (Branković 2009).

wrote in *Physics Today*, “It was under socialism that Yugoslavia rose during the Cold War from poverty and insignificance to become a potent political, diplomatic, and military force. The period also saw the rise in the status of science, which Tito considered a tool for realizing his dream of worldwide socialism” (2019, 31). Several elite physics institutes were established and given significant funding. In relation to *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, Tatalović and Jarić Dauenhauer emphasize:

Yugoslavia did have an active rocket program. Slovenian astronautics pioneer Herman Potočnik Noordung published ideas in 1928 that were ahead of his time. And Tito once reportedly asked Mike Vučelić, a Yugoslav NASA engineer who worked on the Apollo program, to bring space travel “back home.” The media and scientists have since debunked most of *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, but what stood out is that it needed debunking in the first place. (2019, 31)

Readers’ comments left under media articles discussing *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, confirm the perception of Yugoslavia’s modernity, even when they express an awareness that a serious space program was unlikely a part of that modernity:

*I am sure that the film will be a success because people like to believe in the progressivity of the former system. I think this space program is a made-up story, but the former state was much better in the domain of social care and welfare (health protection, education, housing). (el CARTEL, 2016, March 4)*<sup>5</sup>

*We were probably quite far from a space program, but we (Yugoslavia) were producing airplanes (Orao 2) 45 years ago. Today, they would be world-class aircraft compared to these pathetic Pilatuses. (luckyss, 2016, March 4)*

---

5 All translations of non-English texts are by the author.

*Thanks a Lot* also provides numerous references to Yugoslav modernity. It offers a window to a world that would exist had the rupture caused by the violent end of Yugoslavia, the global defeat of state-socialist projects, and dramatic changes in regimes of production not happened: Yugoslav citizens use tablets and cell phones produced by EI in Niš, Gorenje, and Obod, the main character drives a Zastava 1001, a hyper-modern sequel of Yugoslav cars produced in Kragujevac, and takes for business travel “the high-speed, ultra-modern, electro-magnetic train between Skopje and Ljubljana” by Jugoslovenske železnice (Yugoslav Railroads) (Miljački 2018, 1).

## Reading Against the Grain

The two cultural texts use the strategy of adding fictional twists to known historical events and developments and may thus be read as instances of alternative, virtual, or counterfactual history (see “Virtualna istorija: Da se dogodilo drugačije,” 2014). Writing alternative, counterfactual histories is a genre that has a long-lasting tradition. The post-Yugoslav space has seen some of these as well. Perhaps most notable is the book *Alternativna istorija Srbije* (Alternative History of Serbia) by two Serbian historians and public figures, Predrag Marković and Čedomir Antić. It consists of short, dialogic chapters that offer alternative histories of different periods of Serbian history, spanning from the distant past and the time of Saint Sava, the first Archbishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church who lived in the 12th–13th centuries, to the far-away future of the year 2115, for which the authors dwell upon the question of how Serbian society would look at that moment (Marković and Antić 2016). This book is a representative of the so-called big (alternative) history, based on an essentialist, homogenizing understanding of nations that, as Jelena Lalatović argues, “results in the naturalization, and not demystification of armed conflicts and violence” (2016).

Historiography has traditionally been suspicious and condescending towards the narrations of counterfactual histories. As Ferguson (2014, 6) points

out, generations of historians treated counterfactual history as a mere entertaining game and diversion (see also Carr 2018). Having such an attitude of professional historians in mind, it comes as little surprise that alternative or counterfactual histories were more often a subject of literature, film, and popular culture in general.

The novelist Marko Vidojković and film director Žiga Virč did not, however, aim to provide an alternative history of socialist Yugoslavia that would feed the mythological imagination or foster affective mobilization as the art and popular culture that takes on counterfactual histories usually do, or at least that is not what they single out as the main ambition of their artworks. On the contrary—both authors took a position meant to prevent this. As Virč revealed in several interviews, he saw his film’s “mission” as largely pedagogical and aiming at warning and educating the spectatorship about fake news, the fabrication of facts, and the misuse of historical images and facts and at exposing the mechanisms of manipulation of the truth engaged in by politicians and the media (see Bernik 2016; Saito 2016; Schapira 2016; Struna 2016). To do this, the director combined typical truth-telling visual techniques—such as archival material, testimonies, and visits to the abandoned facilities of the space program at the Yugoslav airbase in Željava, Croatia—with the fictional plot about the Yugoslav space program. His aim was also to critically address (the uncritical) Yugonostalgia and prevent its outburst among his film’s audience. As he stated in an interview:

When combining all these stories together, we wanted to cover all sides of the Yugoslavia regime at that time, [including] the personal stories that told what the system was doing. Ivan’s story fits into that in a more symbolic way because you have a lot of people who are very nostalgic and [who think] Yugoslavia was great, everybody had jobs, social security, everything. On the other hand, there was this prison camp where you could go if you were just a little bit too much against the system, so we wanted to cover that with Ivan’s story. (Virč in Saito 2016)



Similarly, Marko Vidojković was careful to add a significant dose of satire to his text and distance himself emotionally from the country his novel was reviving. In a newspaper interview, he stated:

[Yugoslavia] was simply not capable of dealing with historical challenges. When it was supposed to transform into a democratic and civic society, it disintegrated in the bloody civil war. In addition, let us not forget that many of those who participated in the country's disintegration and readily took nationalist clothes on are still among us. Because of that, I do not nurture any Yugo-nostalgia and see it as Yugo-hypocrisy. (Sabljaković 2017)

Both the film and the novel emphasize the oppressive aspects of Yugoslav socialism. *Houston, We Have a Problem!* does it with the personal story of Ivan Pavić's destiny, which, by "portraying the human face of the broad-sweep decisions of politicians like Tito, who 'disappeared' many of his citizens, imbues the archival footage with real emotion, and makes an apt juxtaposition to old film of Tito living like a prince and juggling the fate of his countrymen who were, to him, pawns" (Charney 2016). In *Thanks a Lot*, modernity and technological advancement of "super" Yugoslavia are combined with "unmistakable elements of autocracy, violence, and nationalism" (Miljački 2018, 1; see also Puljarević 2022, 78).

Despite their authors' somewhat distant, disengaged, critical, pedagogical, or satirical stance, these two cultural texts have been met with immense interest and very positive reactions by their audiences in the former Yugoslav societies. *Thanks a Lot* has had several editions since it was published for the first time in Serbia in September 2017. It was simultaneously published in Croatia and was one of the country's best-selling books in the autumn of that year. The book's Slovenian translation, *Res vam hvala: Smrt bandi, svoboda Jugoslaviji* (Thanks a Lot: Death to the Gang, Freedom to Yugoslavia), was published in 2019 by the V.B.Z. publishing house. Serbian film director Srđan Dragojević wrote a scenario for TV series based on Vidojković's novel. Long before its first screening, *Houston, We Have a Problem!* attracted enormous

attention—its first trailer was seen by almost a million viewers in less than a week (Kern 2016). The film premiered in 2016 at the Tribeca Film Festival and was later screened in cinemas across former Yugoslavia and in more than 60 festivals. It was the first Slovenian film available on the Netflix platform and was nominated as the Slovenian candidate for the Oscar for Best Foreign-Language Film. It received several awards, including the Vesna Award for Best Feature Film at the 2016 Festival of Slovenian Film and the Audience Award at the Mediterranean Film Festival. While the film attracted large numbers of spectators, it also triggered some negative reactions—such as a petition to forbid “all cultural, artistic, and political veneration and glorifications of the criminal Tito and his system,” among which is *Houston, We Have a Problem!*. The authors of the petition state that the film’s premiere is on “the despot’s birthday” and anticipate considerable media support and forging historical facts (“PROTI TITU IN TITOVU KULTURI” 2016). Negative comments also frequently appeared under media texts dedicated to this movie. Here are some exemplary ones:

*I have not seen the movie and do not intend to see it. It is for failed Yugonostalgics, who nurture abnormal narcissism and like imagining that Yugoslavia used to matter on the world map while ignoring everything related to bankruptcy and the company of the “non-aligned,” a.k.a. the most backward societies [...] It is for losers, and today, it is modern to revive yugonostalgia and thus extract money ... Sad. (Kingstone, 2017, April 20)*

*I would not criticize the film before I see it, but I am afraid it is yet another stupid and more or less concealed advertisement of the previous regime and Yugonostalgia successfully propagated by the lefties [...]. (Slovenec5, 2016, May 5)*

As these comments illustrate, both positive and negative reactions to the film and the novel point to their potential to produce affect and emotional mobilization, even though they are based on fictitious events.

Yugoslav popular culture has long been understood as the most propulsive generator of nostalgic sentiments among former Yugoslavs. This Yugo-nostalgia is usually seen as superficial, non-reflected, and a politically unproductive escape to an idealized past (Scribner 2003, Dimitrijević 2017). While categories of the real, the true, and the factual have mobilizing power and an important role in the debates over the nature of socialism, these categories do not apply to the two cultural texts I discuss here because these texts are overtly based on fake, imagined, and fictitious events. As we can see above, this fact did not diminish their affective capacity nor prevent their attachment to the familiar category of Yugo-nostalgia.

The affective capacity of *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot*, despite their clearly counterfactual foundations and their authors' critical stance towards Yugoslav socialism, points to the uncontrolled—and uncontrollable—elements inherent to each cultural text. Walter Benjamin referred to such elements in historiographic texts and historical testimonies as reading against the grain—“against the intentions of the person or persons producing them,” as Ginzburg put it (2012, 4). Carlo Ginzburg further points out that the same is true for “literary texts that strive to present an autonomous reality” (2012, 4) and, we may add, any artistic narrative that presents a reality, being it true or untrue.

## The Untrue and the Real

The obvious discrepancy between the historical facts and the histories told in *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot* should have made these two cultural texts clearly detached from the historical, generational, and personal experiences of socialism in Yugoslavia—something that did not/could not happen cannot be bound to reality and causality but to their opposites. As such, it is a product of the imagination outside historical time and its laws and often comes in shapes of a futurist techno-utopia, paranormal phenomena, or even conspiracy theories. The main protagonist of *Thanks a Lot*, Mirko Šipka, resembles Fox Mulder from *The X-Files* (Miljački 2018), while conspiracy theories

and references to them feature prominently in *Houston, We Have a Problem!*. As Harm Rudolf Kern describes,

The conspiracy is so classic that the movie even explains how Kennedy was assassinated by the Yugoslav secret service. After the sale of the non-functioning Yugoslav space program, relations between Tito and Kennedy deteriorate. Tito visits Washington to smoothen things out but is almost assassinated. In a follow-up phone call, Tito invites the US president to visit Yugoslavia. This invitation was in vain since the attempt on Kennedy's life only one month later did succeed. When historian Roger McMillan, the main narrator in *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, is asked about the connection between these events, he answers with a grin, an uncomfortable silence, and a suggestive "no comment." (2016)

In the perception of these two cultural texts, the categories of the *true* and the *untrue* do not correspond with the categories of the *real* and the *unreal*. Slavoj Žižek, who makes a star appearance in *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, says at the film's end: "Even if it didn't happen, it's true" (see Mochiach 2016; Kern 2016). This discrepancy can easily be subscribed to the spectators' inability to distinguish between the fake and the truth, their taking the fiction for history, and their propensity for conspiracy theories. These qualifications politically translate to the tropes of irrationality and naivety of the post-social subjects (see Dimitrijević 2017) but such interpretation would be too narrow and inaccurate. There are at least two important reasons for that.

First, several instances suggest that in our socio-political present, the non-factual often captures reality better and *truer* than what claims to be objective and true. Think, for example, of the notable spate of comedian-politicians and carnivalesque political parties that have experienced unexpected and remarkable success during the last decade (see Molé 2013; Klumbyté 2014; Petrović 2018) or of the parodic, alternative news outlets that mushroomed all around the globe during the last decade, which citizens treat as a truer, more sincere, and more serious source of information than mainstream, corporate

media (see Kavaliauskaitė 2009; Haugerud et al. 2012; Petrović 2015). Because of this quality of alternative news outlets, Baym (2005) argues that “oppositional” would be a more appropriate name than “fake” for such news.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in her essay on *Houston, We Have a Problem!*, Iva Kosmos (2016) writes about the complex and not necessarily mutually exclusive relationship between history and counterfactuality. She argues for opening history to stories that are not necessarily based on the factual and, through that, for rehabilitating the notion of alternative history, usually dismissed as untrue and not based on facts. She points out, “Despite the decision to reject the quest for the truth, *Houston, We Have a Problem!* is not as far away from history as it may seem.” She refers to British historian Alun Munslow, who “points to the difference between the past and history—the past is everything that happened before the current moment, while history is a story, a narrative about that past. The mistake of the traditional historiographical discourse is that it equates the past and history. The past is not accessible; all we have are stories about it” (in Kosmos 2016). According to Kosmos, Žiga Virč takes archival material, interprets it, and creates a story about the past: “Although he clearly says that it is not (about) the truth, what he does is not so radically different from what historians do” (2016). Kosmos’s views on the work of historians resonate with the insights of one of the finest historians of our time, Carlo Ginzburg. He is critical of “the tendency of postmodern skepticism to blur the borders between fictional and historical narrations” but “in the name of constructive element they share,” he proposes “a view of the relation between the two as a competition for the representation of reality” (2012, 2). This competition, Ginzburg stresses, is “a conflict made of challenges and reciprocal, hybrid borrowings” (2012, 2).

Second, the realness of the two cultural texts I deal with in this chapter is defined less through the categories of the cognitive and factual and more through the category of the affective. It is not that readers and spectators are unable to

---

6 This is even truer when we have in mind the totally new meanings that fake news acquired during the 2016 US presidential election campaign and during its aftermath. They pose another good reason to think of an alternative name for parodies of the news.

differentiate the fake from the truth and understand the hoax, but separating the truth from the fiction is not their primary concern. Taking the untruthfulness of the film's and the novel's narratives as an unquestionable fact, the viewer and the reader may allow succumbing to joy in seeing, listening, reading, and imagining what they know from their past and what could be possible histories, or futures, of Yugoslavia. That is how many spectators approached *Houston, We Have a Problem!*. Their comments reveal that the untruthfulness of its basic plot is by no means an obstacle for enjoying it and engaging, emotionally and intellectually, with the ideas and imagery it offers: *The film is, of course, totally made-up, but it is nevertheless so interesting that it must be seen in one breath* (Hallenbeck, 2017, July 12); *I saw the film, and it is really excellent. A story that makes you think. Although it is fiction* (malikaliber, 2017, July 12).

## The Politics of Joy

An entire cultural industry provides the former Yugoslavs with media for expressing and nurturing their emotional relationship with the past. Songs, films, and products from the Yugoslav times are consumed, circulated, and refashioned; many new ones are produced to feed consumers' emotions for the past, usually referred to as (Yugo)nostalgia—a recipe promising good sales and profit generation.<sup>7</sup> As already pointed out, the authors of *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot*, were careful to distance their narratives from Yugonostalgia. Despite that, nostalgia is frequently mentioned in media texts discussing these works: Slovenian journalist Vesna Milek wrote that Virč's film could “lead to feeling such a strong Yugonostalgia that one feels a bit embarrassed” (2016). Vidojković's book was characterized in the media as bringing “a new type of Yugonostalgia” and “uniting Yugoslav readers” (Sabljaković 2017).

---

7 For a discussion about the potential of music to shed a new light on memory politics and practices in the post-Yugoslav context, see Hofman (2015b) and the special issue of *Southeastern Europe* 2015 (Hofman 2015a).

Yugonostalgia is typically understood as a positive emotional expression of one's private, intimate, and personal attachment to the past.<sup>8</sup> In most interviews related to *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot*, their authors talk about their childhood memories when addressing the issue of Yugonostalgia. Moreover, (the lack of) personal memories serve as an argument for neglecting Yugonostalgia as a driving force behind these cultural texts:

Žiga Virč, of course, does not remember Tito's death. He was four when Yugoslavia disintegrated. No symbol of that country remained in his memory, neither a red scarf nor songs. All he remembers is a siren sound and running into the shelter during the ten-day war. He remembers that and the terrified look of the Territorial defense member, who was with him in the shelter, very well. As he ironically states, these are the only imprints of real Yugonostalgia that remained in his childhood memories as a four-year-old boy. (Milek 2016)

Vidojković, on the other hand, describes his childhood as a source of affection for Yugoslavia, simultaneously maintaining the view that this country was deeply wrong and troubled, which is proven by how it disintegrated.

My childhood was the nicest part of my life; I spent it in a country for little kids. Everything was idyllic. Adults hid from us that something was wrong, the school properly educated us, everything was as it was supposed to be, the music was great, movies and sports were as well, the army was strong, and everything was cool. However, in 1989, when I started masturbating and when my childhood ended, Yugoslavia started falling apart. This made my childhood memories even nicer. (Vidojković in Borković 2018)

---

8 For discussions of the meanings and potentials of nostalgia in the aftermath of socialism and Yugoslavia, see Kojanic (2015), Petrović (2010a; 2010b; 2014; 2016), Slavković and Đorgović (2017), and Velikonja (2008).

In another interview, Vidojković said he has “very warm feelings for his own childhood, and it would be nice if childhood had evolved into a nice socialist youth and then into a socialist middle age, but it did not happen” (Sabljaković 2017).

Despite their authors’ insistence on personal memories in describing their feelings for Yugoslavia, these two cultural texts offer a different script for emotional engagement—the one that points to the public and the collective agency and political imagination and thus cannot be reduced to typical tropes of longing from the time of one’s youth or having positive memories of one’s childhood. They address collective dreams through recognizable mythologized narratives of the nation’s greatness, victories and successes. Žiga Virč hints at the collective dream of “being something in the world” in an interview, emphasizing that

Yugoslavia has always had this weird, special position in a way in the minds of people here, this position of being a global player at that time because when Yugoslavia fell apart, all the republics became just classical normal countries. [...] I think that’s why people are so nostalgic about it. It could be just the propaganda that made it appear bigger, but certainly, Nixon came to Yugoslavia to discuss his thoughts on the relationship between Southeast Asia with Tito, or the Gulf countries at that time. Tito was Christ to everybody. One day he would go to North Korea, the next day he went to visit Poland. (Saito 2016)

The fateful plane crash in 1989 that alters the direction of history in *Thanks a Lot* is what enables a collective imagination of a different future. As Ana Miljački writes,

By eliminating the cabinet’s greedy political ambitions and jockeying for power in the aftermath of Tito’s death—which was historically followed by a dervish dance of comparatively merely life-size presidents rotating in from each of Yugoslavia’s six republics—Vidojković’s plane crash also invites readers to imagine the world cleared of the effects of some of the key



voices that historically fueled nationalisms from the highest governmental stages. (2018, 3)

This possibility to imagine the lost future as an alternative to the post-socialist present results in the joy the former Yugoslavs could immerse in through the immediate engagement with the film and the novel. This joy could emerge because of the non-factuality of the two narratives, as they could enjoy them unrestricted by the constraints usually imposed on them when expressing their emotional relationship with the socialist past. The non-factuality made them exempt from justifying their attachment to that history and allowed them to enjoy consuming it without engaging in a dialogue with hegemonic, normative, and often revisionist dominant interpretations of Yugoslavia's history in the public discourse of former Yugoslav societies, overshadowed by the country's disastrous end and by the global defeat of the political project of state socialism; they are also liberated from the self-justification and self-censorship such engagement usually implies.<sup>9</sup>

In line with prevalent negative assessments of Yugonostalgia, some researchers are prone to see this avoidance of confrontation with dominant interpretations of Yugoslav history as problematic and unproductive. For example, Maja Breznik and Rastko Močnik understand it as "shifting away from official interpretations without challenging it" (2022, 1062). There are, however, two aspects of the joy produced by the engagement with alternative histories of Yugoslavia that reveal joy as politically potent and relevant affective engagement that actually challenges the givenness of the post-socialist aftermath. The first aspect is closely related to the complicated relationship between the true and the real that I discussed earlier; the other concerns the political potential of joy and generally affective engagement with the possibility of a different end of the Yugoslav socialist project.

---

9 As I have written in my previous works, attempts to approach the Yugoslav socialist past positively (or even neutrally) in the public sphere are almost always followed by a rejection of Yugo-nostalgia and a self-defensive introductory phrase "I am/we are not nostalgic..." (Petrović 2013).

## Countering the Normative Gaze

The possibility of leaving the dichotomy of truthful vs. fake outside the picture offered by *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot* enabled former Yugoslavs not to shy away from the dominant narratives of the past but to actively oppose the normative, hegemonic regimes of remembering and legitimation. Enjoying alternative histories of socialist Yugoslavia as *possible* and *real*, they point to the necessity to open a space for the diversification of (hi)stories of Yugoslavia (see Petrović 2016), a space situated outside the teleological understanding of history (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2017), which in the case of socialist Yugoslavia (and state socialism in general) inevitably led to the end, defeat and demise and consequent “normalization” of European socialist societies, or they “come back home” to Europe, which is the metaphor frequently encountered in political discourses. With the global defeat of the state socialist projects, the “western myth of the inevitability of the victory over monolithic and oppressive communism” prevailed (Almond 2014, 113). One of the comments under a text about *Houston, We Have a Problem!* points to the mechanisms of erasure that enable this victorious narrative: *Whatever is true, it is apparent that mocking YU technology and economic power becomes stronger with the passage of time. In a hundred years, when there will be no live witnesses left, the common belief will be that there was no electricity in Yugoslavia and, of course, no planes. Everybody will happily “applaud the new world” in their blissful ignorance* (1984, 2016, March 4).

In the Yugoslav context, strongly marked by disastrous ethnic conflicts in which the country fell apart, the Yugoslav socialist past is not to be seen in any other way than as a prelude to the conflicts in the 1990s. In contrast, the present is seen exclusively as their aftermath. In the case of postcolonial societies, Nancy Rose Hunt identifies the same epistemic narrowing that catches these societies in the event-aftermath straightjacket (2016, 5). This narrow, reductionist gaze defines how the past can be viewed and regulates what is possible and acceptable in the present.

Insisting on factuality and truthfulness is not the way to challenge or alter such a normative and reductionist gaze. It became particularly apparent

in the reactions to *Houston, We Have a Problem!* of those commentators and reviewers who, differently from the majority of former Yugoslavs, took the dichotomy between the true and the fake as the most important one. Their quest to resolve the question of whether “Communist Yugoslavia Played a Secret Role in Putting a Man On The Moon” (Taylor 2012; Charney 2016) usually resorts to the classical Cold-War imagery of Yugoslavia (and socialist societies in general) as being under totalitarian rule and unable to produce anything that would compete with the West or have any significant role in the global arena. As a viewer of the film’s trailer wrote, “In 1961, Yugoslavia could not even produce a decent harvest” (Solash 2012); another internet commentator similarly pointed out that *Yugoslavs did not even have enough money for coffee and bananas* (ViskokTlak, 2016, May 5). Noah Charney, “an American historian living in former Yugoslavia” (as he describes himself in the text), similarly asserted

Yugoslavia never had the cash to really invest heavily into research, as much as the country’s longtime dictator Josip Broz Tito might have liked to outdo his Soviet arch-rival, Joseph Stalin. Yugoslavia struggled to sustain itself at all, and could have been considered a third-world country during the early days of the space race, relying heavily on loans from foreign powers, including the US. The idea that Yugoslavia could launch a space mission, when the country could barely feed its citizens, was pie-in-the-sky to begin with. (2016)

Such discourses on Yugoslavia as economically inefficient and incapable and a politically insignificant country led by a dictator expose the emotional attitudes towards the Yugoslav past as a sign of political immaturity, proof of dangerous, atavistic cultural attachments, false consciousness, and malady—strongly resonating with dominant readings of post-socialist nostalgia in general (see Gille 2010, 283; Todorova 2010, 2; Nadkarny and Shevchenko 2014, 63).

## Conclusion: The Power to Be Affected

Within the post-socialist context of the former Yugoslav societies, emotional attachments to the socialist past are also predominantly interpreted through these familiar registers of melancholia and nostalgia and are seen as politically unproductive and blocking any possibility for post-socialist subjects' agency. Branislav Dimitrijević describes the nostalgic post-socialist subject as longing “for the never-happened.” But this “never-happened,” writes Dimitrijević, “is not structured as some imagined future that is still-never-happened, but as an actual never-happening. This is why this subject is ideal for the current ideological conjuncture as s/he is neither the subject who remembers the past nor the subject who imagines the future” (Dimitrijević 2017, 39).

Contrary to Dimitrijević's assertion, as we could see in the case of the reception of *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot*, the “never-happening” can be constitutive of nostalgia and affective engagement also in situations in which these feelings do not result from post-socialist subjects' naivety, ideological blindness, or inability to separate the truth from the fake. Such views on post-socialist subjects, moreover, ignore not only the long-lasting history of thought about the political power of being affected Michael Hardt writes about (2015) but also the fact that this current ideological conjuncture overtly denies the post-socialist subjects the power to be affected and empowered, by their own socialist past, and more specifically by the most politically relevant aspects of that past, such as modernization, vertical mobility, the available education, healthcare, and social security. The consequence of this denial, as Boris Buden points out, is that the “social contradictions of post-communism, such as the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the dismantling of all forms of social solidarity, enormous social injustices and widespread suffering—they all remain affectively unoccupied [...] This social anesthesia is one of the most salient symptoms of post-communist transformation” (2012, 78).

Through the joy that results from immersing in the narratives about the past that never happened and the future that will not be happening but are nevertheless real in *Houston, We Have a Problem!* and *Thanks a Lot*, former

Yugoslavs recall—and are able to feel—the power to be affected by the promises of the collective socialist project. This joy offers them the agency to oppose the givenness of the current ideological conjuncture since enjoying an alternative past and future makes it possible to sense that a different present could also be possible.

## References

1984. 2016. "Film Houston, imamo problem! potuje na čislani festival Tribeca." Commentary on March 4. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsllo.si/kultura/film-in-tv/film-houston-imamo-problem-potuje-na-cislani-festival-tribeca/387369>.
- Almond, Mark. 2014. "1989. bez Gorbačova: šta bi bilo da se komunizam nije urušio?" *Gradac* 196–197: 113–127.
- Baym, Geoffrey. 2005. *Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Bernik, Tina. 2016. "Žiga Virc, režiser filma Houston, imamo problem!: 'Film lahko doživiš kot hvalospev Titu ali pa vidiš ogromno negativnih plati.'" *Dnevnik*. 25 April 2016. <https://www.dnevnik.si/1042734425>.
- Borković, Goran. 2018. "Jugoslavija je morala umrijeti, kad se ima u vidu kakva je sve bagra u njoj živjela." *Forum tjedni magazin*. 10 April 2018. <https://forum.tm/vijesti/jugoslavija-je-morala-umrijeti-kad-se-ima-u-vidu-kakva-je-sve-bagra-u-njoj-zivjela-6585>.
- Breznik, Maja, and Rastko Močnik. 2022. "Organized Memory and Popular Remembering: The Encounter of Yugonostalgia Theories with Socialism." *Memory Studies* 15 (5): 1055–1069. doi: 10.1177/17506980211049899.
- Buden, Boris. 2012. *Zona prelaska: O kraju postkomunizma*. Beograd: Fabrika Knjiga.
- Carr, Edward Hallett. 2018. *What Is History?* London: Penguin Books.
- Charney, Noah. 2016. "Did the Yugoslavs Help Put Apollo 11 on the Moon?" *Observer*. 20 June 2016. <https://observer.com/2016/06/did-the-yugoslavs-put-apollo-11-on-the-moon/>.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Čalić, Mari Žanin. 2013. *Istorija Jugoslavije u 20. veku*. Beograd: Clio.
- Dimitrijević, Branislav. 2017. "In-Between Utopia and Nostalgia or How the Worker Became Invisible on the Path from Shock-Worker to Consumer." In *Nostalgia on the Move*, edited by Mirjana Slavković and Marija Đorgović, 30–41. Belgrade: The Museum of Yugoslavia.

- elCARTEL. 2016. "Film Houston, imamo problem! potuje na članski festival Tribeca." Commentary on March 4. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsl.si/kultura/film-in-tv/film-houston-imamo-problem-potuje-na-clanski-festival-tribeca/387369>.
- Ferguson, Niall. 2014. "Virtualna istorija: ka 'haotičnoj' teoriji prošlosti." *Gradac 196–197*: 5–58.
- Ghamari-Tabrizi, Behrooz. 2016. *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution After the Enlightenment*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gille, Zsuzsa. 2010. "Postscript." In *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, 278–289. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. 2012. *Threads and Traces: True, False, Fictive*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hallenbeck. 2017. "Čast prvega slovenskega filma na Netflixu je pripadla filmu Houston, imamo problem!" Commentary on July 12. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsl.si/kultura/film-in-tv/cast-prvega-slovenskega-filma-na-netflixu-je-pripadla-filmu-houston-imamo-problem/427392>.
- Hardt, Michael. 2015. "The Power to Be Affected." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Special Issue: Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant, 28 (3): 215–222. doi: 10.1007/s10767-014-9191-x.
- Haugerud, Angelique, Dillon Mahoney, and Meghan Ference. 2012. "Watching *The Daily Show* in Kenya." *Identities 19* (2): 168–190. doi: 10.1080/1070289X.2012.672853.
- Hofman, Ana, ed. 2015a. "Music, Affect and Memory Politics in the Post-Yugoslav Space." *Southeastern Europe 39* (2). <https://www.schoeningh.de/view/journals/seeu/39/2/seeu.39.issue-2.xml>.
- Hofman, Ana. 2015b. "Introduction to the Co-Edited Issue 'Music, Affect and Memory Politics in the Post-Yugoslav Space.'" *Southeastern Europe 39* (2): 145–164. doi: 10.1163/18763332-03902001.
- "Houston, We Have a Problem." n.d. Documentary Campus. <https://www.documentary-campus.com/training/masterschool/houston-we-have-a-problem>.

- “Houston, We Have a Problem - Yugoslav Space Program: Myth or Reality?” n.d. Houston, We Have a Problem. <http://www.houstonfilm.net/>. Accessed 2 December 2022.
- Hunt, Nancy Rose. 2016. *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Jakovljević, Branislav. 2016. *Alienation Effects: Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia, 1945–91*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kavaliauskaitė, Jūratė. 2009. “Hybrid Entertainment Television: Viewership of the Lithuanian ‘Dviracio Sou.’” In *Permitted Laughter: Socialist, Post-Socialist and Never-Socialist Humour*, edited by A. Krikmann and Liisi Laineste, 99–124. Tartu: ELM Scholarly Press.
- Kern, Harm Rudolph. 2016. “A History That Never Happened: The Yugoslav Space Program.” *Balkanist*. 14 June 2016. <https://balkanist.net/a-history-that-never-happened-the-yugoslav-space-program/>.
- Kingstone. 2017. “Film tedna: Houston, imamo problem!” Commentary on April 20. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsllo.si/kultura/film-in-tv/film-tedna-houston-imamo-problem/420207>.
- Klumbytė, Neringa. 2014. “Of Power and Laughter: Carnavalesque Politics and Moral Citizenship in Lithuania.” *American Ethnologist* 41 (3): 473–490. doi: 10.1111/amet.12088.
- Kojanic, Ognjen. 2015. “Nostalgia as a Practice of the Self in Post-Socialist Serbia.” *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 57 (3–4): 195–212. doi: 10.1080/00085006.2015.1090760.
- Kosmos, Iva. 2016. “Vesoljska retrotopija.” *LUD literatura*. 1 June 2016. <https://www.ludliteratura.si/esej-kolumna/vesoljska-retrotopija/>.
- Lalatović, Jelena. 2016. “Alternativna istorija – tradicionalni idenditet.” *Reč* 86 (32): 249–258.
- luckyss. 2016. “Film Houston, imamo problem! potuje na čislani festival Tribeca.” Commentary on March 4. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsllo.si/kultura/film-in-tv/film-houston-imamo-problem-potuje-na-cislani-festival-tribeca/387369>.
- malikaliber. 2017. “Čast prvega slovenskega filma na Netflixu je pripadla filmu Houston, imamo problem!” Commentary on July 12. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsllo.si/kultura/film-in-tv/film-houston-imamo-problem-potuje-na-cislani-festival-tribeca/387369>.



- rtvslo.si/kultura/film-in-tv/cast-prvega-slovenskega-filma-na-netflixu-je-  
pripadla-filmu-houston-imamo-problem/427392.
- Marković, Predrag J., and Čedomir Antić. 2016. *Alternativna istorija Srbije*.  
Belgrade: Nedeljnik.
- Milek, Vesna. 2016. "Žiga Virč: 'Pa pozdravite gospo Tito.'" *Delo*. 6 May 2016.  
<https://old.delo.si/sobotna/tretji-kamen-od-lune.html>.
- Miljački, Ana. 2018. "Once Upon a Time in Yugoslavia." *The Avery Review* 35.  
<https://www.averyreview.com/issues/35/once-upon-a-time>.
- Mochiach, Nachum. 2016. "The Reality Behind the Reality." *Fipresci*. 2016.  
<https://fipresci.org/report/the-reality-behind-the-reality/>.
- Molč, Noelle J. 2013. "Trusted Puppets, Tarnished Politicians: Humor and  
Cynicism in Berlusconi's Italy." *American Ethnologist* 40 (2): 288–299. doi:  
10.1111/amet.12021.
- Nadkarny, Maya, and Olga Shevchenko. 2014. "The Politics of Nostalgia in the  
Aftermath of Socialism's Collapse: A Case of Comparative Analysis." In *Anthropology and Nostalgia*, edited by Olivia Angé and David Berliner, 61–95.  
New York: Berghahn.
- Petrović, Tanja. 2010a. "Nostalgia for the JNA? Remembering the Army in  
the Former Yugoslavia." In *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, edited by Maria  
Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, 61–81. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Petrović, Tanja. 2010b. "When We Were Europe: Socialist Workers in Serbia  
and Their Nostalgic Narratives – the Case of the Cable Factory Workers in  
Jagodina." In *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, edited by  
Maria Todorova, 127–153. New York: Social Science Research Council.
- Petrović, Tanja. 2013. "The Past That Binds Us: Yugonostalgia as the Politics  
of the Future." In *Transcending Fratricide: Political Mythologies, Reconciliations, and the Uncertain Future in the Former Yugoslavia*, edited by Srđa  
Pavlović and Marko Živković, 129–147. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Petrović, Tanja. 2014. "Mourning the Lost Modernity: Industrial Labor,  
Europe, and (Post) Yugoslav Post-Socialism." In *Mirroring Europe: Ideas of  
Europe and Europeanization in Balkan Societies*, edited by Tanja Petrović,  
91–113. Leiden: Brill.

- Petrović, Tanja. 2015. "Serbia in the Mirror: Parodying Political and Media Discourses." *Slavic Review* 74 (2): 288–310. doi: 10.5612/slavicreview.74.2.288.
- Petrović, Tanja. 2016. "Towards an Affective History of Yugoslavia." *Filozofija i Društvo* 27 (3): 504–520. doi: 10.2298/FID1603504P.
- Petrović, Tanja. 2018. "Political Parody and the Politics of Ambivalence." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (1): 201–216. doi: 10.1146/annurev-anthro-102215-100148.
- Petrović, Tanja. 2021. "Workers, Culture, Infrastructure." In *On Factories and Workers: Industrial Heritage in Serbia*, edited by Slobodanka Šibalić and Aleksandra Momčilović Jovanović, 60–69. Beograd: Museum of Science and Technology/Museum of Yugoslavia.
- "PROTI TITU IN TITOVU KULTURI." 2016. *Peticija.Online*. 30 March 2016. [https://www.peticija.online/proti\\_titu\\_in\\_titovu\\_kulturi](https://www.peticija.online/proti_titu_in_titovu_kulturi).
- Puljarević, Sašo. 2022. "Spomin in travma v postjugoslovanskem romanu." Masters thesis, Ljubljana: University of Ljubljana, the Faculty of Arts.
- Sabljaković, Una. 2017. "E baš vam hvala' – novi način jugonostalgije." *DW*. 3 December 2017. <https://www.dw.com/bs/e-ba%C5%A1-vam-hvala-novi-na%C4%8Din-jugonostalgije/a-41595634>.
- Saito, Stephen. 2016. "Tribeca '16 Interview: Žiga Virč on Rewriting History in 'Houston, We Have A Problem.'" *The Moveable Fest*. 21 April 2016. <https://moveablefest.com/ziga-virc-houston-we-have-problem/>.
- Schapiro, Michael. 2016. "Žiga Virč." *Full Stop*. 22 April 2016. <http://www.full-stop.net/2016/04/22/interviews/michael-schapiro/ziga-virc/>.
- Scott, David. 2014. *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Scribner, Charity. 2003. *Requiem for Communism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Slavković, Mirjana, and Marija Đorgović, eds. 2017. *Nostalgia on the Move*. Belgrade: Museum of Yugoslavia.
- Slovenec5. 2016. "Ko naletiš na arhivske posnetke Tita v kopalkah, ti je jasno, da morajo iti v film." Commentary on May 5. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsllo.si/kultura/film-in-tv/ko-naletis-na-arhivske-posnetke-tita-v-kopalkah-ti-je-jasno-da-morajo-iti-v-film/392222>.

- Solash, Richard. 2012. "Experts Unconvinced By Trailer Claiming Secret U.S.-Yugoslav Space Pact." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 January 2012. [https://www.rferl.org/a/video\\_claims\\_secret\\_us-yugoslavia\\_space\\_pact/24456127.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/video_claims_secret_us-yugoslavia_space_pact/24456127.html).
- Struna, Sanja. 2016. "In Conversation with Žiga Virč." *View of the Arts*. 9 April 2016. <https://viewofthearts.com/2016/04/09/in-conversation-with-ziga-virc/>.
- Tatalović, Mićo, and Nenad Jarić Dauenhauer. 2019. "Physics in the Former Yugoslavia: From Socialist Dreams to Capitalist Realities." *Physics Today* 72 (8): 30–36. doi: 10.1063/PT.3.4269.
- Taylor, Adam. 2012. "This Documentary Claims That Communist Yugoslavia Played A Secret Role In Putting A Man On The Moon." *Insider*. 18 January 2012. <https://www.businessinsider.com/yugoslavia-moon-jfk-space-tito-2012-1>.
- Todorova, Maria. 2010. "Introduction: From Utopia to Propaganda and Back." In *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille, 1–13. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Velikonja, Mitja. 2008. *Titostalgia: A Study of Nostalgia for Josip Broz*. Ljubljana: Peace Institute.
- Vidojković, Marko. 2017. *E baš vam hvala: Smrt Bandi – sloboda Jugoslaviji*. Beograd: Laguna.
- "Virtualna istorija: Da se dogodilo drugačije." 2014. *Gradac 196–197* (special issue).
- Viskok Tlak. 2016. "Ko naletiš na arhivske posnetke Tita v kopalkah, ti je jasno, da morajo iti v film." Commentary on May 5. *rtvslo.si*. <https://www.rtvsl.si/kultura/film-in-tv/ko-naletis-na-arhivske-posnetke-tita-v-kopalkah-ti-je-jasno-da-morajo-iti-v-film/392222>.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- Virč, Žiga, dir. 2016. *Houston, We Have a Problem!* 1h 28min.
- Branković, Nikola. 2009. "Safet Isović - Mujo Kuje Konja Po Mjesecu 1969 (Jazz Fest. Version)." YouTube, uploaded 9 December 2009. Video, 3:14. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0zYK6ZuxcE>.