Activist Aesthetics in the Post-Socialist Balkans: 

Resistance, Rebellion, Emancipation

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Introduction: activist aesthetics after Yugoslav socialism

Over the last decade, across what used to be Yugoslavia, there has been an upsurge in social and political activism. These movements vocally bring into question both the neoliberal capitalist transformation of post-socialist societies and the liberal democratic political system judged as corrupt and non-representative. This double critique in the post-socialist context, especially in the post-Yugoslav and post-conflict space, is often followed by an examination of and engagement with the socialist past and its heritage and, generally, progressive and leftist ideas.¹ Yet, this double critique cannot be separated from a double defeat: the defeat of the revolutionary Left in the West followed by the rise of neoliberalism (since the late 1970s), and the final defeat of socialist regimes around

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1989. In the Yugoslav case, this defeat was also followed by the violent disintegration of the country.

In this article, I examine cases of what I will call activist aesthetics in the acts, practices, and works related to contemporary political and social activism\(^2\) of progressive and left-wing movements and groups in the post-Yugoslav societies. Although activist aesthetics are not limited to artistic practices, the focus here is on the use of art and artistic forms. In order to understand the variety of activist aesthetics in the post-socialist Balkans – whether contemporary art, performance, choir recitals, theatre, poetry, mural painting, cinema, or protest art – and the specific influence of socialist legacy, I will build upon Hans-Thies Lehmann’s distinction between the aesthetics of resistance and the aesthetics of rebellion.

Lehmann made this distinction (without further elaboration) in his half-hour public lecture titled Aesthetics of Rebellion? Crossovers between Politics and Art in New Social Movements,\(^3\) in which he tried to position contemporary theatre vis-à-vis new social movements and to reflect on the relationship between art and politics in general. He referred to Peter Weiss’ monumental The Aesthetics of Resistance, a novel about the role of art in resistance and emancipatory struggles; and more concretely, about the resistance of a group of German workers against the Nazi regime, resulting in their capture and brutal death.\(^4\) For Lehmann, the aesthetics of resistance imply ‘a memory of a possible future of the past’. In other words, the aesthetics of resistance is ‘a memory of a

\(^2\) My understanding of activism draws upon Engin Isin’s definition of ‘activist citizenship’. See: Engin F. Isin, ‘Citizenship in Flux: The Figure of Activist Citizen’, Subjectivity 29, 2009


\(^4\) Peter Weiss, The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume 1, a novel, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2005
resistance’, and of its hypothetical nature and its possibilities.⁵ Lehmann contrasts the aesthetics of resistance with the aesthetics of rebellion, in which ‘art directly participates in a political movement’. Again, ‘in the aesthetics of resistance political consciousness reflects in an artistic way its doubts, its history, its potential failure, the unanswerable questions that would burden every political action’,⁶ whereas in the aesthetics of rebellion, art is at the same time in the service of a movement but also facilitates the articulation of political struggle.

I suggest three additions to Lehmann’s two aesthetics that will help us analyse post-socialist and post-Yugoslav examples. First, one must account for cases where the aesthetics of resistance appear together with the aesthetics of rebellion, or, in other words, where acts or works of art combine the characteristics of both aesthetics. My second addition is concerned with the risk of aestheticisation of both resistance and rebellion,⁷ understood here as those practices that turn past experiences of resistance into pseudo-political statements – or worse, into commodities for cultural consumerism or entertainment – stripping them of their historic and political content (their realised and unrealised potentialities) and thus of their contemporary relevance. This may come, for example, in the form of T-shirts – the most famous featuring Che’s portrait – musical renditions of revolutionary songs, slogans, street art, and various other artworks that refer (sometimes in a humorous way) to past resistances but void them of their present political potential and turn them into objects of social distinction, cultural interest, lifestyle accessories, and entertainment.

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⁵ Lehmann, Ästhetik, op cit, pp 18–19  
⁶ Ibid, p 23  
⁷ On the complex relationship between art activism and aestheticisation, see Boris Groys, ‘On Art Activism’, e-flux journal, 56, June 2014
However, and this is my third addition, one has to allow for different interpretations of works and acts depending on the context and events. To use the previous example, the same *aestheticised* Che Guevara T-shirt will have different meanings at a beach party, a concert, a TV appearance, a political meeting, or an occupation or encampment.

**Socialist heritage: from aestheticisation to resistance**

The tension between aestheticisation and the aesthetics of resistance are exemplified in the phenomenon of so-called self-organised activist choirs that have mushroomed across the Balkans over the last decade. *Horkestar* (Belgrade), *Raspeani Skopjani* (Skopje), Škart (Belgrade), *Zbor Praksa* (Pula), the all-female choir *Kombinat* (Ljubljana), the lesbian-feminist choirs *Le zbor* (Zagreb) and *Le wHore* (Belgrade), and the antifascist choir *Uho* (Belgrade) – but also *29 November*, formed by ex-Yugoslavs in Vienna – are all intrigued by and interested in revolutionary and socialist ideology and its cultural products. They often perform classic revolutionary and workers’ songs, many of which once formed the repertoire of the international socialist movement and the Yugoslav socialist regime. The intention is to reaffirm negated and marginalised socialist values in the context of capitalist transformation, but also to give voice to feminist, LGBT, and other minority voices in societies dominated by conservative-nationalist ideologies.

These choirs often perform at popular venues and festivals where their political message is easily lost due to the distance that the choirs themselves or their spectators continue to maintain toward the region’s socialist heritage. This usually means displaying
left-wing iconography (the red star, red scarfs, socialist flags, etc.) but, at the same time, ignoring the ideology behind communist-led resistance and socialist regimes. A strong renewed interest in everything socialist may make these performances attractive and even ‘cool’ for those involved in these choirs and for the fans who follow them, without necessarily engaging the performers or the audience in a political and ideological positioning.

On the other hand, the re-actualisation of partisan and revolutionary songs could have strong political potential if linked to social and political movements. The Slovenian choir *Kombinat*, for instance, participated in the massive anti-corruption protests that took place in that country in 2013. And a recent example from Bosnia and Herzegovina confirms that the public performance of partisan songs can even be seen as a subversive act. During a commemoration of the 73rd anniversary of the famous Kozara Offensive in WWII, a group of leftist activists from Banja Luka sang partisan songs – specifically, those of the partisans who fought the Nazis and their local collaborators in that very battle – during the playing of the anthems of Serbia and Bosnia’s constitutive unit the Republika Srpska. The act was indeed subversive, and it targeted the conservative, clerical, and nationalist appropriation of that important event in the history of Yugoslav resistance to both the Nazis and their local nationalist collaborators. Police immediately intervened and removed activists from the site.  

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To illustrate the aesthetics of resistance in the post-Yugoslav space, I will now turn to three examples: theatre performances by Serbian director Bojan Đorđev, murals painted by the Belgrade-based KURS collective, and artistic interventions by Croatian artist Igor Grubić.

Đorđev’s play *This is not red, this is blood*, which premiered at CZKD in Belgrade on 1 November 2014, is entirely composed of socialist, revolutionary, and partisan poetry; testifying to the revolutionary struggles in the first half of the 20th century and, particularly, to the four-year long war of liberation fought against Nazi occupation. As such, it is an example of the aesthetics of Yugoslav socialist and partisan resistance without the slightest irony. On the contrary, Đorđev carefully composed the script from old, official anthologies of revolutionary poetry. These anthologies were once produced in huge print runs; they were a part of school curricula and were featured in public ceremonies that celebrated the communist movement, the partisan victory, and thus the socialist regime itself. The anthologies are arranged chronologically, starting with pre-war poetry, then moving into the period of the liberation war, and then into the post-war moment and the realisation of the efforts and sacrifices that made a better (socialist) society possible. In his play, Đorđev reverses the chronology, ending with ‘a pre-revolutionary tension that we project into our present’.¹⁰ He does not counterpoise the past socialist regime with the new capitalist one, but brings us back to the pre-WWII capitalist system as reflective of our predicament today. In this way, the poetry he presents invites us to critically rethink our current struggles in conversation with these past struggles that were, eventually, defeated by the post-socialist capitalist restoration.

For, though the project was indeed defeated, its legacy still indicates a path to follow: ‘Yugoslavia as past contains more future than our present moment.’ A similar approach was adopted by Đorđev in his new play, *Future Read in Concrete and Stone*, which premiered in Belgrade on 25 January 2016. In this performance, he openly invited the audience to collectively perform, on stage, and to reflect upon all the potential messages that monuments to the partisan struggle hold for us today in our search for a new radical imagination and for emancipatory practices.

A comparable exploration of Yugoslav socialist history is at the centre of the KURS artistic collective’s murals. Like Đorđev, their mural ‘Struggle, Knowledge, Equality’ (painted by Miloš Miletić and Mirjana Radovanović) puts a focus on the student movement in the inter-war Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The mural was inaugurated in 2014 on Belgrade’s Students’ Remembrance Day, 4 April, established in memory of a student protest on the same day in 1936, when a protestor was killed. The mural was inspired by the cover page of a 1923 issue of the *Young Worker [Mladi Radnik]* journal. In it, two figures (female and male) each hold a flag – the male holds a red one, across which two sparrows carry a sash with the slogan ‘struggle, knowledge, equality;’ and the female holds a blue one, on which the artists wrote, in red letters, a poem titled *Poetry will be written by everyone*, by Serbian poet Branko Miljković. Its concluding verses are widely known across the region: ‘But / Will Freedom be able to sing / As slaves used to sing about it.’ The collective notes that ‘the mural is there primarily as a reminder of the student struggles in the 1930s, but also to motivate young people to fight for their rights and position in society’. The mural thus draws parallels between the situation and

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struggles of students in the 1930s and those faced by students today (poverty, high tuition rates, unemployment, emigration). These topics are directly related to a wave of student mobilisations and occupations of universities in the post-Yugoslav region (to which I will return below). In this example, one can see how the aesthetics of (past) resistance verges toward the aesthetics of (present) rebellion.

Miletić and Radovanović also painted a mural celebrating the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade. It depicts a map of military operations that were undertaken to liberate the Yugoslav capital, coupled with a stylized image showing Belgrade citizens greeting their liberators. At the bottom is a quote from the memoirs of a partisan fighter, on the harshness of the battle and the support partisan units received from citizens. The KURS collective emphasises that this mural is not only meant to celebrate an important moment in history, but that ‘it should also remind us about the long struggle fought by progressive forces for the enjoyment of liberties and for a more egalitarian society’. In addition, it is also intended to oppose an anti-communist historical revisionism; and notably, the anti-fascist choir Uho performed at the mural’s opening exhibition. The message in this case is again similar to Đorđev’s – the KURS collective’s aesthetics of resistance express a strong critique of what came after socialism, and seek to counter it by re-invigorating the memory of the anti-fascist struggle in Yugoslavia and the socialist revolution it brought about.

It is exactly this same intention that motivated the artistic intervention ‘Scarves and Monuments’ by contemporary Croatian artist Igor Grubić, who is known for critically- and socially-engaged performances that target elements of the capitalist

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transformation (such as the privatisation of factories, commercialisation, and consumerism) and often reference revolutionary theories and practices. In ‘Scarves and Monuments’, Grubić placed red scarves on monuments to revolutionary and partisan heroes that were erected in Zagreb during socialism. Thousands of these monuments were destroyed across Croatia in the post-socialist period, especially during the war in the 1990s. ‘By placing scarves on monuments, I aimed at reviving them and giving them an aura of active fighters in our everyday life.’ His aim was also to bring about an ‘awakening and questioning [of] our cultural and political heritage’. In other words, allowing these ‘relics’ of the socialist past to speak, and not only about their own prior struggles. By tying red scarves over their faces, Grubić made these figures appear almost like our contemporaries, easily reminiscent of the Zapatistas or masked leftist militants.

Alain Badiou’s distinction between what he calls ‘official’ and ‘militant’ art can help us interpret the works by Đorđev, KURS, and Grubić and, generally, to understand the post-socialist aesthetics of resistance. For Badiou, official art is ‘an art of the result, of what has been victoriously decided’. Here he refers to the official art of socialist regimes or of victorious revolutions and struggles that glorify their achievements. On the other hand, Badiou describes militant art as ‘an art of the contradiction between the affirmative nature of principles and the dubious result of struggle’. Translated into Lehmann’s terms, official art would represent the aesthetics of resistance, based on victory and not on defeat as in Peter Weiss’s novel, whereas militant art would respond to

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13 Igor Grubić, 366 ritualja oslobađanja (366 Liberation Rituals), KUD INA, Galerija Miroslav Kraljević, DeLvE, Zagreb, 2009, p 61
15 Ibid
the aesthetics of rebellion, which affirms the ideals behind struggles but cannot avoid their contradictory results and reality.

However, all of the works I analyse here are a bit more complicated than this duality implies. All of them refer to the (past) official and victorious art of a (now) defeated regime; meaning, we are dealing with what appears to us now, after the end of socialism, as an aesthetics of a once victorious resistance that was eventually defeated with the end of socialist regimes and the capitalist restoration through anti-communist purges of national history. Affirming the ideals that drove a former political regime develops as a subversive critique of the current liberal-democratic and capitalist regime – more often than not, coupled with a nationalist and conservative rewriting of history – that has delegitimised the partisan victory and annulled the achievements of socialism.

What used to be official art becomes, under the current circumstances, a militant art that reflects upon a historic victory and post-socialist defeat on the one hand, and upon our present situation and possible resistances on the other.

**From the aesthetics of resistance to the aesthetics of rebellion**

One could conclude that the aesthetics of resistance always flirts with the aesthetics of rebellion, or with our present situation. Furthermore, one can clearly detect when an aesthetics of resistance meets a concrete struggle and thus merges with an aesthetics of rebellion. This occurs when encounters with past struggles enter into dialogue with or directly support those in the present. To illustrate this, let’s examine the 1968 student protests in Belgrade, when leftist youth rose up against a socialist regime
they perceived as too authoritarian and bureaucratic. At one point during the demonstrations, actor Stevo Žigon addressed the crowd. At the time, he was playing Robespierre in Georg Büchner’s *Danton’s Death*, which premiered at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in 1963; his speech to the students was actually Robespierre’s monologue from that play, and in it, the famous revolutionary lashes out against all those who have betrayed the Revolution and for whom ‘the republic has been speculation and the revolution trade!’ The response of the crowd was so immediate and enthusiastic that one doubts they actually recognised the speech as a dramatic monologue, with students applauding approvingly and recognising Žigon’s words (well, those of Büchner’s character) as an open critique of the socialist regime in place, its upper strata (the so-called ‘red bourgeoisie’), its bureaucrats, and their hypocrisy; in short, all those who had betrayed the revolution.

Lehmann himself has referred to the same play, pointing out that *Danton’s Death* was Büchner’s own aesthetics of resistance and, as such, an invitation to reflect upon the situation in the 1830s. Around the same time, Büchner also wrote a pamphlet against social injustice, *The Hessian Courier*, which Lehmann cites as an example of the aesthetics of rebellion. Within our theoretical framework, the staging of *Danton’s Death* in Belgrade in 1963 could be seen, at best, as balancing between aestheticisation (meant for theatre consumption without an obvious relation to the social and political reality) and the aesthetics of resistance (reflecting on the old revolution as well as on the

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16 The event was filmed and later appeared in a documentary by Želimir Žilnik dedicated to the 1968 movement in Yugoslavia, *Lipanjska gibanja* (The June Movements). Žigon’s speech is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4ST_oRflw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4ST_oRflw) (accessed 31 July 2017)
18 Lehmann, *Ästhetik*, op cit, p 23
revolutionary path to socialism). It was the unpredictable events of 1968 that compelled Žigon to leave the theatre and perform Büchner’s Robespierre at an activist rally; and this context turned his monologue into a political intervention – both protesting against and critiquing the current socialist regime – and thus also into an example of the aesthetics of rebellion. I will now turn to three works that, in my view, productively combine both aesthetics in the post-socialist and post-Yugoslav context.

Immediately after the eruption of protests in Bosnia in February 2014 – in the year when the world commemorated the centenary of WWI, triggered by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo – Davor Krvavac, in collaboration with Darjan Bilić, created a poster, showing footsteps and the following inscription: *From this spot on 7 February 2014 by throwing a stone an unidentified individual expressed people’s protest against tyranny and our peoples’ century-old aspiration to freedom.* A picture of scissors indicates that the poster can be cut into two: the lower part with the footsteps is to be placed on the pavement, and the upper part with the inscription on a wall above the footsteps.

The poster by Krvavac and Bilić is actually a pastiche of the famous monument to Gavrilo Princip, which was built by Sarajevo painter and sculptor Vojo Dimitrijević in 1949 on the very spot where Princip shot the Archduke. Dimitrijević inscribed the monument, above where Princip’s footsteps were pressed into the concrete: *From this spot on 28 June 1914 by firing a shot Gavrilo Princip expressed people’s protest against tyranny and our peoples’ century-old aspiration to freedom.* This unusual monument, at odds with the artistic practices of the communist regime, itself presents a certain aesthetics of resistance. (Though an unusual conceptual work, it still belongs to the
‘official’ art of the time). By highlighting the first day of the 2014 protests in Sarajevo, when protestors threw stones at administrative buildings and police, and offering a pastiche of Dimitrijević’s monument, Kravac and Bilić blended a reference to past resistance (as Princip’s act was once officially interpreted and is still seen as such by many) with Dimitrijević’s own aesthetics of resistance. At the same time, they offered strong aesthetic support for the ongoing rebellion.

Another group of activists – most of whom participated in those same protests and plenums in 2014 – interrupted the official WWI centennial ceremony held later in the year and attended by local and European leaders. They wore masks of Princip’s face and displayed signs reading ‘We live again under the occupation’. Refusing to portray Princip as an assassin and terrorist, these Sarajevo protesters see him as a symbol of resistance against foreign (at the time, Austro-Hungarian) occupation and of social justice; his anarchist and socialist sentiments corresponding well with their objections against social inequalities and poverty in today’s Bosnia.

A second example comes again from the work of Igor Grubić. During the student occupation of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb in 2009, he created an artistic intervention (in collaboration with Vladimir Tatomir) titled ‘Thin Red Thread’ to support the occupation and the struggle of students for free and publicly-funded education. Grubić connected the building of the Faculty, by thin red threads, to a nearby monument to Croatian 19th-century poet Silvije Strahimir Kranjčević, erected in 1962 and sculpted by Tomislav Ostoja. Kranjčević and his poetry are usually associated with youthful rebellion and the struggle for national rights (under foreign domination, again, Austro-Hungarian). The star-shaped monument represents Kranjčević as a precursor to national
and social emancipation, as he was widely seen in the socialist period. Thus, again, as in the case of Dimitrijević’s Princip, one can see a socialist interpretation of past struggles (which were not necessarily fought as socialist) that paved the way to revolution. Not only did Grubić use red threads, but he also tagged an inscription to the bottom of the monument – a verse by Kranjčević: ‘You will die once you start doubting your own ideals’.

Ostoja’s aesthetics of resistance, and his representation of Kranjčević as symbol of resistance that was victoriously fulfilled in socialism, were brought back to life by Grubić – and re-interpreted – through a direct connection with the 2009 student rebellion. In Grubić’s own words, the red threads represented ‘the forces leading to the student revolution’. Although he claims the colour red ‘was not chosen as the carrier of ideological associations’, this is hard to believe. It is precisely the colour red that places the student movement in the clear line of historic progressive and left-wing movements. The verse Grubić places at the bottom of the monument therefore comes as a warning to young students not to betray their rebellion at a later stage in life. I would read it also as a commentary, intentional or nor, on the socialist regime’s defeat. Indeed, the regime died as a result of doubting or betraying its own ideals. The verse can be viewed further, again regardless of the artist’s intention, as a commentary on Tomislav Ostoja’s work as well. Ostoja built many monuments under socialism; yet, in his post-socialist phase, he embraced conservative and religious nationalism as the new ‘official’ art of the post-socialist regime.

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19 Grubić, 366 Rituals, op cit, p 177
Finally, a third example is the mural titled ‘Factories to the Workers’, painted in the self-managed ITAS-Prvomajska factory in Ivanec (Croatia) by the KURS collective – which shifted, in this work, from the aesthetics of resistance to the aesthetics of rebellion. The mural represents the factory’s workers, who occupied the bankrupt facility neglected by the owner, and re-started production. The famous socialist slogan ‘Factories to the Workers’ celebrates their achievement, and asserts the principle that factories should belong to workers, but also refers to the Yugoslav self-management system under which workers actually did own their factories (this ownership was mostly taken from workers during privatisation campaigns in the 1990s and 2000s). In the words of the collective, ‘this intervention goes against contemporary perceptions of the mural as a means of aestheticisation and decoration. It is not a romanticisation of the ITAS workers’ struggle, but becomes its constitutive part’.21 The self-management of workers, once the official ideology of Yugoslavia, becomes rebellion under capitalist conditions.

**The aesthetics of rebellion: from protests to occupations**

*Protests*

The aesthetics of rebellion is embedded in the public actions of what I call the post-Yugoslav ‘new left’.22 There are three major activities (which are sometimes combined) in which one can recognise this new left: struggles for the commons or against the privatisation of common and public goods, such as urban spaces and cultural or natural

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22 See Štiks, ‘New Left’, op cit, pp 135–146
resources; occupations of public spaces (most notably of universities in defence of free education and against its commercialisation); and, finally, the emergence of plenums or citizens’ assemblies as a form of horizontal democratic participation.

The use of artistic, musical and literary forms, especially performance, play, songs, carnival, and visual art, has always been part of social movements. In the post-socialist context, this is particularly visible within commons movements in a struggle against enclosures, privatisations, and real estate development. Well-known examples include ‘The Right to the City’ movement against development of parts of Varšavska street and Flower Square (Cvjetni trg) in Zagreb; protests for the preservation of Picin Park in Banja Luka and Peti Park in Belgrade, in both cases opposing their transformation into building sites; the ‘Srd is ours’ movement against the development of a golf resort on a hill in Dubrovnik; and, finally, the ‘Ne da(vi)mo Beograd’ (Don’t Drown Belgrade) movement against the massive real-estate Belgrade Waterfront project on the Sava riverbank.

During protests in Zagreb, ‘The Right to the City’ movement collaborated with Green Action to stage several performances to denounce the city-level corruption that had allowed private interests to flourish at the expense of urban common goods, such as access to public space. The decision to cut off half of a downtown street to build an underground parking garage for a nearby development that was itself controversial triggered anger and indignation. Among many actions, a performance titled ‘The Burial of Public Interest’ in that very garage built on Varšavska street, as well as a makeshift ‘Trojan Horse’ sculpture, are prime examples of the aesthetics of rebellion.

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On 31 March 2011, a huge coffin draped in the flag of the City of Zagreb was carried to the entrance of the Varšavska parking garage on the shoulders of activists. When the flag was ceremoniously removed from the coffin, large black lettering was revealed, reading *Javni interes* (Public Interest). The activists then threw the coffin down into the subterranean depths of the garage. In early February of that year, the same group had also created a huge Trojan Horse sculpture, which was brought to Varšavska street as symbol of how the public interest had been betrayed and a warning that the proposed development project was another Trojan Horse, and one that would eventually destroy the city if allowed to go forward. Police immediately demolished the Trojan Horse; but in a curious development, the city government later erected its own ‘flowery’ horse on that very site, as part of a public consultation project that invited citizens to post suggestions to a mailbox installed inside. This cynical re-appropriation of the Trojan Horse symbol, and mockery of public consultation and participation, demanded a response. The ‘flowery’ horse was firebombed several times, and rebuilt several times, in a sort of cat-and-mouse game between anonymous activists and the city government.

The ‘Ne da(vimo) Beograd’ initiative has employed similar tactics, meant to raise awareness of the corruption that is linked to urban development and privatisation. The Belgrade Waterfront project was initiated by the Serbian government in cooperation with a developer said to be from the United Arab Emirates. Although the real source of funding is unclear, as are the true costs and benefits for the city, the government has made this its major investment project – altering the general urban plan, evicting inhabitants from the area, and drawing from its own budget to clear the building site.

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Activists filed numerous complaints, to no avail, before turning to play-like disruption strategies. The name Ne da(vimo) Beograd can be understood as ‘We Defend Belgrade’ but also as ‘Don’t drown Belgrade’, so in November 2014, activists organised ‘Operation Lifebelt’ (*Operacija Šlauf*), distributing beach balls and inflatable rings to members of the city’s planning commission. (The commission eventually rejected all complaints and green lighted the project.) Later, at a parliamentary debate on *lex specialis* for the project, activists brought a huge yellow rubber duck, both to ridicule the ‘waterfront’ project and as a pun on the word *patka*, which means ‘duck’ but also ‘hoax’. This duck soon became the symbol of the protest, and the movement only intensified after demolition of the last buildings on the building site. Indeed, an unknown, masked group carried out final demolitions on the night of 25 April 2016, and police ignored calls to intervene. The anger of citizens was soon expressed in a series of massive marches through Belgrade in 2016 and 2017; and the duck started wearing a mask.

*Occupations*

Student occupations have occurred in almost all the post-Yugoslav states, with major occupations at universities in Zagreb (2009), Belgrade (2011 and 2014), Ljubljana (2011), and Skopje (2015). These occupations, almost as a rule, involve a recognisable aesthetics of resistance that refers to earlier student movements, and somewhat unavoidably to Paris in May 1968. This aesthetics of resistance involves slogans, quotes, graffiti, and rhetoric centred on the rejection of authority and on the political subjectivation of the student (youth) population. The major literary reference is often Bertolt Brecht, and quotes of his,
such as ‘When injustice becomes law, rebellion becomes obligation’ and ‘What is a robbing of a bank in comparison with establishing one,’ are often shared among occupiers.

Brecht’s poem ‘Don’t let them seduce you’ became a sort of unofficial anthem of the Zagreb occupation of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. Famous singer Ibrica Jusić, now in his seventies, came out to support the occupation and sang this song at an improvised concert. Its translation into Croatian, by Marxist philosopher Darko Suvin, had been included on Ibrica’s 1978 LP. Writer Marko Pogačar, one of the student activists who assisted with the concert, wrote:

‘[It] was a sort of unplanned, spontaneous mise-en-abyme of the whole student struggle. It was a symbolically charged point equal to that Danton’s Death forty years earlier [in 1968] and some 400kms to the East [Belgrade]; the cathartic point confirming our conviction that some walls one has to destroy with one’s own head.’

This comment captures how contemporary struggles create their own genealogies and how an echo of that famous Robespierre’s monologue from Belgrade in 1968 can be found in Brecht’s verses performed in Zagreb in 2009.

There are three documentary films dedicated to the rebellion of Croatian students: The Land of Knowledge by Saša Ban (2011), Blockade by Igor Bezinović (2012), and Plenumovie by Marta Batinić, Sanja Kapidžić, and Ana Jurčić (2014). All explore the student movement from the inside. Igor Bezinović and Saša Ban both filmed during the two occupations in Zagreb in 2009, and their works contain a sense of political urgency and even of agitation. Plenumovie was inspired by a shorter student occupation that took

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26 Ibrica Jusić’s rendition of Brecht’s poem is also used as commentary in the final sequences of the documentary Blockade by Igor Bezinović (2012).
place at the University in Rijeka. It uses archival footage, together with interviews of the participants, whose melancholic feelings about the old days of struggle – characteristic of the aesthetics of resistance – are combined with critical reflection on that very experience.

The student occupations documented in these films represent an appropriate preface to the occupation of Zvezda Cinema in Belgrade in December 2014 by a group of young filmmakers and their friends. Zvezda was, like almost all other cinemas in Belgrade, privatised in one of many schemes in which a new owner acquired a cinema franchise only to speculate with the associated property. It was thus closed as a cinema and left to decay, before activists occupied it to start a guerrilla programme aimed at alerting the public about the neglect of Serbian culture.

The activists displayed a flag said to represent ‘the movement for the occupation of cinemas’, featuring the famous fist of resistance holding a cinematographic ribbon, and they also painted this symbol in the cinema entrance. The occupation initiated considerable media coverage (including articles in the Guardian and New York Times), and famous French filmmaker and animator Michel Gondry even made a short, animated film in support of their struggle. The occupiers made their own film, too, ‘New Cinema Zvezda’ – showing how they had occupied the cinema, cleaned it up, and returned it to its original function. Both of these films underlined the neglect of the cultural sphere in Serbia and the fact that Belgrade museums and cinemas have been closing down for years, clearly critiquing the privatisation process and calling upon the state to act urgently for the sake of young people and artists.

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This example, of the cinema occupation in Belgrade, brings to mind the occupations of theatres and cinemas in Italy, such as Teatro Valle, Cinema America, and Cinema Palazzo, all in Rome. A closer comparison, however, highlights an important difference between the Zvezda occupation and both the Italian occupations of cultural institutions and Balkan student occupations. Namely, in these latter cases, commercialisation and privatisation in culture or education acted as a trigger for wider critique of a neoliberal capitalist system that produces the conditions for the destruction of common, cultural, and public goods. At the organisational level, they were characterised by the establishment of plenums or citizens’ assemblies, in which everyone was invited to play a role in horizontal democratic decision making, to shape the future of these movements and occupations. In other words, a particular problem (such as closure of a theatre) was used in a wider protest and critique; for example, Teatro Valle was at the forefront of the Italian movement for the defence of common goods. But in the case of Cinema Zvezda, the occupiers insisted on their particular struggle within the cultural field (defence of the Serbian film industry and cinemas) and avoided using a plenum-like decision-making process. Instead, they focused on reactivation of the cinematic programme, recruitment of volunteers, and wide public support. At the same time, some leaders of the movement openly distanced themselves from ‘any’ ideology, which in this context meant the left,\textsuperscript{29} while other activists sought to have a stronger progressive appeal and address more general political and economic issues.

\textsuperscript{29} ‘The occupation of Zvezda is not coloured by a leftist or any other ideology and does not represent anarchy or licentiousness; it presents a way of cultural emancipation and civic awakening as well as repairing the damage caused by shady privatization’, quoted in Dimitrije Bukvić, ‘Cultural Guerrilla Strikes Back’, \textit{Balkan Insight}, 6 April 2015, http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/cultural-guerrillas-strike-blow-for-serbia-s-ruined-cinemas (accessed 31 July 2017)
Conclusion: towards a post-socialist aesthetics of emancipation

The *post-socialist* part of the post-socialist aesthetics of resistance and rebellion cannot be just a matter of periodisation. It does not come only after *socialism*; in fact, it cannot and does not want to avoid a dialogue with socialist heritage and ideals. This heritage was marginalised, dismantled, or demonised in a post-socialist period marked by historic revisionism, nationalism, and rampant capitalism. Socialist ‘official’ art was used to celebrate the historic victory of socialism and to support the state socialist regime; yet, from the early 1990s, that victory faded into defeat. Now, that heritage becomes a strong reference point and source for the examples of aesthetics of both resistance and rebellion in the contemporary post-Yugoslav space. Even in cases of the aesthetics of rebellion where the relationship to a socialist past is not as visible, we can see its traces in the promotion of ideals of equality, participation, and solidarity, which are at odds with the neoliberal values of individualism, consumerism, and inequality. Additionally, experimentation with horizontal democracy and citizens’ assemblies instantly brings the times of Yugoslav socialist self-management to the mind of observers and participants. And this denotes the long tradition of socialist movements even when a left-wing vocabulary does not dominate the plenums or participants are barely aware of this history.

The advent of plenums, as well as the spread of horizontal mechanisms of decision-making and participation, represents an important development in new social movements, both internationally and in the post-socialist Balkans. The plenum is a direct critique of representative democracy as a veiled oligarchy that does not represent the interests of most citizens. Student occupations were the first to experiment with plenum
democracy in the Balkans. It remained confined to universities until the February 2014 eruption of protests in Bosnia, when massive citizens’ plenums were organised in almost every major city.

Drawing upon Jacques Rancière’s understanding of the politics of aesthetics, one can conclude that an act of rebellion redefines our perception of the present, but also – as shown in this article – of history. Can we, then, beyond artistic practices discussed in this article, see post-socialist plenums as harbingers of emancipatory activist aesthetics? These collective acts contain a strong aesthetic dimension insofar as they allow, in Rancière’s terms, for an entirely different redistribution of the sensible. In other words, they challenge and change what can be said, seen, heard and, finally, done. In post-socialist societies, these acts also allow for a re-articulation of what has been silenced. With their own theatricality, dramaturgy, scenery, and rhetoric, they unlock a profound redefinition of social, economic, and political relationship. The very fact that they are spatially and temporally limited turns them, necessarily, into aesthetic prefigurative acts that offer an experience of what is yet to come and what is wished for, and, for those participating, a strong taste of emancipation.

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