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12

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# INTERPRETING THE PAST: THE COMPETING MEMORIES OF THE YUGOSLAVIAN PERIOD THROUGH THE CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF SLOVENIAN HISTORY MUSEUM AND PRIVATE EXHIBITION

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## **Abstract**

In the given article we analyze the representation of the period from the recent history- Socialist Yugoslavia- through the case study of national history museum and private exhibition. Although both of the analyzed objects are located in Ljubljana, the metastories which they construct and display are based on the different cultural patterns. We compare the differences of the narratives being used by the private and state institution and apply the visual analysis method together with semi-structured interviews for these purposes. As a result of our research, we show how differs 'official narration' compared to the so-called 'Yugonostalgic' or 'Titostalgic' viewpoint and describe their main characteristics.

**Keywords:** Yugoslavia, Yugonostalgia, museum, representation, Slovenia, Ljubljana, history

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## **Introduction**

The collapse of the socialist regime in Yugoslavia involved a change in the sphere of 'official memories' (Jović 2004) and a rupture in people's private memories, representations, traditions, as well as their social and personal identities (Kuzmanic, 2008: 152). The period of the early nineties in Slovenia was closely tied to the movement towards the Europeanization or Westernization and distancing from Yugoslavia and common cultural heritage. The process of re-articulation of the collective remembering and introduction of the new policy was initiated immediately after Slovenia's declaration of independence. The process of renaming the streets, replacement of the monuments and changing the names of the state institutions has instantly emerged (Dragičević-Šešić, 2011: 34).

Museums played the role of litmus paper and, perhaps, most brightly indicated the transformations which the new-emerged country was going through. The branch of the museums (three of them) called the museum of People's Revolution since 1962 were changing their names. First to adopt a new name was a Celje museum, which since 1991 was using the title 'the Celje Museum of Recent History'.<sup>2</sup> The historic museum in Ljubljana, which had the same name since 1962 up to the 90th, was oriented towards the representation of the period of World War II. Finally, in 2003, the museum was also renamed as 'The National Museum of Contemporary History'.<sup>3</sup>

From the words of one museum's practitioner, with whom we have conducted the semi-structured interview, the adaptation of the new policy was visible not only through the name modifications, but also by the appearance of the new paradigmatic demand. Thus, at the beginning of the 90s, there has appeared the call for the new museum job positions for the specialist with the ethnological background instead of historian one, which was predominant before. Such detail illustrates that not only the reinterpretation of the history was required by the state, but also the new visual regime and new methodological perspectives.

In our research we aim to analyze how the recent past- the Yugoslavian period is represented at the national museum and at the private based exposition. For this purpose, we have analyzed the cases of 'National Museum of Contemporary History' and the exhibition titled 'Tito: A Yugoslav Icon', both located in Ljubljana. The visual analysis method

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.muzej-nz-ce.si/history.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.muzej-nz.si/en/pages.php?id\\_meni=147&id=91](http://www.muzej-nz.si/en/pages.php?id_meni=147&id=91)

and the semi-structured interviews with the practitioners working in the museum sphere were conducted as the main research methods.

Our decision to use museums and the exhibition space as the main object of analysis is grounded in the understanding of the given institutions as deeply political. They function not only for displaying the material and preservation objects chosen as the heritage objects, but also as the space, which helps different groups of interest to use it for ideological purposes and to compete with each other (Crane, 2000). Therefore, the museum is understood by us as a place of the concurrences of the power and meanings (Williams, 2007); the place where the material talks not only about the history, but also about the actors, involved in creating the meanings (Bennett, 2008).

History museums work as the public institutions which transmit the constructed history and are involved in representation and maintaining the national identities (Ostow, 2008, Bennet (1995, 2008), Anderson (2006)). In ethnic- national museum visitors are being educated in the objectified narratives of nationality and ethnicity (Appadurai, Breckenridge, 1992: 46). Hence, the history museum is an important actor in the construction of national identity and in such role it would be analyzed in the given article.

However, in the situation when traditionally, museums have the formal presentation of the history through the “official history”, the individual memories are left behind. Kavanagh (1996) calls such type of representation “a history over memory”. When people visit museums they bring their life histories and memories with them. Such memories could dominate over any ‘formal’ history offered, may be compared and discussed “often on a cross-generation basis within a family group”. Younger generations can assimilate museum narrative on the basis of confirmations given from the “witness” of the period. The reasons of successful transmission of the knowledge can be received from such oral statements like: “Your Granddad used to have one like that...” or they could be stirred by exclusion and absence (‘where we came from, it is not called that’, ‘... for us it was so different’, ‘I never wore anything like that in the 40s!’) (Kavanagh (1996): 2).

The situation when the individual memory is consonant to the official collective memory would represent the successful case of transmitting and consuming the national identity, but what to do if the individual memory does not tie to the official memory? In such cases two main actors: the state and the communities may collaborate in different ways. One of them is to create the alternative commemoration practices,

exhibitions and consequently let the plurality of public interpretation to co-exist in the society.

The Slovenian case fits this description while there exists the visual representation of the alternative public demands in the form of private exhibitions. In our research, we will describe such exhibition dedicated to the Tito Broz and the image of Yugoslavia which it brings.

### **Analyzing the National Museum of Contemporary History**

Compared to all other ex-Yugoslavian countries, Slovenia is the only one from the block that has opened the museum of the contemporary history. Museum that focuses on the history of the 20s century, especially on the Yugoslav period and, what is worth mentioning, includes the transformations of 90s into the texture of the exhibitions. In our opinion, it is an important fact testifying the ability of Slovenia to present the history not by pieces that led to the oblivion and kitschification of the history, but as the conceptually more consistent construction.

The predominant approach of the state museum towards representation of the Yugoslavian period is deconstructivism. From one side, the exhibition uses the classical socialist visual regime as the background of the narration, but critics and refutation are superimposed on it. To illustrate the given statement, let's take an example from the museum's space.

One of the rooms at the museum is dedicated to the post Second World War years. The tone of the subsequent exhibition is highly critical towards the life in Yugoslavia. The accent is made on the totalitarian exercises of power perpetrated by the government. The titles located in front of stands clearly indicate this model by such formulations: "Police State-the rule of the secret political police", "Red barons", "On the edge of hunger and poverty", "The bloody spring of 1945-the crime against humanity". The bloody spring is the referring to the mass killings of the Slovenian Home Guards. The Slovenian institute of Contemporary History estimates the number of the executed is around 12,000 people, but still, it's not possible to determine the responsible organizers of the mass killings ( Luthar (2013): 446).

Wherein, the visual design consists of the neutral objects like Yugoslavian flag, photos of the leader and the crowd, artifacts from the routine life- all that what we have called the 'socialist visual regime'. For example, there is a photo where Broz Tito is standing with the gun near the dead ibex. It is accompanied by another photo, where Edward Kardel is keeping in his hands a big fish, which he, likely, has caught

several minutes before the photo was taken. The interpretation of the photo is deeply individual and refers to the collective patterns which the visitor has. Thus, for some these photos would be associated with the leisure and active time-spending, for others, the photo may cause the hostility because it would be associated with the cruelty and environmental damage.

By constructing the narration, the museum has chosen the second type of the interpretation and thus, used the following plaque: 'Red barons'. Consequently, the photos were used as the fond that could be interpreted differently, but where the critical narration became predominant.

Another example of similar visual regime is the stand with the title 'Slovenia 1945-1960'. It consists of the wall with posted photos on it in two columns. In the left column one would see ceremonial photos representing soldiers riding horses and being joyfully greeted by the people occupying the streets; in the right column- photos of people at the moment of execution. Two similar elements are represented in the both photos: the crowd and the soldiers, however the message of the stand is clearly critical.

Next part of the exhibition located in the next room, deals with the 'Self-management' issue and covers 1960-1980 time periods. However, when entering the room we might read on the information plaque, that the room is representing "the Slovenian economy after 1945". The room gives quite a positive visual impression by showing different products, located in the form of composition through the exhibition space. These products are accompanied by charts with statistical data distributed by categories and by photos related to the production and consumption issues. Among presented rubrics one will find the following: 'Catering and Tourism', 'Trade', 'Agriculture and Fisheries', 'Transport and Communication', 'Building and Civil Engineering'.

As we mentioned, the exhibitioner material gives a positive impression of displaying material or at least neutral. However, the informational board corrects our impressions by emphasizing that "Slovenian industrial products are displayed in the 'kompostnik', a huge showcase which shape implies numerous ecological problems". The given informational statement ties automatically the represented industrial production into the critical ecological discourse frame. Thereby, the economy of the Yugoslavian period may be also interpreted as a 'fail project'.

The critical approach toward the representation of the material disappears when entering the final room of the permanent exhibition which is dedicated to Slovenian independence.

The whole room is closely tied to the demonstration of the Yugoslav existence of the last decade as the union doomed to its disintegration. The titles accompanied stands confirm our findings: “The end of Josip Broz Tito’s cult of personality”, “Decomposition of the Yugoslavia”, “Slovenian National Spring/Slovenian national program” (see figure 1). Subsequent to these titles, narration is constructed in a form of emancipatory discourse where each event displaying the 80<sup>th</sup> is integrated into the broader picture of the inevitability of Yugoslavia’s disintegration and of emergence and recognition of Slovenia Independence (see figure 2).

Figure 1: The National Museum of Contemporary History, Ljubljana, Slovenia, ‘The end of Josip Broz Tito’s cult of personality’



Figure 2: The National Museum of Contemporary History, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 'Slovenija is recognized!'



The deconstruction of the regime conditionality is made through the inclusion into the public narration stands representing the ideological overturn institutionalized by the government. The stand called “Before and after” is the bright illustration. The stand consists of the photos which show changes occurred to the titles of the streets and governmental institutions when Slovenia entered 90s. Towns which previously contained prefix ‘Tito’ in their names has simplified it. Thus, “Titovo Velenje” became “Velenje”; the titles at the ministries previously written in Serbo-Croatian language were replaced with Slovenian.

Another booth is showing the information on “Ten-Day War” period and pay precise attention to the official, legal side of the new status of Slovenia as an independent country. The final stands represent Slovenia’s EU entry and its integration into the European environment. The final element of the exhibition consists of the poster illustration presidential candidates and with the sentences printed on the floor: “Slovenija Priznana! Z priznanjem držav evropske dvanajsterice je Slovenija postala enakopravna članica mednarodne skupnosti. Delo, 16.1.1992” (Slovenia is recognized! With the recognition of twelve European countries Slovenia became a full member of the international community. Delo, 16.1.1992).

Summarizing the analyzed exhibition we have to notice that the given museum provides visitors with the informative exhibition divided into ten year frames, started by the end of WW2 and finished by the integration of Slovenia nation-state into the European Union membership. The representation of the whole period of Second Yugoslavia is

characterized by the implementation of the critical discourse directed to deconstruct the mightiness of the regime and strengthen the official democratic and Euro- oriented discourses.

However, the official collective memory cannot be inclusive to such extend that it reflects and integrates each individual remembering (Green, 2004). Usually there exist memory resistance groups that due to the complex number of reasons are searching for the alternative interpretation of the past, even though sometimes such interpretation is based on the selectivity of the facts and oblivion.

It is important to mention, that any of the collective memory chosen as background for representing the national history cannot fully integrate the broad variety of individual memories. The visitors of the museums might meet the dissonance with the remembering which they have. Even the reflection regarding the single question would broadly vary from person to person. Such differences could be associated with the different individual memories and also different collective memories.

To check this statement, Kuzmanic (2008) analyzed the individual remembering of different events related to the disintegration of Yugoslavia among Slovenians. She compared the differing collective memories between Slovenians and other residents of Slovenia of Bosniak and Serb origin. 16 deep interviews have been conducted. Kuzmanic has found that people similarly interpreted the death of Tito. Their remembrance included "clear dramatic note, organization and familiarization of newly encountered experience and the presence of various actors as well as the mental state of the narrator" (Kuzmanic, 2008: 158). Additionally, what is important to understand is the feature of perception to associate the concrete event- death of Tito- with broader political context- with 'before Tito died' and other forms like 'independent Slovenia' or 'time after Tito death'. "Tito's death is not important in itself, but because it reminds the interviewee of the past times, which seem to be better in comparison with today" (Kuzmanic, 2008: 159).

However, the author has found that respondents with different ethnic background had differently interpreted the disintegration process. Actors with different ethnic backgrounds had used three main narratives. The majority of young Slovenians talked about the breakup of Yugoslavia in terms of transition to some better system (a) narrative of transition or change). The Serbians from Slovenia made an accent on the disintegration as a loss of common border and country (b) narrative of disintegration (Kuzmanic, 2008: 162) and for Bosnians the prevailing event associated with disintegration is the war (c) narrative of war

(Kuzmanic, 2008: 163).

The following exhibition, which is described below, works as a demonstration of the alternative interpretation of the past, based on the different type of the collective memory.

Slovenia may be included into the list of countries that have chosen the model of the public plurality of the opinions. Thus, the proper illustration of this statement would be the Yugonostalgic exhibition, which took place at the 2013- early 2014 in Ljubljana.

### **Analyzing the non-museum based exhibition 'Tito: A Yugoslav Icon' (Tito: Obraz Jugoslavije)**

The alternative version of historical past and the role of its main political agenda provides the exhibition with the title 'Tito: A Yugoslav icon' (see figure 3). We specified it as a non - museum based type of exhibition relying to two characteristics: location and its institutional initiators. The exhibition took place at the Exhibition and Convention Centre in Ljubljana, the commercially oriented organization which provides the space for fairs and other events, among which presentation of wine products, tourism, and furniture is highly relevant. The scientific exhibitions take place here as well, but however rare, and mostly for natural history collections.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 3: The Exhibition and Convention Centre, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 'Tito: A Yugoslav Icon', the entrance



The exhibition was broadly self-promoted by billboards located through the city. The period of its functioning was 7.11.2013-28.2.2014. When coming inside one may notice a stand with a list of partners. Among

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ljubljanafair.com/home/>

them were: The museum of contemporary history (Slovenia), The Museum of Yugoslav History (Serbia), Museum and galleries of Ljubljana, several Slovenian journals: Mladina, Delo De Facto and several commercial companies. However, the information about the organizers is very limited and raises questions. It is registered as a company 'Ti&To' with the insufficient income of two Euros for 2012 as stated on Slovenian tax records site.<sup>5</sup>

Thereby, the unclearness with the status of the organizers and non-declared purposes of the exhibition as such allow us to suggest several implications. There is visible:

- The public demand on nostalgia,
- The commercialization of the demand,
- And the existence of the collaborative possibility with the institutions legitimized to preserve and represent the past.

The exhibition occupies the whole territory of the first floor. The main stylistic methods used here are photos printed in big size related to different topics, the same size descriptions accompanying them and authentic artifacts. The space is divided into segments, each of which exhibits a specific topic. There are eleven sections, arranged in the following sequence: first one concentrates on the short description of Tito's biography. It is followed by the section narrating about his encirclement, mostly function as a multimedia room where interviews with the former staff is represented. The dominant type of narrative is 'sublimely mourned'. As a nostalgic type of narration, the exhibition refers predominantly to feelings and interpretations (Velikonja (2008): 28) rather than to rationality and search for objectivity.

The third section presents nonaligned movement. The section consists of the panel with the text and is accompanied by the big print of the photo. There are three people represented on it. Two are shaking hands, and one is standing between them. All three are smiling and looking at the piece of paper which they, most likely, have signed several seconds before the photo was taken. The person in the middle is Broz Tito, Gamal Nasser, the second president of Egypt, is on the left and Jawaharlal Nehru on the right.

The text is characterized by its anti-scientific approach; it lacks facts and is prevailing in prescriptive formulations. We quote it in full and bold formulations to be analyzed below: "The non-aligned policy, which was

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<http://web.archive.org/web/20131019114658/http://www.politikis.si/?p=96454>

also the policy of Yugoslavia, was extremely fruitful, as it is well-known, in the fight for peace and social progress. Non-aligned countries are today among the most promoters of equal relations in the world, relations without any discrimination and interference with the internal affairs of others. At the same time, they are ready to democratically participate in all fields of human and social activities, in terms of mutual relationships and well as the relationship with other countries”.

The statement that “Non-aligned countries are today among the most promoters of equal relations in the world” does not have any single relation to reality and moreover, is seen by us as cynical statement, but however is still sometimes used by the politicians (Judah, 2009: 1). I would like to remind, that the chairperson of the movement in 2012-2013 was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was preceded by the leaders from Egypt and in 2006-2007 Fidel Castro. All of those countries, represented by their leaders (Iran, Egypt, Cuba) are not included into the list of transparent and democratic regimes and are characterized by the numerous violations of the freedom of speech and movement, by political repressions, different number of social inequalities.<sup>6</sup> The union consists of 120 country members that include mostly all African countries and among others, are also North Korea and Belarus<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, the person, who is making the text has to be a hard-headed cynic and lobby the image of alliance, or to be totally incompetent in the issues which he is preparing.

The presence of the next section is extremely significant – the ‘President’s shadow’. It is made as a piece of wall preceded by increased in size photo of Broz Tito’s profile and a text printed in the form of profile’s shadow on the wall. The text is dealing with the Goli otok issue. It informs the visitor about the existence of political repressions which took place in Yugoslavia, about the role of “the members of Informbiro” as the main actors of the repressive actions. The role of “the Slovenian politician Edvard Kardelj” is mentioned and what’s the most important, the statistics on the number of prisoners and their status is given.

Other sections present the life of the former leader through such contextual sections: “Tito and the post of Yugoslavia”, “Travels”, “Relay

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<sup>6</sup> Report on the level of corruption for 2013 year is available on ‘Transparency International’ :

<http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>

<sup>7</sup> Non-Aligned Movement official site:

[http://csstc.org/v\\_ket1.asp?info=11&mn=1](http://csstc.org/v_ket1.asp?info=11&mn=1)

of youth”, “Tito and films”, “Artistic representations” (see figure 4), “Tito’s New Year eve celebrations”. The final exhibition has the telling title, which defines the style of the exhibition material: “A funeral for all time”.

Figure 4: The Exhibition and Convention Centre, Ljubljana, Slovenia, ‘Tito: A Yugoslav Icon’, ‘Artistic representations’



Generally analyzing the displayed material, we might assume its conceptual completeness in the style in which authors work and its ethnographic character. The phenomenon of ethnographical exposition, from our point of view, is closely tied to the uncritical way of narration with ‘friendly’ approach towards the subject of the presentation. The subject of this exhibition is not only Tito as a historical person, but also and rather more important -the constructed image of Tito, or a collective perception of the image with its further institutionalization through the celebrations and production. Thus, the official celebration of the ‘Relay of Youth’ is the example of the institutionalized form of fixation Tito as person into the Tito as a representative of power, as a strong leader, as the guarantor of the piece. The production of postage stamps with his depiction is the applied version of the same type of myth-production and fixation.

The exhibition fits into the definition of being nostalgic because of the several reasons: content, tone, title and its visuality. The described exhibition reminds us about the importance of the representation of the material. The connotation- words, visual background forms the way of recommended perception. Thus, a section dedicated to the collection of sculpted statues of Tito does not provide any critical remarks, opinions,

neither on the leader, nor on the aesthetic backwardness/narrowness of the style.

The existence of such exhibition demonstrates the demand on the alternative re-reading of the recent history compared to the official one presented at the National Museum. It demonstrates the existence of the so-called Yugonostalgic or Titostalgic recently emerged trend (Luthar, Pusnik (2010), Bošković (2013), Mandeljc (2013)) (see figure 5).

Figure 4: The Exhibition and Convention Centre, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 'Tito: A Yugoslav Icon', Shop



For better understanding of this recently emerged phenomenon, Breda Luthar and Marusa Pusnik (2010) proposed the following description (p. 18). In their opinion Yugonostalgia is:

- A “kitschification” of memory and past
- The form of selective remembering
- It works as a post-socialist normalization (de-criminalization of the socialist past image)
- It uses the spatial imaginary of strong and secure country in opposition to small unknown national states appeared after 1991 (“imperialist nostalgia” in terms of Renato Rosaldo) (Luthar, Pusnik, 2010: 18).

The Yugonostalgia, according to Bošković has emerged after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and related to it the appearance of the new forms of narratives- ‘a new Utopia: the nation’. Such type of nostalgia was the reaction on national homogenization of the identity with which people were leaving full 50 years. It symbolizes the desire to keep alive the collective multicultural identity and to oppress the civil wars (Bošković (2013): 57). Yugonostalgia as the confrontation to the

nationalist discourse, ethnic conflicts and civil wars has to be spread through the countries which witnessed these characteristics the most and it is (Bošković 2013, Velikonja 2008). Additionally, nostalgia is spread in the regions with the weak economy (Velikonja, 2008).

Taking into consideration described characteristics, Slovenia has to drop out of this list, but in spite of its good economic conditions 'many people in Slovenia are looking back for inspirations in secured and guaranteed life'. The unpredictability of this phenomenon increases because it becomes actual for young people, who did not have first-hand experience, but still are influenced by the nostalgic feelings (Mandelc (2013): 55).

The feature of this phenomenon is the "depoliticization symptom", when the deeply political personality is used for consumption purposes and in commemoration of 'good things' happening during the socialist times (Velikonja (2008): 19-26). Such observation fits into the frames of the exhibition described above.

The main traits of nostalgic narrative are ex-temporality, ex-territoriality, sensuality, complementarity, conflicted story lines, unpredictability, polysemism and episodic nature (Velikonja (2008): 28). The key element which is easy to find when describing the nostalgic phenomenon would be its episodic nature, which eventually helps to understand the mechanism of its vitality. It gives the "green light" to the usage of partial representational images of the complex reality and at the same time allows dismissing the political background of the event.

Finally, why not the epoch was chosen as a focus of the exhibition, but the single person? For instance, the similar in style exhibition took place in Belgrade, but there was chosen more general title: 'Good life in Yugoslavia'. The restaurants, pubs and hostels usually use dates of Yugoslav socialist holidays. For example, a pub located on the corner of the Sarajevo City Museum is called '25<sup>th</sup> May' restaurant, referring the both to the official holiday- Day of Youth and to the birthday of the leader.

The special term was created in order to generalize the events dedicated particularly to the commemoration of the leader. Velikonja proposed to call this special group of commemoration-Titostalgia. Tito in this regards symbolize stability, prosperity, solidarity. He embodies a realization of social demand on vertical mobility lift while coming from the lower class up to the upper (Velikonja (2008): 98). In addition, he represents the image of the 'typical' citizen: typical Balkan men, a typical

central European and cosmopolitan and in this regard can be easily understood the slogan 'We are all Tito's (Velikonja (2008): 98).

## **Conclusions**

In our research, we have shown how varies the representation of the same period when shown from the perspectives of the different actors. The period of the Second Yugoslavia remains to be a highly discussible issue that actualizes different forms of collective and individual memory. The National Museum of Contemporary History as the official institution which represents the material, maintains the national symbolic order and plays a sufficient role in retranslating and forming national identity is providing the visitor with the critical remarks regarding the socialist period of its history. The authoritarian nature of the ruling class with their weak intellectual abilities is accompanied by the critical ecological discourse when relating to the economic production in Yugoslavia. The events which are emphasized as the nodal point of the exhibition are different crimes made by the regime during the post- Second World War period towards the former collaborators, towards the religious groups and ideological opposition and the political opponents. The representation of Yugoslavia is constructed through the critical discourse perspective and aim to deconstruct the mightiness of the regime and at the same time to strengthen the official democratic and Euro- oriented discourses. The authoritarianism period is opposed to Slovenian independence and its further integration into the European Union politics.

At the same time, the initiative formed by the private initiative represented the same period reverse. The accent on the figure of the first president organizes the frames of the imagined period- from the end of the Second World War and until the 1980 when Tito Broz has died. In such a way there is formed the lacuna of the history after Tito's death and until the collapse of Yugoslavia. Such differentiation allows seeing the competing memory as a fragmented selection of time. The selectivity of the facts and domination of the glorification narration are other characteristics of the exhibition.

In the situation when the national museum deals with the opposed representation of the Yugoslavian past, the emergence of the suppressed narration works as the form of the public confrontation. The fact of the emergence of such exposition and the fact of its public existence in the capital of the country, not at the suburb or as an exhibition of the Yugonostalgic club in their private space, represents still actual public demand for re-revision of the recent past and affords to legitimize such vision.

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