Seeing the Futures Past, and Futures yet to Come: On the (Im)possibility of Reading the Promises of Liberation from the Visual Archive of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Socialism

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On the (Im)possibility of Reading the Promises of Liberation from the Visual Archive of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Socialism

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“The post-Yugoslav gaze does not seem to be able to recognize photographic abundance in the photographs that constitute the visual archive of the Non-Aligned solidarity and Yugoslav socialist internationalism and to recuperate alternative histories and voices.”

By comparing the dominant media and academic readings of the visual archive of Yugoslav non-aligned internationalism with the interpretations of the corresponding visual archive of the Bandung Conference, I reflect on the impossibility of recognizing the futurity, solidarity, and alternative modernity in the photographs depicting Yugoslav international encounters in the context of the Non-Aligned Movement. I outline a number of reasons for this impossibility, some of which are related to the nature of photography itself, while the others are shaped by the specific temporality of post-Yugoslav post-socialism and the limits that this temporality imposes on political subjects, their imagination, and aspirations.

Keywords: non-alignment, Yugoslavia, post-socialism, photographic archive, temporality, representation, cynicism
Introduction: Seeing from the Aftermath

Photographs are essentially about time.¹ As Gerhard Richter points out, photography possesses “an afterlife, a temporal structure of experience and ghostly reception that will not let it rest in its separation from the before or the after” (Richter 2011, 189). At the moment they are taken, the photographs are already past objects and images. Antonino Paraggi, a protagonist of Italo Calvino’s famous story The Adventure of a Photographer, was troubled by this characteristic of photography: “the taste for the spontaneous, natural, lifelike snapshot”, he complained, “kills spontaneity, drives away the present. Photographed reality immediately takes on a nostalgic character, of joy fled on the wings of time, a commemorative quality, even if the picture was taken the day before yesterday” (Calvino 1958). But this inherent pastness of photographs is inseparable from their orientation towards the future: Whether they are studio portraits, snapshots, photojournalistic images, or formal photographs of political summits, the moment in which the photographs are taken always contains and counts on, the future gaze. During the process of creation, they may be the result of the photographer’s desires and imagination (as Calvino vividly describes in his story), but the very moment they materialize, they become the subject of future readings that depend to a large extent on the viewers, their desires, beliefs, imaginations and political horizons defined by their own present. This dependence on the future gaze makes photographs historical objects par-excellence. As British historian Edward Palmer Thompson wrote:

[It is we,] in the present, who must always give meaning to that inert and finished past. For history is forever unresolved, it remains a field of unfinished possibilities, it lies behind us with all its contradictions of motives and cancelled intentions, and we – acting in the present – reach back, refuse some possibilities and select and further others. (Thompson 1997, 100)

In this essay, I am interested in the ways in which past, present, and future intersect when “we in the present” read the photographs that show the world that emerged from the political liberations of the twentieth century and the promises of a different world order that those liberations brought. Liberation

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as an event is itself significantly determined by the interplay and intersection of the present, the past, and the future. The moment of the twentieth century liberations is the result of political – anti-fascist and/or anti-colonial – struggles that were often tense, exhausting, and costly in terms of investment, effort, and human lives. They are, at the same time, the moments marked by the promise that the future will bring – a moment of hope, a starting point for a different, better, more just world based on different political premises. I ask how we in the present make sense of the past of the second half of the twentieth century, and whether our gaze, coming from our own present, is capable of recognizing the promise of the liberations of the twentieth century and ensuing international efforts for solidarity, peaceful coexistence and modernity in one’s own terms. As I show in this essay, in the present from which we look, we know the fate of the emancipatory political projects of socialism and anti-imperialism that shaped the twentieth century, and this acquired knowledge significantly influences our ability to recognize the promises of the past.

Our present, moreover, is the time void of political imagination. As a result, the future as a heuristic term “saturates – or oversaturates – today’s humanities” (Hunt 2020), while the past increasingly becomes a site to search for ideas of the future and “a densely animated object of enchantment” (Scott 2014, 13). An “archive fever” (Derrida 1995) is the result of this search. In the post-Yugoslav space, archivists and activists are turning to the legacies of Yugoslav socialism as “a potential mine of insights and practical knowledge that could be reactivated in the difficult and often exasperating postwar political present” (Kurtović 2019). To a significant extent, these archival efforts are based on a more fluid understanding of archives and are often motivated by needs and desires that arise from our own political present. They are accompanied by a growing artistic and academic interest in various aspects of Yugoslav socialism and its legacies (see for example Galjer and Lončar 2019; Hofman 2020; Kirn 2020; Štiks 2020). Yugoslav internationalism and its role in the Non-Aligned Movement is one of the important topics revisited by scholars and artists and a source from which to draw useful insights for the emancipatory politics of today (Stubbs 2020). A number of books, research projects, and exhibitions have focused on Yugoslav non-alignment over the past decade. They address a wide range of fields including art, aesthetics, and culture (Videkanić 2019, 2021; Turajlić 2021; the exhibition Southern Constellations: The Poetics of the Non-Aligned at Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, 2019), development aid and education (Wright 2021), women’s internationalism (Bonfiglioli 2021), economic (Spaskovska and Calori 2020, Spaskovska 2021a), and military
relations (Lazić 2021), the role of municipalities in Yugoslav non-alignment politics (Unkovski-Korica 2022), and reexamining Yugoslav non-alignment from the perspective of decoloniality or race/whiteness (Subotić and Vučetić 2017; Baker 2018; Stubbs 2021).

The complex temporal relations outlined above and the tensions they create are the backdrop against which I would like to direct our attention to the visual archive of the diplomatic activities of socialist Yugoslavia, largely centred upon the figure of President Josip Broz Tito. It consists of photographs showing his meetings with Third World countries liberated from colonial rule. The photographs were taken in various locations – during official diplomatic visits to Yugoslavia, during Tito’s visits to Asian, African and South American countries and, most importantly, at summit meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement. Photographers working for major Yugoslav newspapers closely followed the summit meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement. The photographic archive of President of the Republic J. B. Tito, kept at the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, includes more than 135,000 photographs. As Jovana Nedeljković argues:

[M]ore than a third of them are related to the many different encounters of the Yugoslav president with the so-called Third World, which makes it a rich resource for any broader consideration of the movement and the principles and policies that NAM developed. (Nedeljković 2019, 154)

Miloš Švabić, who worked as a photographer for several Slovenian newspapers, photographed the first Non-Aligned Summit in Belgrade in September 1961, and the National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia preserves the photographic collection of more than 500 Švabić’s photographs from that event. Although they are kept in the archival collections of central institutions concerned with preserving the collective memory of the past, these photographs are also part of an elusive archive of Yugoslav socialism. Many of them were published in newspapers and circulated among the public, making them easily recognizable and characteristic of the time.

Photographs, Christopher Lee argues, “depict not only an immediate present that soon becomes the past, but they can contain contingent traces of the future” (Lee 2020, 200). In the photographs with which I am concerned in this essay,

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2 See http://foto.mij.rs/site/search?searchbox=nesvrstani.
the traces of the future are deeply anchored in the original context frozen in the photographs themselves and inextricably linked to the esthetics, styles, mores, and conventions characteristic of the time in which the photographs were taken.

Given this inherent connection between the promises of the future and the concrete experience of Yugoslav socialism that these photographs markedly embody, I outline below the main narrative threads through which the visual archive of Yugoslav non-aligned internationalism has been read in academic literature and media texts since the collapse of socialism and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, and address the (im)possibilities of seeing them as embodiments of a “postsocialist and postcolonial futures past” (Scott 2014, 2). Futures past is Reinhart Koselleck’s term referring to the “onetime future of past generations or, more pithily, […] a former future” (Koselleck 2004, 11). Koselleck thus insists on the connection, as stated by Tribe, “between a chronological past, a lived present that was once an anticipated future, and expectations of the future” (2004, x). I place the post-Yugoslav readings of the visual archive of the Non-Aligned Movement in dialog with the readings of the visual archive of the Bandung Conference found in the academic literature, and this comparison reveals important differences. In the concluding part of this essay, I reflect on the reasons why cynicism and triumphalism are the dominant characteristics of the post-Yugoslav, post-socialist view of the photographic archive of the Non-Aligned Movement.

**Seeing Styles, Performances, Enactments**

In most of the photographs that belong to the visual archive of Yugoslav non-aligned internationalism, we see mainly men of different ages, ethnicities, and skin colors, dressed in different ways – in modern suits, military uniforms, in traditional or religious clothing. These photographs, which suggest conviviality and optimism (Lee 2020, 195), visualize encounters driven by the open possibilities for the future in the aftermath of the liberation from fascism or colonialism. Under this open horizon of possibilities, these photographs visualize a possibility for solidarity, cooperation, and coexistence in the international arena that is different from what the hegemonic and hierarchical logic of the Cold War offered these newly liberated states. This possibility was realized in the Non-Aligned Movement and Tito’s related diplomatic activities and travels, which were abundantly documented photographically. Serbian sociologist Todor Kuljić sees these foreign policy efforts of J. B. Tito as:
[A] rare example or relatively successful and independent breakthrough in hierarchical relations in international order through overcoming the inevitable peripheral subordination of a small state to the interests of great powers. It was unusually active and successful diplomacy in particular historical circumstances. (Kuljić 2004, 297)

Kuljić’s reading of Tito’s diplomatic activities, in which he insists on the visions and possibilities of an alternative configuration of the international order as the basis of international political alliances between Yugoslavia and post-colonial states, is the exception rather than the rule in the scholarly literature. Far more common are assessments such as that of Petar Simić, who evaluates Tito’s diplomacy “by its final result, in which Yugoslavia found itself in a paralysis, and ultimately on the ‘wrong side of history’” (Simić 2008, 216).

Interpretations of Yugoslavia’s actions in the international arena and its role within the Non-Aligned Movement, especially those that fit into the latter interpretive framework in which the ideas of non-alignment are viewed through the prism of the ultimate (and inevitable) failure of the projects of state socialism and anti-imperialist internationalism, rely heavily on the reading of photographic evidence of diplomatic encounters, summits, and conferences. This is true of contemporary media texts as well as academic discourses. However, these photographs are usually taken “as mere ‘illustration’ rather than foregrounded content to be analysed in its own right” (Lee 2020, 201). The authors of these interpretations focus predominantly on representations, styles, postures, and clothing. For example, in the detailed text about the meeting between the Cuban Goodwill Mission led by Ernesto Che Guevara and Yugoslav President J. B. Tito on the island of Brijuni in August 1959, the BBC Serbian portal depicts the scene of the meeting of “two revolutionaries, politicians and future pop icons” as they talked “with inevitable Cuban cigars, one dressed in a green uniform, with black beret and brass star on it, the other dressed in an ironed white suit, with the panama hat on his head. One in boots, the other in polished shoes. One with a beard, the other carefully shaved” (Anđelković 2020).5

4 Nancy Rose Hunt points that such perspective is caught in an “event-aftermath straightjacket” (Hunt 2016, 5).
5 For more on the Cuban Goodwill Mission’s visit to Yugoslavia in 1959 and readings of this event from the present-day perspective, see Petrović 2021.
International diplomacy, Christopher Lee argues, “requires a setting and audience, and political leaders, as agents of history, needs a stage, literally and figuratively” (Lee 2020, 203), and this is reflected in the photographs that belong to the genre of diplomatic portraiture. In examining the visual archive of the Bandung conference, Lee, drawing upon N. Shimazu (2014), sees the theatrical qualities of staging and enactment as crucial to the “radical assertion of an emergent Third Worldism” (Lee 2020, 205). Photography played an important role in creating the “Bandung spirit,” which refers “at once to a continuing ethos of anticolonialism, a presentist attitude of alliance and solidarity and an optimistic feeling of unlimited possibility about the future” (Lee 2020, 197).

Staging, enactment, and performance are the main interpretive tools used to describe Yugoslav non-aligned internationalism and its photographic visualizations. Scholars focus on the ways in which Yugoslavia “staged” its position and status when engaging with countries that had liberated themselves from colonial rule, usually through public appearances and the practices of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito. The focus is often on Tito’s style: on the fact that he was dressed “smartly” along with Naser and Nehru, or on the fact that “resplendent in a Panama white linen suit, white shoes and black pocket handkerchief, [he] reinvented himself in Brioni as a ‘post-revolutionary dandy’ and a picture of fashionable modernism on the world stage” (Kilibarda 2010, 28). For the same author, “Brioni marks – along with Bandung, New York, and Belgrade – one of several homosocial birth moments in the emergence of a (very masculinized) postcolonial vision of ‘nonalignment’” (Kilibarda 2010, 27). Similarly, the light is shed on the ways in which Yugoslavia “enacted” its position and status among the countries that have liberated themselves from colonial rule, usually through the performances and practices of its president, Josip Broz Tito, as well as through popular culture and imagery.

Lee and Shimazu (2014) similarly highlight ambiguous visual and staged aspects of the Bandung myth, arguing that “depictions of collaboration and conviviality between Nehru, Naser, Sukarno, and other figures contributed to an enduring image of the Third World solidarity” but also pointing to “problematic elitism and gender exclusivity” and “postcolonial male camaraderie” (Lee 2020, 197; see also Burton 2019). However, these scholars emphasize that these problematic aspects do not obscure or eliminate the presence and importance of Third World solidarity and its capacity “to strengthen unorthodox narratives, establish new epistemologies of knowledge and achieve counterhegemonic political ends” (Lee 2020, 199), nor do they
diminish the relevance of this capacity to our own political present and possible future(s). To provide a conceptual framework for the complexity of the visual archive of Bandung and Third World internationalism and solidarity, Lee introduces the concept of the *decolonizing camera*, ascribing to it a dual meaning: “visual documentation of moments and processes related to the event of political decolonization” and “a conjoined aesthetic and political ambition: by depicting and representing political decolonisation, new forms of knowledge and power can be revealed and constituted” (Lee 2020, 198).

In contrast to the ways of seeing the visual archive of the Bandung Conference, the dominant readings of the Yugoslav archive of non-aligned internationalism do not allow for complexity and coexistence. This visual archive is used primarily to support the teleological narrative of Yugoslavia’s dissolution in ethnic conflicts and ensuing political, economic, and social decline of post-Yugoslav societies. Performative, staged qualities discernible from this archive and Tito’s appearances on the international stage are associated with notions such as “simulacrum of post-colonial independence,” “zombification,” and “banality of the post-colony” (Kilibarda 2010). Lee (2020) and Shimazu (2014) consider staging, performance, and enactment as essential features of the “iconography of Third World solidarity” (Lee 2020, 202) and do not question the nature of this solidarity, but even consider it indisputable. In the post-Yugoslav scholar context, on the other hand, the solidarity visualized in the photographs of J. B. Tito and the Third World leaders becomes a mere performance, done for pragmatic and opportunistic reasons. Jelena Subotić and Srđan Vučetić (2017) argue that the Yugoslav leadership and diplomats “understood too well” that the “performances of solidarity with post-colonial Africa and Asia would bring status rewards for Yugoslavia.” Moreover, the scholar’s gaze remains focused on the immediate, stereotypical, and most easily read in these photographs: Tito is seen as “a hunter, a collector, a white man in Africa” (Sretenović 2004, 26) or “a capitalist tourist” (Krstić 2010).

While in the context of the “Bandung myth” its visuality conditioned by staging and performance was read as a means to counter hegemonic colonial relations, the Yugoslav actors of these “performances” are almost exclusively placed *within* these relations and seen as racially privileged and ignorant of their own whiteness (Subotić and Vučetić 2017; Vučetić S. 2017).

The exhibition *Tito in Africa: Picturing Solidarity*, which displayed a selection of photographs from the Museum of Yugoslavia showing the Yugoslav president...
during his visits to liberated African countries in the 1960s and 1970s, brought
the visual archive of Yugoslav internationalism to the attention of various
audiences. The result of the international research project “Socialism Goes
Global: Cold War Connections Between the ‘Second’ and ‘Third Worlds,’ 1945–
1991,” based at the University of Exeter, the exhibition was first shown at the
Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade from June 27 to September 3, 2017, and later
at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (November 13, 2017 to April 8, 2018) and
at The Wende Museum in Los Angeles (June 23 to October 20, 2018).

In the book that accompanied the exhibition, Radina Vučetić claims that “the
overwhelming impression after looking at thousands of Tito’s photos from
Africa is that these are the images of a ‘white man’ in a ‘black country,’ a man
who comes as a friend and as a modernizer” and that “looking at the protocol
and the photos from Tito’s safaris, it appears that his anticolonial rhetoric often,
although not intentionally, had a colonial tone amid colonial scenery” ((Vučetić
R. 2017, 25, 43). Vučetić is aware of “the hegemonic power of interpretative
frames to ascribe meaning to events” (Gerasimov and Molinger 2015, 715) – she
warns that “not everything is self-evident and the question should be asked of
how much we ‘read into’ the meaning of these photos ourselves” (Vučetić R.
2017, 29). Despite such warnings, the persistent gaze in the post-Yugoslav post-
socialist present seems unable to see “beyond purified Western concepts of race,
nation, culture, and territory, which can misinterpret longstanding histories,
presentist intentions, and imagined futures” (Lee 2020, 199).

**Post-socialist Gaze’ Blindness for the Political Promises of Socialism**

Ana Sladojević, one of the curators of the exhibition *Tito in Africa: Picturing
Solidarity*, critically addresses this inability, asking:

> Why is the visual aspect of these photos so easily perceived as laden by colonial
imagery, when viewed outside the anticolonial and antifascist contexts, and
without the background of the Yugoslav relations with African countries?
(Sladojević 2017, 102)

She refers to “a break from the social order and its values, which happened in
the 1990s, and continued in the first half of 2000s,” and “had a striking effect
on the development of the visual imagery of socialist Yugoslavia” (Sladojević
2017, 96). Under these circumstances, the photographs from the visual archive
of the Non-Aligned Movement “unwittingly become exponents of a certain ‘temporal exoticism’ reinforced by their long absence from the public eye” (Sladojević 2017, 98). Ljubica Spaskovska similarly draws our attention to the memory/forgetting nexus, pointing to an “institutional amnesia that also extends to the spheres of education and intellectual debate” in three important dimensions of socialist citizenship: anti-fascism, internationalism/non-alignment and self-management (Spaskovska 2021b, 35). Erasure, she argues, was absolute in the “institutional and political memory on self-management and non-alignment”, while anti-fascism was “stripped down of its transnational and Yugoslav dimensions and generally reduced to national(ist) narratives about decades’ or centuries’ long struggles for independence” (Spaskovska 2021b, 36 and 38).

Apart from the “general cultural climate of forgetting” (Sladojević 2017, 102) and erasure in post-Yugoslav countries, which render futurity, solidarity, and other values ingrained in Yugoslav socialism invisible and inaccessible, reading emancipatory promises from the visual archive of Third World solidarity, non-aligned internationalism and alternative modernity is fraught with a number of other difficulties. Some of these difficulties have to do with the challenges emerging from the temporal perspective from which this archive is looked upon, as well as the inherent ambivalence of photography, an unresolved relationship “between the promise and the effect of the photograph” (Hayes and Minkley 2019, 2).

Photographs of past events are always subject to a retrospective gaze and overshadowed by a “known, predetermined outcome” (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2020, 13), making it difficult to see in them futures lost but also “futures to be imagined” (Heyes and Gilburt 2020, 17). Part of the difficulty certainly arises from the nature of our own political time: from our present, we look to the moments of the second half of the twentieth century, and thus to a past in which the future was “not merely possible but imminent; not only imminent, but possible” (Scott 2014, 4). In this present, in contrast to the past we are looking at, “we have seen a marked diminution in the production of new utopias” (Jameson 2016, 1). The future is not easily imagined and comes in dystopian rather than utopian registers, while we know that past futures and promises have already been lost, betrayed and destroyed.

Many visual historians and theorists of photography have explored how to address the limitations of retrospective readings of photographs informed by
the subsequent outcomes of political processes and promises from the past. Marianne Hirsh and Leo Spitzer (2020) propose a “liquid, multitemporal reading” as a way to displace this retrospective gaze. Christopher J. Lee’s (2020) concept of the “decolonizing camera” encompasses “both the act of documenting decolonisation and the ‘ways in which visual archives produced during decolonisation can contribute to new iconographies of the political, which are both factual and mythic at once’” (Lee 2020, 195). Elizabeth Edwards brings the concept of photographic abundance to the discussion, a quality that opens “the possibility of affect, and above all, the recuperation of alternative historical narratives and voices embedded within this abundance” (Edwards 2015, 240).

The post-Yugoslav gaze does not seem to be able to recognize photographic abundance in the photographs that constitute the visual archive of the Non-Aligned solidarity and Yugoslav socialist internationalism and to recuperate alternative histories and voices. On the contrary, it works to fit these archives into a broader narrative of historical inevitability and linearity and make them legible to a Western gaze.6 This adaptation is done by decontextualizing the meaning of the subjects and objects depicted in the photographs. Ana Sladojević shows how this mechanism of decontextualization works: The photographs which show Tito “wearing Ethiopian headgear and holding a shield and two spears” offer a “seemingly colonial image if judged only by means of ‘costuming’, appropriation and scenography,” but if we consider that they were taken at “historically significant location” – at the “scene of the decisive Battle of Adwa (1986) in which Ethiopians, led by Emperor Menelik II defeated the Italians”, representing “one of the symbols of African resistance to colonialism”, then these photographs unfold as “anticolonial in a markedly symbolic sense” (Sladojević 2017, 111–112).

A characteristic feature of most readings of these archives from the aftermath of Yugoslavia and its socialism is cynicism. As David Scott argues, cynicism became constitutive of the gaze on the (failed) socialist and postcolonial political projects: “The empowered entrenchment of an intolerant and fundamentalist version of liberalism,” he writes, made “cynicism an acceptable, if not always necessary, part of so-called transitions from illiberal rule” (Scott 2014, 163). This cynical, often trivializing gaze prevents any possibility of affect and the recuperation of alternative historical narratives of which Elizabeth Edwards writes. It says more about the limits of our own political imagination.

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6 On legibility of historical events, see Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016.
in the post-socialist present than it does about the qualities of the visual archive of solidarity and internationalism of the Non-Aligned Movement.

However, the photographs that make up this archive will not necessarily remain locked in this kind of framing forever, and such framing is not the only possible one today. The photographs “keep developing in unforeseen directions when they are viewed and reviewed by different people in different presents” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2020, 13). They also have “other lives” that can recall “lost futures and [...] new futures yet to be imagined” (Heyes and Gilburt 2020, 17).
References


Short Biography

Tanja Petrović is a lead research associate at the Institute of Culture and Memory Studies ZRC SAZU and a professor at the ZRC SAZU Graduate school in Ljubljana. She is interested in the uses and meanings of socialist and Yugoslav legacies in post-Yugoslav societies, as well as in cultural, linguistic, political, and social processes that shape the reality of these societies. She explores a plethora of issues, encompassing the role of language in forming ideologies, memory and identity, labor and gender histories in post-Yugoslav spaces, and the relationship between memory, heritage, and historiographic narratives on Yugoslav socialism. She published numerous articles and monographs in the fields of anthropology of post-socialism, memory studies, masculinity, gender history, heritage studies, linguistic anthropology, and labor history. Among her recent publications are “Fish canning industry and the rhythm of social life in the Northeastern Adriatic,” Narodna umjetnost 57 (2020); “Agency, biography, and temporality: (un)making women’s biographies in the wake of the loss of the socialist project in Yugoslavia,” Wagadu: a journal of transnational women’s & gender studies 21 (2020); “Political parody and the politics of ambivalence,” Annual review of anthropology 47 (2018).