

In his latest novel, *The Peripheral* (2014), science fiction writer William Gibson describes a future with various pasts. In that future, the rich can interfere with recent history, changing events that lead to a “stub”, a timeline that stops (and so does not interfere with the contemporary). The action of the novel takes place in one of these stubs, a near-present of animated tattoos, ubiquitous drones, government marijuana and 3D printers at your local shopping mall. History as a stub suggests the Wikipedia stub, or short article that requires more information. And this question of history, the present, the future, and what our memories can do to process this information, is very much relevant to the artworks in “The Future of Memory,” which are deeply metahistorical even as they think about the future. Here we learn to be disgusted by past, by our politics, by our everyday cruelty. But we also learn that this cruelty and violence have historical precedents.

Consider, first of all, two of the artists whose video works deal with Balkan history: Igor Bošnjak and Aleksandra Domanović. In *Balkan Hotel* (2013), Bošnjak takes us into one of Marshall Tito’s bunkers in Yugoslavia. As a gritty, postindustrial soundtrack gloomily drones on, the camera shows us a mix of the fantastic and the utilitarian: mid-century modern chairs lined up at teletype machines, a key in a doorknob, banks of fluorescent lights, or a mural of swimmers at a beachside resort. Given that the bunker was designed for the Yugoslav apparatchiks in the event of a nuclear war, who did they think would be on the other end of the communication devices? At least the operators had chic, Danish-looking chairs to sit on. And the generals and cabinet ministers would be able to remember better days, in the sun and at the seaside, as they cowered, eating canned food and waiting for the radiation to dissipate.

Domanović’s *Turbo Sculptures* (2005-2013) capture a more recent twisting of history. Sculptures of Bruce Lee, Bob Marley, and (proposed but abandoned) Samantha Fox, mark some attempts, after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, to provide public sculptures that circumvent the recent past. And they suggest a popular attempt at memory-making that is at least more refreshing than the crude forms of nationalism to be found in Macedonia, such as, Suzana Milevska recently wrote in *e-flux*, monuments in Skopje “of unrecognized and incomplete identities, marginal heroes, and exaggerated victories from the past were used as strategies for inducing collective enjoyment, and ultimately selfdelusion.”¹ But Domanović’s turbo monuments are more properly sublime, especially the Bruce Lee sculpture unveiled in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2005. A shiny, chromed figure, Bruce Lee represents an attempt to suture over the recent past of the Balkans, the fractious war, claims and counter-claims of atrocity, victim-hood, shame and blame. In Domanović’s video, pop culture icons (Batman, Fox, Bob Marley...) are layered over standard images of war (a tank facing the audience). The form of that video — its corporatized and clunky format, over-identifying with the format of cheesy TV news — then attempts to match the very “turbo” quality of what we might call low postmodernism (or lo pomo).

But Bošnjak’s video is more stylish and cool. The bunkers, its modern furniture and grey-steel teletype machines would not be out of place in a hipster boutique in Brooklyn or Kreuzberg. So too, the retro-kitsch concept of folk sculptures are very much in keeping with our present-day fascination with recent pop culture. Since the 1990s, that is, global pop culture has successively mined the recent past (first the 1970s, then the 1980s, now the 1990s, as the 20th anniversary of Nirvana’s *Nevermind* album reminded us). What those pop culture moments do, especially Domanović and Bošnjak’s art, is to bring to the fore the troubled way in which we, as social subjects, deal with our history, our memory.

First of all, the sculptures are fetishes, which allow the Balkan subjects to disavow their (our) history. For Lacan, the fetish is what allows the subject to misrecognize its lack (or surplus), to forget about it. Domanović’s images (the freeze frames that circulate as metonyms of the work) offer viewers the unwrapping of a Bruce Lee sculpture, for instance, next to a peeled back slide curled on a stack of pictures. That is, the images are simultaneously photograph, video or moving image, and object. Such an accelerated wrapping/unwrapping (like the veritable money shot that is the YouTube genre of unboxing devices) is all the more necessary to distract us from our violent past and present. That is, the form of the video functions all the more hurriedly, hysterically, perhaps: #Accelerationism, is after all, a hysterical philosophy *par excellence*. This operation of fetishistic disavowal, Slavoj Žižek reminds us, is one of four ways in which we negate, repress, or deny the past. In his book *Less than Nothing* (2013), Žižek distinguishes between Freud’s four “main forms” of Ver- : “*Verwerfung* (foreclosure/rejection);

Verdrängung (repression); *Verneinung* (denial); *Verleugnung* (disavowal).” Žižek continues: “In *Verwerfung*, the content is thrown out of the symbolic, de-symbolized, so that it can only return in the Real (in the guise of hallucinations). In *Verdrängung*, the content remains within the symbolic but is inaccessible to consciousness, relegated to the Other Scene, returning in the guise of symptoms. In *Verneinung*, the content is admitted into consciousness, but marked by a denial. In *Verleugnung*, it is admitted a positive form, but ... it is not really integrated into the subject’s symbolic universe.”²

Domanović’s *Turbo Sculptures* suggest disavowal, or *Verleugnung*, in that the horrors of the Balkan wars are “admitted into consciousness”: “Nobody from the wars of the 1990s or from the former Yugoslavia deserves a monument, because all our leaders did was to prevent us from progressing,” declares Bojan Marceta, who helped organize a statue of Rocky/Sylvester Stallone in the Serbian town of Zitiste. But the horrors are disavowed, isolated, by being transformed into the fetish of the Turbo sculpture, the celebrity monument, a kind of fan art writ large. Domanović’s naming of Turbo Sculpture owes much to an indigenous postmodern kitsch found in the Balkans during and after the wars. From gaudy architecture to nationalist politics, Turbo denotes a frenetic striation of affect, ornament, and aesthetics. This effect is in turn mimicked, perhaps, in Domanović’s video’s curvy layers of images which, placed one on another, build an argument through sheer excess.

For all its elegance, Bošnjak’s *Hotel Balkan*, meanwhile, is more horror movie-like in its use of tracking shots down long, cramped corridors, and its forensics’ focus pulling that will remorselessly move from one telephone or object to another. With no narration, the role of sound is important, while with the imagery Bošnjak provides us with a way to think historically about technology and what Egyptian artist Basim Magdy calls “our futuristic past.” That is, the sound has an ambient feel, with static, buzzing, and hums that suggest the feedback caused by deteriorating electronic machinery. The machinery depicted in the video: old turntables and microphones and bulky plastic desk phones, a switchboard with dozens of openings waiting for input jacks — the sounds, and technology, of the 1970s and 80s. Now and then the soundtrack is a bit more modern: is that the buzzing and screech of a dial-up modem? The beeping of 8-bit video games? The connection made between analogue tech to Balkan history suggests that Tito’s bunker may be re-figured as a symptom of our past. That is, the “future” of that Communist past is surely what is now repressed (the operation of *Verdrängung*) in our neoliberal present, as repressed as the bulky communications technology, computers, and switchboards have been relegated to the scrapheap of history. In both cases, a metahistorical sensibility is at work, one with a self-conscious awareness of the visual and narrative elements of history. So too with Jon Rafman’s video, *Mainsqueeze* (2014), but with the addition of the affective (thusmaking it psychoanalytic) via registers of disgust, anxiety, and paranoia, if not anger.

Writers such as Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai have helped us to think about emotions, or affect, in queer and feminist and postcolonial ways that exceed those ideas’ origins in Lacan, Deleuze, or Kristeva. To which we can add questions of a historical attitude towards digital networks evident in Rafman’s work. And so what of the history of that technology, or digital or computer memories that are internal to those systems? It is easier, perhaps, to wipe the history of one’s browsing than to wipe bodily fluids off the keyboard — and it is such an “ugh factor” that we encounter with *Mainsqueeze*. With Rafman, instead of Ngai’s “ugly feelings,” then, we have “ugh feelings.”

In *Mainsqueeze*, we see a discontinuous series of images, often scenes of destruction: a washing machine running until it self-destructs, photos of passed-out drunks with their faces covered in black marker; a watermelon crushed between a muscleman’s thighs, an office worker smashing his laptop, a young woman stepping on a crayfish, violent historical paintings such as Caravaggio’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1598-1599). Someone in a turtle costume tries to escape from rope, while a dog barks and a cellphone buzzes. The graffiti’d drunks walk that fine line between college hazing pranks and Abu Ghraib “soft torture,” reminding us of how both practices also tend to be relentlessly documented by the perpetrators: no one is so ashamed of their actions that they also won’t upload it to Facebook. This is a different kind of memory, perhaps: acknowledged, not even disavowed. Rafman’s work suggests we may

need a fifth category for Žižekian or Freudian repression: here, everything is disgusting, anxiety-inducing, and even while nothing is hidden (the Internet, and Rafman, will show us almost anything), we cannot help but feel paranoid about what we aren't watching, what is hidden in the society of total transparency and uploading.

Mainsqueeze is thus difficult to watch, and it is no wonder that, in the U.S., a country where torture and drone warfare is disavowed but carried on furtively, Rafman's work should itself be censored (as when the video was cut from his recent St. Louis Museum exhibition). But this is as it should be, and in a post *Charlie Hebdo* political sphere, where art critics and iconophobia are vilified, a little old-fashioned censorship is to be welcomed as bracingly honest. For really, there is no rational (or realist) criticism possible with Rafman: no point in breaking down the origins of a given image, its progress from event or its simulacra to digital dissemination and (mock) outrage. That social media cycle is all too well known, as predictable and banal as a philistine and the gutter press in a former age. What I mean here, is that no matter how much information one reads about the etiology of a given *Mainsqueeze* image or sequence, one is still disgusted. You could learn, for instance, that the shellfish that a woman steps on while a voice-over discusses caring for an infirm relative was in fact a robotic shellfish or that the image was CGI'd. No matter: the look is amateur internet video, the crack and squish have done their work, and we can never deny our disgust retroactively. The title of this essay, *Always Futurize!* is a reference to Fredric Jameson's well-known call, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), to "always historicize!", to always contextualize cultural objects in history. Today we face a different task, as suggested by these artworks. What future do we have in front of us? The apocalyptic end times suggested by so many Hollywood films? The "peak oil" moment of wind turbines and hippies? The shiny, unproblematic connectivity promised by cellphone ads? The sped-up contradictions philosophized by #Accelerationism? We do not know, of course, but to think about the future, and to inquire into its relation with our past, our history, our emotions and our memory, may be the most important question today.

1 Suzana Milevska, "Ágalma: The 'Objet Petit a,' Alexander the Great, and Other Excesses of Skopje 2014," *e-flux* 57 (Sept. 2014).

2 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*. (London: Verso, 2012), 859.

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