

Book Review

Mileta Prodanović. 2023. *An Older and More Beautiful Belgrade. A Visual Chronicle of the Milošević Era*. Budapest/Vienna/New York: CEU Press. 215 pp., ISBN 9789633866306 (hardcover), ISBN 9789633866320 (paperback), ISBN 9789633866313 (eBook), €75.00/€29.00/available in Open Access: <https://ceupress.com/book/older-and-more-beautiful-belgrade>

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This book is a collection of reflections on the visual transformations of Serbia and its capital Belgrade in the period marked by great economic and cultural turbulence, war in the former Yugoslavia, and, most of all, the political regime personified by Slobodan Milošević (1989–2000). The author, an astute observer and witness of these transformations, connects the changes in visual culture and communication in the public and private spheres of life with wider social and political developments. Accordingly, the book focuses on that single step which, in the words of the author's colleague, Bosnian artist Jusuf Hadžifejzović, separates “kitsch” and “blood”.¹

The three main chapters are titled “New Forms of Sacrilege”, “Pathopolis”, and “Necropolis”. The first chapter discusses various aspects of profanation of the Orthodox Christian imagery in the postsocialist “revival” of religious life in Serbia, including the historical roots of this profanation in the Soviet Union and socialist Yugoslavia. The second chapter discusses a number of manifestations of degradation of visual culture and urban life in Belgrade and establishes connections between these developments. The author takes a thorough look at a wide variety of phenomena, such as banknotes as “images of the state” (44); medals as “reflections of incoherent ideology” (96); Belgrade's eclectic and incoherent architecture; its downfall as a result of the consequences of war in former Yugoslavia, including the NATO bombing in 1999; the residences of the new social elites and Serbian war-profiteering *nouveau riche*; the degradation of public monuments; urban graffiti; advertising and visual communication; election posters and slogans; public and private megalomania, celebrity charlatans, and their public presence, to name but a

¹ For more on the artistic performance “From Kitsch to Blood, There Is Only One Step”, see “Od kiča do krvi je samo jedan korak.” Bosanski Kulturni Centar KS. Sarajevo. 29 September 2022. <https://bkc.ba/od-kica-do-krvi-je-samo-jedan-korak/>.

few. The third chapter discusses aspects of life connected with death, such as political manipulation of dead bodies; obituaries; graves of dignitaries and ordinary people, even including cases of putting mobile phones into tombs for “direct communication” with the deceased.

Mileta Prodanović is a notable Serbian visual artist and writer, professor, and former Rector of the University of Arts in Belgrade, actively involved in the intellectual opposition to Slobodan Milošević’s regime in the 1990s. This book, based on the author’s previously published essays and lectures, was originally compiled in Serbian in 2001, the year in which Slobodan Milošević left Belgrade to spend the rest of his life imprisoned in The Hague. The title of the book ironically refers to a phrase used to justify the military action of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) against Dubrovnik in 1991–1992 (“We shall build an older and more beautiful Dubrovnik”).

The book is amply illustrated and the author considers it “more of a picture book than a sustained polemic or a series of essays” (11) and a “preparatory sketch” for larger studies of Belgrade’s cultural crisis in the 1990s (16). As an author of such a study I can testify that I have used *An Older and More Beautiful Belgrade* in its original version as a valuable and reliable illustration of the cultural climate in Belgrade in the 1990s, although this book focuses only on its negative aspects. (I have nevertheless written many pages also discussing the positive ones.) In this book, Belgrade is pictured as a gigantic *Wunderkammer* filled with objects and narratives that could only exist in the particular circumstances this city found itself in as the capital of a country which violently fell apart. For example, such imagery might have included holy images depicted on ballpoint pens, key rings, badges, notebook covers, cigarette lighters, menus, or beer labels. *Prodanović* places such objects under a microscope, but not as a detached and impartial observer. According to him, and I can subscribe to his opinion, the physical and moral devolution of Belgrade continues, so this book is “not just history but an ongoing narrative” (17), in accordance with the observation that cities materialise social relations. Hence the book’s relevance in its present form adapted for an international readership.

In the “Editor’s Note”, *Robert Horvitz* explains “why a book about a small atypical country in the 1990s is relevant today”. He sees many aspects of Trump’s American presidency “foreshadowed in Milošević’s populist makeover of Serbia”: both Trump and Milošević are “demagogues who undermined the rule of law, exploited their supporters’ real and imagined grievances, attacked professional journalism and violated public trust in election results” (viii). Both used tribalism to sabotage democracy. On the other hand, NATO’s bombing of Serbia in 1999 and the border changes that gave Kosovo independence are now cited by Russia as precedents justifying its bombing of Ukraine and border changes to “protect” Crimea and Donbass. The Russian and Serbian governments’ unwavering support for each other on these issues keeps this analogy alive, and the situations seem to be similar in a

structural sense (viii). Be that as it may, written with passion and wit, *An Older and More Beautiful Belgrade* is a valuable source for any reader attempting to grasp the complexities of the Serbian society of the 1990s.