

2022

Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist
Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia,
1945-1985. By Bojana Videkanic.
Montreal: McGill-Queen's University
Press, 2019. 304 pages. Notes.
Illustrations. Figures. 99.00, hard bound;
33.00, paper; \$31.35, ebook.

Bobic, N

<https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/21265>

10.1017/slr.2023.40

Slavic Review

Cambridge University Press (CUP)

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945-1985, by Bojana Videnaković, McGill-Queen's University Press: Montreal & Kingston, 2019, 304 pages, £33.00 (paperback), £99.00 (hardback), \$31.35 (ebook) ISBN 978-0773559462

In a world where thinking and practising otherwise to the legitimised hegemony of knowledge is an exception, and where there are still far too few books on art dedicated to addressing how various hegemonic positions around economics, colonialism, and cultural imperialism were historically circumvented from an aesthetic perspective, Bojana Videnaković's *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945-1985* is a welcome counter to the identified gap. This monograph, which was informed and driven by Videnaković's doctoral thesis, uses a focused and case study approach spanning six chapters to bring together the originary positions and translations of Yugoslav art between 1945-85. Videnaković focuses on socialist realism through to socialism modernism and discusses the ways in which they converge into and extend into what she calls nonaligned modernism. The impetus is to articulate both the unique positioning of Yugoslav nonaligned modernism in national and international art discourse, as well as to realign the narrational discourse around art since the 1990s dissolution of Yugoslavia. From this perspective, the text is a valuable and necessary read for anyone interested in the context.

The analysed case studies are thematic, chronological, and often complemented with images. The list of these case studies is too large to cover; however, it is worthwhile to note that the introduction is foregrounded by Antun Augustinčić's monument 'Peace',

which was Yugoslavia's input to the UN Headquarters in New York in 1952. It was a symbolic indicator in pursuit of a future where women lead – such trailblazing fostering a greater chance of delivering peace. The case study that follows is by the same sculptor, although the 1955 'Yekakit 12: Monument to the Victims of Fascism' is in Ethiopia and symbolised with children, women, and men who died in the throes of war against Italian imperialism. Videnaković uses these monuments to signpost the active and conscious political engagement and ideology of Yugoslavia, a country whose future was marked by a clear desire for peace, transculturism, anticolonialism, antifascism, and anticolonialism. The progressive political aesthetic was embedded in the formalisation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), with the first conference taking place in Belgrade in 1961. Indeed, the case studies demonstrate that socialist Yugoslavia operated liberally and that its art was taken beyond Yugoslav borders: various Biennales of panoramic exhibitions travelled to the West, East, as well as the non-aligned countries. That the political aesthetic was forward-looking becomes further evident in the overview of how nonalignment was curated over a 30-year period at the Ljubljana Biennale of Graphic Arts, established in 1955. The representation of art was geographically diverse, spanning contexts from Africa, Asia, and the Americas; the presence of Western and non-Western art was largely even. While Videnaković does briefly note the lack of female representation, the monograph fails to delve with critical depth into the explicit absence of women in the alternative aesthetic signification – the proclaimed progressiveness was evidently limited.

Nonaligned Modernism provides a passionate, insightful, and interdisciplinary analysis of the ways in which art in Yugoslavia did not conform to standard aesthetic categories found in western modernism or socialist realism given the unique position of socialist Yugoslavia that embraced the alternative 'third way' politics of non-alignment associated with Cold War politics. Although Videnaković sequences nonaligned modernism through the frames of the alternative signifying process of Yugoslavia which was established as a series of multi-ethnic republics, with populations endeavouring to establish balance between Soviet communism and Western capitalism, NAM, and the semi-colonial/oriental concept of Balkanism, the text fails to find clear and nuanced connections between these lenses. The nexus between Balkanism and art remains unclear, especially when it comes to the stereotypes of 'nesting orientalisms' found within former Yugoslavia. This is significant given the argument that art was entangled in the larger politics of emancipation associated with the SFRY. Where the monograph particularly falters is in the lack of analysis of certain case studies. For example, it is not clear why Videnaković quickly brushes past the role of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade and its alternative signifying role in Yugoslavia's and the global cultural aesthetic. After all, the museum and the art exhibited were envisaged to dislocate the hegemonic permeation of acknowledged Western cities such as Rome and Paris as beacons of culture, and against which all culture is to be measured and become subservient to. Moreover, that the museum is located in a park with works of the most significant Yugoslav sculptors is significant, although this remains unexplored. There

is also scope to further interrogate, or at least come back to in the sixth concluding chapter, the role of ‘impossible histories’ – which is framed in the first introduction chapter – in terms of the lessons the history of socialist Yugoslavia and NAM offer to the homogenous and hegemonic conception of nation-states, including the associated art and aesthetics of post-1990s Yugoslavia. Doing this could help clarify the promising concluding words of this monograph – by revisiting the aesthetic of socialist Yugoslavia including its anti-imperialist and anti-fascist agenda, “the aim of this study [is] to further these goals and place them front and centre in the emerging nonhierarchical Yugoslav and global art worlds” (Videnaković, 220).

Dr Nikolina Bobic
School of Art, Design and Architecture (Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Business)
Plymouth University
Roland Levinsky Building, Drake Circus, Plymouth, Devon, PL4 8AA
nikolina.bobic@plymouth.ac.uk.