“I Will Speak in Their Own Language”

Yugoslav Socialist Monuments and Science Fiction

Raino Isto

This article analyzes the relationship between science fiction paradigms and socialist-era Yugoslav monuments through a discussion of two recent independent films, *Sankofa* and *A Second World*. In *Sankofa*, these monuments are documented as part of the creation of a final collective archive before the apocalyptic destruction of human society, while in *A Second World* the monuments visually narrate the story of an elderly man who claims to be communicating with an alien utopia. The article considers the historical context of these monuments, how they emerged into popular culture, and how their association with science fiction affects our understandings of them.

Introduction

Olaf Stapledon’s epic future history novel *Last and First Men: A Story of the Near and Far Future* (1930) chronicles the development and transformation of humanity over the course of two billion years. The book’s narrative begins in “Balkan Europe,” a fact that is seldom commented upon. For Stapledon, writing in the 1930s, the epithet “balkan” clearly refers both to a geographical region—Southeastern Europe, where the events that began the First World War played out—but even more so to an ontological condition, one of fracture and fragmentation, of “compulsive tribalism” (19). In the Balkan Europe of *Last and First Men*’s first chapters, the spiritual differences of cultural groups fail to reconcile; they dissolve into conflict, temporarily united only by external foes (America and the Far East). It is perhaps appropriate, then, that Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson’s multimedia adaption of Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* finds its visual inspiration in Balkan Europe as well, although in a different way.

Jóhannsson’s adaptation of Stapledon’s novel—a score with accompanying film footage, and voice narration by actress Tilda Swinton—was one of the renowned composer’s last projects before his death in 2018. Jóhannsson, known for his soundtrack work on films such as *The Theory of Everything*

Extrapolation, vol. 60, no. 3 (2019) https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2019.18

(James Marsh, 2014) and *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016), drew the initial inspiration for his film from his discovery, in 2010, of a series of photographs of massive, predominantly abstract monuments constructed across socialist Yugoslavia between the 1960s and the 1980s. In fact, the monuments as a visual inspiration came *before* the decision to narrate the project with Stapledon's text: "I'd never really found an idea that propelled me, and then I saw it. […] There. Fully formed," Jóhannsson said of his first encounter with the images of the Yugoslav monuments (qtd. in Male). After discovering the existence of the sculptures, he traveled in the states of former Yugoslavia for a month with Norwegian cinematographer Sturla Brandth Grøvlen and together they shot a body of black and white footage of several of these monuments, highlighting their novel shapes and weathered concrete, stone, and steel surfaces. Jóhannsson and Grøvlen's approach to the monuments focused on their relationship to natural phenomena (the sky, the atmosphere), visually removing the busier elements of their spatial context. "We wanted to film these sculptures in a very formalistic manner," Jóhannsson explained (qtd. in Male). As he began to write music to accompany the footage, Jóhannsson turned to Stapledon's fiction, and to *Last and First Men* in particular, as source material that matched the "alien and otherworldly" aesthetics of the monuments, their apparent link to a civilization distant in both time and space from that of contemporary Western Europe (qtd. in Male). While Stapledon's *Last and First Men* begins in Balkan Europe, Jóhannsson's film and its score *end* there: he adapted the narration for the footage and music from the final chapters of Stapledon's book, and the monuments of former Yugoslavia thus visualize not the rupture of the First Men, but the end of human civilization witnessed by the Last Men. Towering against cloud-streaked skies and forested mountains, the Yugoslav monuments seem to promise—like Stapledon's novel—the possibility of communication across stretches of time that far exceed the scale easily grasped by human experience.

Jóhann Jóhannsson's version of *Last and First Men* is not the first film to explicitly frame the Yugoslav socialist monuments as part of a science fictional narrative. Indeed, it is one of a growing number of works that place these memorials in science fiction settings, and in fact use their aesthetic qualities to produce the "alien and otherworldly" impressions associated with the science fictional mode. In this article, I set out to understand what is at stake in the framing of this particular corpus of monuments as science fiction. What does it mean to read the Yugoslav monuments as science fiction? What are the specific characteristics of this reading? What is obscured and what is illuminated about the monuments in the course of this historical re-imagining?

I seek to answer these questions by analyzing how Yugoslav monuments are intertwined with representational modes of science fiction in two recent independent films: *Sankofa* (Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher, 2015), and *A Second World* (Ruben Woodin-Dechamps and Oscar Hudson, 2016). Like Jóhannsson, the directors of these two films were inspired by photographs of the Yugoslav monuments. Both films are the work of filmmakers based in Western Europe who traveled to the region to film these sculptures, later using this footage to produce films that imagine these memorials as the mysterious cipher for a lost past, or another world. They are, so far, the only two films to present the Yugoslav monuments in the context of science fiction. (Given Jóhannsson's untimely death, *Last and First Men* has been performed only a few times, as an orchestral piece accompanied by video. It has not yet seen finalized release as a film, although it was intended to eventually be released as such.) However, they are part of an expanding body of visual culture—including music videos and album cover art—that treat Yugoslavia's socialist monuments as if they belong to a remote reality.[1]

Sankofa and *A Second World* approach the monuments from two distinct perspectives: in the former, the monuments serve as indexes of the remoteness of memory in a post-apocalyptic setting, while in the latter the monuments represent the alternate possibilities of an alien utopia. Both films demonstrate the power that science fiction possesses to redirect our attention to marginalized histories as alternatives to hegemonic narratives. But they also evidence the ways that science fiction can reify (neo-) colonial imaginaries that relegate certain geographies to other times and obscure how those geographies relate to global networks of political power. In fact, both of these films are structured around a more contemporary (and differently geopolitically inflected) version of what scholar John Rieder calls "the colonial gaze" in science fiction. Rieder argues that the emergence of science fiction as a literary mode was related—through tropes such as the imaginary voyage, the quest for lost civilizations, and the apocalyptic catastrophe—to a set of ideologies and conflicts underlying colonialism. Rieder proposes the existence of what he terms "the colonial gaze," a configuring relationship that "distributes knowledge and power to the one who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at" (7). This relationship of distributed power is connected to empire, and specifically to the advances in science that accompanied anthropological interest in colonial populations as examples of primitive otherness (Rieder 4–5; cf. Kerslake 8–24). The stakes of power and control at play in this relationship are particularly visible in science fiction's sustained interest in displacement in history, which is in turn linked

with the relegation of the anthropological "other" to a different time, what anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls the "denial of coevalness" (31).

Science fiction is not necessarily always complicit in *sustaining* the distribution of power put in place by the colonial gaze; rather, as Rieder puts it, "science fiction exposes something that colonialism imposes" (15). *Sankofa* and *A Second World* both reveal and participate in a variation of this distribution of vision and knowledge, in different ways. In both cases, their inflection of the colonial gaze relates to the location of the monuments themselves, in the Balkans. As Andrew Hammond shows, nineteenth-century depictions of Eastern Europe, and of the Balkans in particular, treated the region as a wild zone, a dangerous landscape inhabited by frequently savage peoples. Western European writing often framed the Balkans as the source of ancient evils bent on destroying Western civilization—Transylvania as the harshly mountainous homeland of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), for instance (Hammond 36–37). In the early twentieth century, historian Maria Todorova argues, the Balkans became associated both with the breakup of "large and viable political units" and with "a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, [and] the barbarian" (453). Located at the edges of the crumbling Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, the Balkans became a kind of geographical signifier for liminality and marginality *par excellence*. By the close of the twentieth century, discourses surrounding the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia both perpetuated these associations and transformed them: the Balkans became a kind of dangerous "other" *within* Europe, representing the possibility of the failure and breakdown of Western society (Bjelić 9–10). The evolution of discourses about the Balkans has, in many ways, produced the region as a particularly suitable setting for science fictional narratives. While neither *Sankofa* nor *A Second World* actively perpetuates the worst aspects of these imaginative frameworks, they both receive the region as one characterized by a mysterious otherness, distant and yet familiar, and fraught with the potential for collapse and oblivion.

Monuments, Memes, Utopia, and Ruins

The monuments built in postwar Yugoslavia emerged into global popular culture linked to a science fictional narrative of displacement in time. In 2011, a gallery of images began circulating on the internet with the accompanying title "25 abandoned Yugoslavia monuments that look like they're from the future."[2] The collection of photos was initially inaccurately identified as documenting

Figure 1. Jan Kempenaers, *Spomenik #6 (Kozara),* 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

"Soviet" monuments, but the title of the article was later changed (Džuverović 9). The photographs that accompanied the article were taken from the 2010 photobook *Spomenik #1–26: The Monuments of Former Yugoslavia*, the work of a Belgian photographer named Jan Kempenaers (Figure 1).[3]

It was Kempenaers's photographs that first inspired Jóhann Jóhannsson to travel to Southeastern Europe to film the monuments, and they were likewise the medium through which Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher (director of *Sankofa*), and Ruben Woodin-Dechamps and Oscar Hudson (directors of *A Second World*) first discovered the sculptures. Kempenaers framed the monuments against abandoned, sometimes misty landscapes, and they did indeed appear as if they were lost in time. Marked with graffiti and often surrounded by dense foliage, with no human visitors in sight, the monuments appeared completely forgotten. In June 2013, an article appeared in *The Guardian* with a headline stating that the monuments "look like alien art." The article described the sculptures as looking like "alien landings, crop circles or Pink Floyd album

covers" (Surtrees). The title of Kempenaers's book, *Spomenik* (the Bosnian-Serbo-Croatian and Macedonian word for 'monument') quickly became the appellation used to describe these modernist monuments in English-language media. As architectural critic Owen Hatherley writes, the spomeniks became "a successful brand," and their meme-ification as "concrete clickbait" tended to link the structures to an imagined narrative of future oblivion.

Commemorative monuments occupy a curious middle position between architecture and sculpture, and thus any discussion of monuments in science-fictional contexts demands a brief consideration of how architecture relates to science fiction more broadly. As Nic Clear suggests, science fiction and architecture are most frequently thought of together in the context of utopian projects to remake urban space in conjunction with transformative changes in technology. From the interwar avant-gardes to various post-war experimentations, utopian architectural projects have—like utopian science fiction—sought to envision new ways of inhabiting modern (and postmodern) environments (Fortin 30–33 and Clear 277–278). In recent decades, however, some architectural visions have adopted a sleek aesthetic and fetish for progress that mirrors certain science fictional aesthetics, but lacks the critical edge of much science fiction (Clear 286). The relationship between accelerated technology and utopian thinking, however, is less apparent in the case of commemorative monuments than it is with other kinds of architecture. Indeed, if the spomeniks[4] were utopian (Videkanić 35), they were utopian in a slightly different way: they represented not so much (or not only) a dynamic and ideal future, as a mystifying recent past that opened up possible futures without concretely attempting to enact them spatially.

It is perhaps slightly more helpful to consider the ways that commemorative monuments figure in science fiction literature and film, rather than the connections between science fiction and avant-garde visions for lived environments. Although they appear with less frequency than other kinds of iconic "artifacts" that contribute to the transference of information across time and space in science fiction (Wolfe 52), monuments nonetheless surface at certain key moments in the history of the genre. They often pose questions about the shape of history itself, presenting the protagonists of science fiction stories with models of causality ranging from the linear to the cyclical and even the inverted (Isto 493–494, 496–497, 498–499). It is, for example, the ominous White Sphinx that first greets H. G. Wells's time traveler in the distant future, posing anew the riddle of humanity. John Taine's novel *The Time Stream* (1946) begins when its protagonists travel back through time to the vast "desert of the monuments," and the monumental sculptural reliefs of a colossal ancient city

narrate the rise and fall of the alien Old Ones in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936). The inscrutable black monolith sets in motion humankind's evolution in Clarke and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). In Dan Simmons's *Hyperion Cantos* (1989–1997), the six Time Tombs move backwards through time, setting in motion a catastrophic conflict. In these and other examples, the monument participates not in the projection of an ideal future (as in much utopian architecture), but rather in making explicit the difficulties of representing relationships between past, present, and future (Isto 496–497, 501–502). The explicitly symbolic character of monuments, and their link to memory, places them in a different discourse than that of cities of the future.

Given this relationship to memory, it is unsurprising that the spomeniks have also been framed as ruins. Images of the monuments, first made by Kempenaers and then others, were an early entry in a continually growing body of photography focused on the built heritage of former socialist countries, much of which seems to occupy a visual territory parallel to so-called 'ruin porn' (Rann; cf. Kulić). The category of ruin porn developed first as a way to describe and critically delineate a body of work focused on the "aesthetic objectification" of former industrial spaces, especially the urban landscape of Detroit, Michigan (Strangleman 25). Images of abandoned and crumbling factories, walls covered in graffiti or vines, with paint peeling and ceilings caving in, seemed to shift such spaces of production outside of history, severing their linkage to specific places or communities. Recent photography of architecture and public sculpture in the former Eastern Europe—whether it focuses on Yugoslav monuments (Kempenaers), bus stop architecture across the former Soviet Union (Herwig), or Soviet Brutalism (Chaubin)—often follows a similar paradigm. Although these photographs ostensibly act as documentation, they play perhaps their most important role as vehicles of an aestheticization that is closely tied to "post-apocalyptic discourse" (Arnold 331).

The post-apocalyptic quality of ruin porn images also makes them appealing as a component of "dark tourism"—tourism focused on sites of disaster or death (Arnold 336, cf. Lennon and Foley). Indeed, tourism has been importantly intertwined with the spread of the spomeniks as a brand, although this tourism is only sometimes focused on the relationship between the monuments and death. At other times the appeal of the spomeniks has simply added to the already established appeal of the Balkans as a zone of sublime natural beauty, exotic culture, and implied danger, and the popularity of the spomeniks becomes linked to a touristic imaginary that revels in the post-Cold War accessibility of these sites to global travelers, creating a kind of "new Orientalism" (Kulić). Photos of the monuments now regularly appear

on travel blogs, and the recent publication *Spomenik Monument Database* both lays out brief histories for an impressive number of the monuments and includes a map of their locations with GPS co-ordinates (Niebyl). This level of information about the monuments' locations was not yet available when either film was produced, however; images of monuments were available, but travel suggestions were not. The makers of both films explain that they tracked the monuments down primarily using the information from Kempenaers's book (which gives general site names for each monument). Wentzel-Fisher supplemented this information with a combination of Google maps and local road maps, while Woodin-Dechamps and Hudson relied on a translator to ask directions from locals.[5] Both films have been released, however, into a different context, in which the monuments have become more accessible, and more firmly associated with a touristic imaginary.

Yugoslav Socialist Monuments as History

Before considering how the spomeniks are deployed in the two films upon which this article focuses, we should understand how these sculptures and memorial complexes came to be made, what they commemorated, and why they look the way they do. These monuments were constructed in Yugoslavia during the postwar years, when the country was controlled by the Yugoslav Communist Party (led by Josip Broz Tito, who had also commanded the Yugoslav Partisans during the war). The majority of these monuments were officially dedicated to the People's Liberation War (the terminology used to describe the Partisan resistance[6] against fascist forces and their collaborators during the Second World War), and to the Yugoslav socialist revolution (Horvatinčić 105). While the narrative of the Partisan struggle was important for legitimizing postwar communist parties and regimes across the former Eastern Europe (Judt 41), the character of Partisan guerilla warfare was also important. In countries like Yugoslavia, Partisan warfare was often a decentralized struggle that ranged across remote territory. Battles were fought on cliffs and in small mountain villages, and the commemorative landscape that grew up after the war followed this geographic distribution, creating monuments in areas well outside of the urban centers of postwar Yugoslavia. Sited as they were predominantly in rural or peripheral zones, the monuments served—as art historian Bojana Pejić notes—to "suggest [that] revolution [was] a natural process" by establishing the natural surroundings of memorials as one of their most striking visual and conceptual elements (13).

The iconic stylistically modernist monuments (including the ones that Kempenaers photographed) produced in the country date to the period often referred to as “late socialism”—a period usually considered to span the 1960s to the 1980s, during which many socialist nations broke with the Soviet Union, and non-alignment emerged as a viable position in the global Cold War (Erjavec 3). Yugoslavia had broken its ties with the USSR in 1948, and the construction of monuments in a variety of hybrid modernist modes—including biomorphic abstraction, Cubo-Futurism, and Surrealism—served to visually separate Yugoslav commemorative art from Socialist Realist modes associated with the Soviet sphere (Videkanić 97–98). Developments in urbanism as well as in neo-avant-garde art practices influenced the spatial and formal aspects of monumental sculpture, and many of the memorials sought to mediate between a deep or long construction of historic time and the radical changes taking place in Yugoslav society in the present (Kulić and Mrduljaš 216–228). In keeping with the Yugoslavian move towards decentralization that accompanied the implementation of self-management socialism, many of the monuments were commissioned and their realization overseen by local committees, and often the artists employed to create them were given significant freedom to experiment formally and symbolically (Grimmer and Bogdanović 34). As a result, the “modernism” of the Yugoslavian memorials was diverse: Bogdan Bodanović worked primarily in stone and incorporated Surrealist references to various mystical traditions; Miodrag Živković treated figures and landscape elements with a Cubo-Futurist sensibility; and Dušan Džamonja created nonrepresentational but symbolically suggestive forms, to name just a few examples.

Since the end of socialism and the violence that took place during Yugoslavia’s break-up, the monuments have often fallen victim to iconoclastic gestures motivated by rejection of the socialist past as totalitarian and by the new politics of nationalism amongst the emergent states of the former Yugoslavia (Kirn 254–258). Thus, the “ruined” status of the monuments in contemporary culture functions as a dual index of the collapse of the historical project of global socialism and of the violence in the Balkans at the close of the century. These historical events can of course be encountered vicariously and touristically in a number of ways. However, the framework of science fiction potentially allows these histories—materialized in the monuments—to be transposed out of the flow of time and causality. From this position, they can either challenge narratives of Western progress (such as the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism after the end of the Cold War), or else be completely commodified as obsolete signs of a lost utopia. Both possibilities are evident, in

different ways, in the two films discussed below, and the ways the monuments are represented in these films indicates their richness as symbols for the conflicted status of utopian visions and the continuity of cultural memory in the historical present.

Sankofa: The Monument and the Post-Apocalyptic Archive

The film *Sankofa* presents a typical narrative of post-apocalyptic interstellar recolonization gone awry. The entire film takes place within the confines of a single shuttlecraft. The film begins when Sally, the sole occupant of the craft, is awoken from cryo-stasis by the ship's computer, in response to the discovery of a piece of cargo brought onboard by a maintenance drone. As Sally recovers from the memory loss she has suffered during cryo-sleep, and begins to examine the contents of the cargo container, she learns more about the purpose of her ship and its mission. In the wake of an unspecified apocalyptic disaster—the film suggests that it is an environmental calamity brought about by human actions—many residents of Earth were placed on ships headed for Titan. As part of this partial evacuation of the planet (many were left behind to die in the approaching disaster), an archive of Earth was created, an amorphous collection of documentation intended to preserve humanity's legacy as it established civilization on a new world. En route, however, many of the ships were destroyed, including the ships carrying with them the archival materials. The cargo brought on board—the personal effects of a biotechnician named Gena Simon—is from one of these doomed ships. When the survivors reached Titan, they discovered that, like Sally, they suffered from permanent memory loss caused by their cryo-stasis technology. Unable to remember their past, and having lost the archive that they gathered, they decided to send a ship back to gather as much information as possible about the Earth. The lone crewmember, Sally, has been implanted with a device that allows her to transmit sensory inputs she experiences back to Titan—she is a living recording device that now represents humanity's only possible link to its history.

The cargo container belonging to Gena Simon contains an array of items, including a collection of recording devices, film reels, and mini-DV cassettes. These devices and their contents belonged to Gena's partner, a filmmaker named Jim Wilson (played by director Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher) who worked for the archiving branch of Earth Abroad (EA), the company overseeing Earth's evacuation and the colonization on Titan. *Sankofa* follows Sally's

Figure 2. Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher, still from *Sankofa*, 2015. Image courtesy of the director.

Figure 3. Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher, still from *Sankofa*, 2015. Image courtesy of the director.

encounter with Wilson's recorded footage—in a sense, the archiving of an archive, since her visual and audio inputs are transferred to Titan. The bulk of Wilson's archive, and the bulk of the flashback scenes that make up *Sankofa*, consist of a documentary that Wilson hoped would buy him passage

on a ship off Earth. Over a collage of footage of EA headquarters and news clips of bee populations waning, Wilson explains, “I recently discovered these monuments, spomeniks. There’s so little documentation about them; I figured they’d be valuable to EA and the archive.” He sets out on a journey across the former Yugoslavia to document an unspecified number of the monuments, and it is this journey—interspersed with other film projects that Wilson undertook—that Sally in turn follows as she makes her way through his cassettes and film reels.

Despite Wilson’s claim that there exists “little documentation” about the monuments, his own camera footage shows several publications outlining the most iconic spomeniks; in fact, Kempenaers’s book appears in one of the shots, open to a page showing Dušan Džamonja’s monument at Kozara, present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina. Wilson’s trip unfolds less as a project of archival recovery than as a touristic itinerary of precisely the kind suggested by so much of the documentation of these monuments in the popular media. “Just three days into Bosnia and we found the first monument,” Wilson’s voice informs the viewer over a series of shots of sculptor Miodrag Živković’s monument in Tjentište—as if there were a specific corpus of the monuments already mapped out, which of course is precisely what many travel blogs have tried to facilitate. Furthermore, Wilson encounters the monuments primarily as if they played no role in contemporary society. Although the footage documents interactions with local residents, it is only close to the end of the film that their point of view on the monuments is seriously considered, and Wilson and his cameraman seem to come upon most of the monuments without the mediation of the people living near the sites.

Wilson’s narrative—embedded within Sally’s broader story—is built from director Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher’s own experience in the region. He explains,

> The idea for *Sankofa* really came to me while hunting down the Brutalist monuments in the former Yugoslavia. [...] I was so excited to capture the monuments on film as I had only previously seen them in pictures. [...] We captured amazing footage of the spomeniks and the areas where they were built, but without a specific treatment. We knew basically what each piece was meant to do narratively, and what ideas we wanted to explore in each section, but the actual dialogue and the edits came after the fact. (qtd. in Van Hove)

This description of the filmmaking process for *Sankofa* reveals some of the unbalanced relationships of representation that are also visible in the film. It suggests a direct and unmediated encounter with the monuments, when—as numerous authors have argued—the entire region of the Balkans has long

been the subject of an "imaginative" or "literary colonization," as Vesna Goldsworthy describes it (2). The spomeniks might well be considered a continuation of this imaginative project (Kulić).

Wentzel-Fisher's commentary on the film's creation is reminiscent of what sociologist John Urry termed "the tourist gaze," one with an impulse for the "extraordinary" (12). The tourist gaze is related to the category of science fiction's colonial gaze outlined by Rieder, although the precise political valences of the two are slightly different. Urry's tourist gaze belongs as much to a postcolonial moment as a colonial one, in which the legacies of colonialism enable new but different modes of leisure and access to "other" places. What they share is a structuring relationship in which the object of this gaze is construed as exotic and is denied the possibility of speaking directly about their experience of the encounter. In the case of the monuments, this occurs precisely by approaching them as abandoned ruins, without any life in the present (and thus as paradigmatically post-apocalyptic artifacts.) One of *Sankofa*'s potential merits as a critical work of science fiction, however, is the way it highlights this gaze being filtered and redirected multiple times into the final product. The director's own experiences are remixed as Wilson's footage (which presents not only the footage of the spomeniks but also Wilson's commentary on the journey). This is transmitted through Sally (via Gena's archive), and of course her narrative together with Wilson's is presented to the film's viewer (and the colonists on Titan).

These layers of the re-presentation of histories and memories draw attention to the gaps that intercede in this transmission, and it is here that *Sankofa*'s science fiction premise can function as a critical commentary on the structure and transference of memory. Memory is a key concern for Wentzel-Fisher; in an interview about the film, he says, "Human memory is inherently flawed, and those seeking to be remembered will build monuments emphasizing the qualities they want remembered. However, as time goes on, the way in which these monuments are perceived changes, cultures change, values change, and those who built the monuments die or lose the ability to reinforce what they intended to memorialize" (qtd. in Van Hove). The film is less concerned to show, however, *how* these changing perceptions occur. In one scene, for example, Wilson films a series of reliefs installed on low walls located in the memorial park at Bubanj, in Niš, Serbia. The reliefs commemorate the victims of mass executions carried out by the German forces at the site during the Second World War, but the monument is marked by vandalism—phrases such as "СМРТ КОМУНИЗМУ" [Death to communism] and nationalist Serbian crosses are spray-painted across the reliefs. Accompanying this footage,

Wilson's narration discusses the importance of learning from the past, but laments that perhaps the act of memorializing "hinders our ability to take in the present moment." Missing, however, is a strong sense that grappling with the present moment might involve understanding the problematic truths that the vandalized monument reveals. The monuments are "time capsules" (a term Wilson uses elsewhere in the film to describe an old socialist-era hotel in Užice), but they also remain active ideological battlegrounds. This layering of histories, however, is only loosely suggested by *Sankofa*'s narrative.

Neglecting to actually trace the conflicts of history that continue to occur in and around the Yugoslav memorials is just part of *Sankofa*'s broader, problematic treatment of memory. The title of the film, *Sankofa*—the name of the mission on which Sally has been dispatched, the name for her implanted recording system—is taken from a term used by the Akan tribe of Ghana, meaning "go back and fetch it," often interpreted as an incitement to "learn from or build on the past" (Temple 127). This word has come to describe an entire school of philosophical and educational practice that relates to respecting and learning indigenous cultural practices in Africa and (in the case of diasporic communities) looking back to how these practices are used in Africa in order to preserve the connection between the past and the present (Temple 128–129). The African legacy of the idea of Sankofa is strangely absent from the film, which carefully avoids questions of racial representation. This cultural appropriation of other practices of memory—without much interest in their origins or uses by different populations—is echoed in the treatment of the spomeniks themselves. The film presents the spomeniks precisely as a universal heritage of humankind (since this is the premise and urgency of the EA archive), and in doing so it loses much interest in their specificity.

This condition of universality is promising, as a thought experiment: it raises the question of world heritage in the context of impending mass disaster. As the apocalypse approaches, the entire world potentially becomes "world heritage." Simultaneously, the *lived* relationship to that heritage—which is also, supposedly, the key factor in sustaining the meaning of monuments (Choay 7)—is about to disappear entirely. The documentation of the monuments will be all that remains. This is one of the places where *Sankofa* is most conflicted: it cannot quite decide if the monuments actually *do* hold memory within themselves, if Wilson's experience of being at the sites (transferred through the filmic documentation) is enough to preserve history, or if the memory and history with which the monuments are intertwined are *already* lost, and Wilson's cathartic artistic encounter with them is simply a tragic performance of the realization of that loss. Precisely whose memory

is being excavated, and for whom, remains ambiguous. Indeed, *Sankofa* also sidesteps the questions surrounding precisely who might be selected to colonize a new world, and who might be left to perish with the old, and thus avoids examining how geopolitical inequalities might actually affect such an imagined future scenario. At a certain point, however, as Wilson and his cameraman wander through Zagreb—taking a day off from filming, and thus fully occupying the position of the tourist—Wilson comments on the people around him going on about their daily lives despite "knowing what's coming." This comment suggests that the Balkans will belong to the world left behind, and while the film raises the specter of this question, it makes no attempt to deconstruct the causes or consequences of this political division. Wilson's documentary undertaking functions as a kind of salvage anthropology, aimed not at the contemporary lives of the places he visits in Southeastern Europe, but rather at the monuments.

Ultimately, *Sankofa* allows aesthetic complexity and strangeness (the otherworldly qualities that audiences are clearly meant to read in the spomeniks' modernist forms) to stand in for a deeper consideration of the ways that history and memory can (or cannot) be preserved at a global scale. Despite this, however, the film can still be read as a challenge to understanding what might really count as memory (or an archive) at the global scale. A distinct but related set of questions surrounds the treatment of monuments in *A Second World*, in which the possibility of another world (and thus an alternate history) presents the spomeniks as a visual intermediary between different (interplanetary) spaces and times.

A Second World: Monuments as Communication with Another World

In *Sankofa*, the Yugoslav monuments form part of a documentary narrative embedded within a science fiction story, whereas *A Second World* is essentially the formal inverse: it is a documentary film that relies heavily on a science fictional narrative embedded within the story presented. *A Second World* revolves around a real person, an elderly man named Ljuba Stojanović, who recounts his memories and evaluations of Tito's Yugoslavia for the filmmakers. He also recounts his ongoing communications with an alien utopian society. Recordings of Stojanović are intercut with footage of various Yugoslav monuments and short clips from interviews with residents living near the monuments, but it is Stojanović's fantastic story that drives the film. *A Second World* opens with a black screen, accompanied only by the ambient sounds of

twittering birds and Stojanović's voice saying (in Serbo-Croatian, subtitled in English), "Now we are going to speak with my little device. We will contact Asomaljia—the Second World. I will speak in their own language."[7] Then the film cuts—for a split second, as Stojanović takes a breath before switching from Serbo-Croatian to an indecipherable tongue that is presumably the language of Asomaljia—to an image of Dušan Džamonja's Monument to the Revolution of the People of Moslavina in Podgarić, Croatia. One of the most-reproduced of the spomeniks, the concrete monument appears to hover on a relatively small base, with a massive 'eye' formed from concentric blocks of metal at its center and a pair of blocky concrete protrusions that resemble wings extending out on either side. Then, as Stojanović speaks in the alien language, a short text superimposed over an image of a dramatic mountain range briefly explains the creation of the Yugoslav monuments. This gives way, as Stojanović continues speaking, to a series of sharp cuts from scenes of one spomenik to another, in quick succession, before settling on a steady shot of Stojanović standing in a verdant forest, next to a decaying building, speaking into a two-piece communication device. The superimposed text explains: "By the end of 1992, Yugoslavia no longer existed. In the midst of its collapse, Ljuba Stojanović claims to have established contact with the alien planet of Asomaljia."

Stojanović's endearing eccentricity, his genuine belief that he is able to speak with an alien planet, is the emotional center of the film. Thus, while the film itself is nonfiction, much of its narrative is structured around a story recognizable as science fiction: the discovery of an alien civilization. Ljuba's nostalgia for Yugoslavia blends together with his belief in alien contact. In one scene he shows the camera his invented flying saucer, boasting, "When this is seen by the English, by your people, a lot of them will be interested in it." The premise is decidedly exploitative, but the filmmakers force the audience to be compelled by Stojanović, not simply to feel pity for him. The viewer learns more about Asomaljia from Stojanović's ongoing descriptions. It is a world rich in resources, well organized socially and militarily ("America is zero compared to them"). Workers there labor for no more than six hours and then, Stojanović recounts, "come home and water the flowers in front of the house." It is, presumably, a communist utopia, although this is never specified.

Much of his explanation of the alien society is delivered over dramatic images of the monuments located in Jasenovac, Kozara, Ilirska Bistrica, and Tjentište, among others. Thus, the monuments become visual mediations between the invisible, ideal alien society described and the real world. Here the monuments *are* utopian in their associations, but they refer to a utopia that

is decidedly "other"—made remote in time and space. Their visual strangeness indexes the lost Yugoslavia, the object of the film's nostalgic desire, but at the same time it likens this past to the alien.

The precise quality of this visual strangeness bears some remark. Some of the "alien" associations of the spomeniks are derived from their placement in the landscape, their separation from the urban context. As John Timberlake points out, science fiction as a representational mode is importantly related to traditions of landscape, and landscape is one of the things that allows science fiction to juxtapose scales of time and space the way it does (25–48). That the monuments appear divorced from everyday life—indeed, separate from any human presence whatsoever—allows them to appear to belong to another society or civilization. If they once represented the symbolic extension of Yugoslavian socialist history into nature, they now represent the foreignness of that history, its fusion with non-human nature. The one time when a human figure is seen interacting with one of the spomeniks, it is Stojanović, who—near the end of the film—stands within the inner circle of Bogdan Bogdanović's monument near Popina. He declares, "This monument will be a symbol for centuries to come," but the film never explains the events that the Popina monument is meant to commemorate, or examines the circumstances of Bogdanović's vision as a monument-maker.[8] As an eternal symbol, then, the monument nonetheless remains mostly empty of historical content; its remoteness is also a remoteness from meaning.

Of equal importance to *A Second World*'s aesthetic interest in the spomeniks seems to be the concentric form of several (though by no means all) of the monuments. This creates the possibility of standing within the sculpture and gazing directly upwards or outwards through a narrow, extended space, a camera angle that appears multiple times in the film. For example, in the scene in which Stojanović visits Popina with the filmmakers, he stands framed in the circular opening of the central prism-shaped structure of the monument. Behind him, the viewer can see a second set of circular forms, aligning like a telescope. This point of view echoes an earlier scene in which Stojanović gazes at the sky through a modest cardboard telescope, insisting that he can see Asomaljia. The repetition of this visual trope suggests the kind of motion through time and space that the film cannot otherwise easily represent. In this sense, the monuments are perhaps the most science fictional aspect of *A Second World*: they establish not only the foreignness of the imagined extraterrestrial society, but also serve as the visual metaphor for the epic distances that one would have to travel to arrive there. The spomeniks mediate between the spoken testimony about history given in the interviews and an amorphous,

unspecified other form of expression—an alien, or at least, foreign expression, that presumably belongs to Asomaljia. (This mediation between human language and nonhuman language or expression is also highlighted in the film by the way that Stojanović is shown multiple times speaking to his chickens. Once, he catches and holds a rooster while he clucks and clicks to it, saying, "He's listening.") The monuments, then, are symbolic markers of a certain universal communication, an aesthetic expression that bridges not only time but—metaphorically—entire worlds and species.

This role of the spomeniks in *A Second World* is different from the one they play in *Sankofa*. In *Sankofa,* the monuments are interesting because of the memories they (potentially) preserve and their importance for *humanity* as a form of heritage. Their value derives from the past they memorialize, and their ability to keep that past alive for humankind. Coincident with this emphasis, Wentzel-Fisher is less interested in what the spomeniks tell his protagonist about Yugoslavia as it existed in the years when the monuments were created, and more interested in their status as objects commemorating the events of the Second World War. In *A Second World*, the events to which the monuments are dedicated are far less important, but the Yugoslavian context, the context of their production, also remains a bit obscure in the film. Woodin-Dechamps and Hudson transform this history into something fantastical, a transformation that hinges on Stojanović's role in the film: he is clearly an unreliable narrator, and his simultaneous nostalgia for Tito's era and belief in having contacted another world serves to dull the critical potential that might be drawn from either history or an imagined alternative world (and thus a possible future that transcends the pessimistic view that Yugoslavia was always destined to fail). Because the film begins with Stojanović's story, the monuments (and Yugoslavia) are immediately embroiled in competing narratives of memory, fiction, and testimony about the past. Co-director Ruben Woodin-Dechamps explains that *A Second World* "was shot during a three-week road trip across the Balkans. After a week spent with Ljuba learning about the complex world of Asomaljia, we set out to find as many monuments as we could armed with only a document full of roughly plotted maps and local hearsay" (qtd. in Carver). This structure is retained in the film itself, and the monuments seem to emerge as much as figments in Stojanović's story as they do as concrete traces of a lived historical era.

There are, however, moments when *A Second World* uncovers the complexity of Yugoslavia as a historical experience, as when one of the interviewees explains, "I've lived in four countries[:] the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, then in the Republic of Yugoslavia, then in Serbia and Montenegro, and now I live

in Serbia, without ever moving a muscle." This layering of history is something that Darko Suvin has also expressed as "formative" for the development of his own studies of science fiction. He explains,

> [I]t became very easy to think of alternative time-streams, of alternative histories, because we all lived them. When I was a little boy there was still monarchist Yugoslavia; then we had the Fascist occupation, we had the partisans, the revolution, post-war Titoism. These were all alternative time-streams. [...] [Y]ou had the possibility to think [...] of "possible worlds." (Pukallus and Suvin 254)

The spomeniks are intertwined with these histories in various ways, but *A Second World* tends to use the monuments, visually, to pull the viewer *out* of history as much as draw them into its multiplying possibilities. This removal from history is accomplished, in part, by the fact that the filmmakers are never present in the film. *A Second World* shares with *Sankofa* the mood of a "road trip" across its territory, but there is no footage of the directors traveling along windy backroads or through foreign cities, as there were in Wilson's footage in *Sankofa*.

Sankofa at least directly suggests some of the dynamics of power and representation at stake in a documentation project undertaken by those for whom the monuments and their history are foreign, even if it does not explore them. *A Second World*, on the other hand, removes evidence of its own mediation. *A Second World* foregrounds the voices of those who lived in the time the monuments were created—and continue to live with them—and in this sense it is quite different from *Sankofa*. However, locals' interpretations of the monuments as political or historical symbols are undercut by the filmmakers' association of the same monuments with an alien, imagined world. And this association *is* a construction: Ljuba does not speak of the monuments as alien markers; it is the structure of the film that uses them to project a visual encapsulation of the other world he imagines.[9] The monuments become a way to move beyond the experiences of those who lived in Yugoslavia, rather than to engage with them. The formalistic approach to the structures causes the viewer to read them metaphorically, but not narratively.

Throughout the film, the spomeniks are approached as if they are alien relics, but they do not actually add up to a past for which Asomaljia is the projected future. Nor, however, are they a deconstruction of linear narratives of revolutionary transformation and their corollary utopian aims—the film approaches them too much as purely aesthetic objects emptied of specific content to complicate these narratives. *A Second World*'s imagined alternative

future, then, is literally worlds away. The monuments never become a force that draws attention back to the here and now, as they do in *Sankofa*, in spite of themselves. In *A Second World*, the past is doomed to oblivion, as in *Sankofa*, but so is the present. The residents of former Yugoslavia, like Ljuba, appear trapped in this present, unable to reach either the past or the future: to put it in Fabian's terms, the film denies them coevalness.

Conclusion

Sankofa and *A Second World* approach the tropes of science fiction in different ways, from different starting points, but in both films, the documentation of the spomeniks is central. The Yugoslav monuments are visual icons of the possibility of alternate timelines and different societies, of different languages and different modes of remembering. The association between modernist architecture and science fiction is an established one, but perhaps the reason that the Yugoslav monuments seem uniquely suited to new science fiction narratives is that they seem to lie outside of the more common association of architectural modernism with science fiction, which is based upon modernism's perceived scientific rationalism (Fortin 30–37). In their stylistic diversity and their dynamic relationship to the natural landscape that surrounds them, the spomeniks seem to promise something different than the regimented, technocratic future promised by the logical geometricity of modernist urban planning. In the films discussed here, the Yugoslav monuments function to push at the limits and blind spots of memory, to pose the question of what might be lost in and to history. At the same time, the incorporation of these structures into science fiction narratives threatens to condemn the legacies they do possess to oblivion, precisely in order to recover them as aestheticized phenomena void of content.

In both *Sankofa* and *A Second World*, part of this repurposing (and replacing) of history—the shift in emphasis from the monuments as historical objects to the monuments as (at least partially) empty signifiers—occurs through the paradoxical combination of science fiction with the documentary genre. It is, furthermore, a particular kind of documentary project that is intertwined with tourism, with the freedom to look at the other and the other's history. The narratives of both films represent a kind of updated version of the trope of the fantastic voyage, with many of the same imperialist associations.[10] Reading *Sankofa* and *A Second World* against the background of the broader popular culture framing of the Yugoslav monuments as

science fiction allows us to see where science-fictional narratives play a role in perpetuating imaginary colonizations not only of space but also of history. The films' intertwinement of science fiction and documentary brings to the foreground connections between certain tropes of science fiction (such as difficulties with the preservation of memory, the post-apocalyptic archive, and the alien language as a code) and the ways that a new global imaginary aestheticizes the ruins of Cold War-era culture in regions at the boundaries of "the West." This aestheticization can be understood as part of a much broader anxiety over the possibility of utopias in the increasing bleakness of the Anthropocene: here utopias are read primarily through ruins, and encountered via dark tourism, in regions imagined as existing only on the periphery of (Western) civilization.

At the same time, both films reveal ways the monuments can open up critical paths for thought. As science fictional objects, the monuments index speculative futures that can undermine the construction of the same imaginaries that place Yugoslavia—and Southeastern Europe more broadly—outside history, or else behind it. In *Sankofa* and *A Second World,* the spomeniks are called upon to assist in imaginative leaps across time and space: as documented ruins, they potentially hold the key to the recovery of human collective memory, and as dynamically alien visual symbols, they conjure the possibility of extraterrestrial utopias. In a broader sense, then, they raise questions about how science fiction treats the discovery of otherness, and the degree to which that otherness is allowed to speak. As I suggested at the outset, the Yugoslav monuments become something like the objects of a new "colonial gaze," similar to the phenomenon John Rieder identifies in Victorian science fiction. As in Rieder's examples from the genre's emergence, this gaze is structured by anachronism, but in the case of the spomeniks this anachronism is more complex. First of all, the monuments are not simply relegated to the past. They are simultaneously linked to the future, but the character of that future is cast into doubt by their visual treatment as abandoned structures akin to ruins. They suggest a promise of memory, but also the promise of radical change, of new social structures. Furthermore, the geopolitical valences of the monuments are different from those of Victorian science fiction. In the wake of Yugoslavia's breakup, the Balkans have returned to the global imaginary as a peripheral zone: at once part of the West and outside of it, wild and dangerous yet increasingly accessible to tourists from Europe and beyond. The search for the monuments as alien signposts or lost memories is also a search for new forms of otherness, and an investigation of who can appropriate such forms as both past and future.

Whether the Yugoslav monuments will continue to function as the objects of science fiction narratives, or continue to be associated with science fiction, remains to be seen. Perhaps they will persist as straightforward markers of inscrutable otherness, rather superficially romanticized images of post-apocalyptic futures, appearing in music videos, in comic books, and on album covers. Perhaps, as in Jóhann Jóhannsson's version of *Last and First Men*, they will serve as the poetic counterpoint to a long history of civilization, to science fiction's ambition to expand time far beyond the bounds of individual perception. Or, perhaps they will begin to truly direct attention both to their own histories and to the context that created them: to the geopolitical complexities of the postwar period and the postsocialist legacy of those decades. In any case, scholars of science fiction must persist in asking: what is lost in the effort to make history new again, and what can be gained by treating history as lost? Who has the right to imagine new futures, and to represent the past as something foreign? Whose past is the ruin of the future, and whose future lies in the ruins of the past?

Notes

1 The Yugoslav monuments appear, for example, as mystical megastructures guiding twin cults in the music video for Alan Walker's "Darkside" (2018), as the architecture of Spiral Asylum in Jeff Lemire and David Rubín's *Sherlock Frankenstein and the Legion of Evil* (2017), and as a post-apocalyptic ruin on the cover of synthwave artist The G's 2018 album *Concrete Island*.
2 Another variation of the photo gallery circulated with the title "Old Yugoslavian Monuments Look like TIE Fighters and Scifi Fortresses."
3 Kempenaers created the photographs between 2006 and 2009, but the book of photos was published in 2010.
4 I use the term "spomeniks" here, despite its problematic character, simply because it has become so widespread as a term for describing the Yugoslav monuments. The term is problematic since its current usage implies that the word specifically connotes a modernist or abstract aesthetic, when in fact it simply means any kind of commemorative monument.
5 Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher, email correspondence with the author, 8 Apr. 2019; and Oscar Hudson, email correspondence with the author, 9 Apr. 2019.
6 The Partisan resistance is the name given to an incredibly diverse range of military resistance movements across Europe that fought against various fascist occupying forces, and were explicitly communist in their ideology. While the Partisan struggle spanned Europe, its localized manifestations in Southeastern Europe were in certain ways exemplary, and political forces across Europe and Asia had significant investments in the outcomes of the resistance there. For the Soviets especially,

the Partisan antifascist movement represented at once a viable example of social revolution brought about by localized leftist forces and a dangerously nationalist challenge to Stalin's broader imperialist goals. The intensity of antifascist fighting in Southeastern Europe also set it apart from other areas, and contributed to the widespread association of the Partisans with Yugoslavia in particular. A concise overview of Partisan military efforts in the greater context of European resistance against fascism is given in Hæstrup 460–493. For a summary of the Yugoslav Partisans in particular, see Ramet 113–162.

7 Neither Wentzel-Fisher nor Woodin-Dechamps and Hudson speak Serbo-Croatian. While traveling in the region, Wentzel-Fisher relied on English and Italian, while Woodin-Dechamps and Hudson hired a translator, through whom they communicated with Ljuba and people living near the monuments (Kaleb Wentzel-Fisher, email correspondence with the author, 8 Apr. 2019; and Oscar Hudson, email correspondence with the author, 9 Apr. 2019). In *Sankofa*, the language barrier between the filmmaker and the locals becomes apparent in a scene towards the end of the film, in which Wilson (played by the director) asks two men for directions to the last monument he visits. In *A Second World*, neither the filmmakers nor their translator are shown. When locals speak Serbo-Croatian in *A Second World*, they are subtitled, but the questions to which they respond are not included in the film. Much of *A Second World* is accompanied by subtitles, since Ljuba's narration serves as a voice-over for large sections of the film.

8 Bogdan Bogdanović was one of the most prolific creators of monuments in socialist Yugoslavia, and his style was unquestionably unique. Bogdanović drew from various mystical traditions, including Kabbalah mysticism, in both his monumental projects and his writings on architecture, and his works have an undeniable air of the magical. He was also one of the few architects who created most of his monumental complexes in stone, rather than concrete, which contributed a sense of longevity and archaism to his forms. On Bogdanović, see Kulić and Mrduljaš 225–228 and Videkanić 154–159.

9 The filmmakers confirm that Ljuba himself did not specifically associate the monuments with Asomaljia. This was their poetic interpretation of the sculptures as reflections of a similarly utopian project (Tito's Yugoslavia) (Oscar Hudson, email correspondence with the author, 9 Apr. 2019).

10 On the relationship between the fantastic voyage trope (and specifically the variety in which lost races are discovered and observed) and colonial or imperial imaginaries, see Rieder 34–60.

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