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***Tito/Tata*: Fiction and Factuality in Documentary Photographs of the Father Figure in Communist Yugoslavia**

Paula Muhr



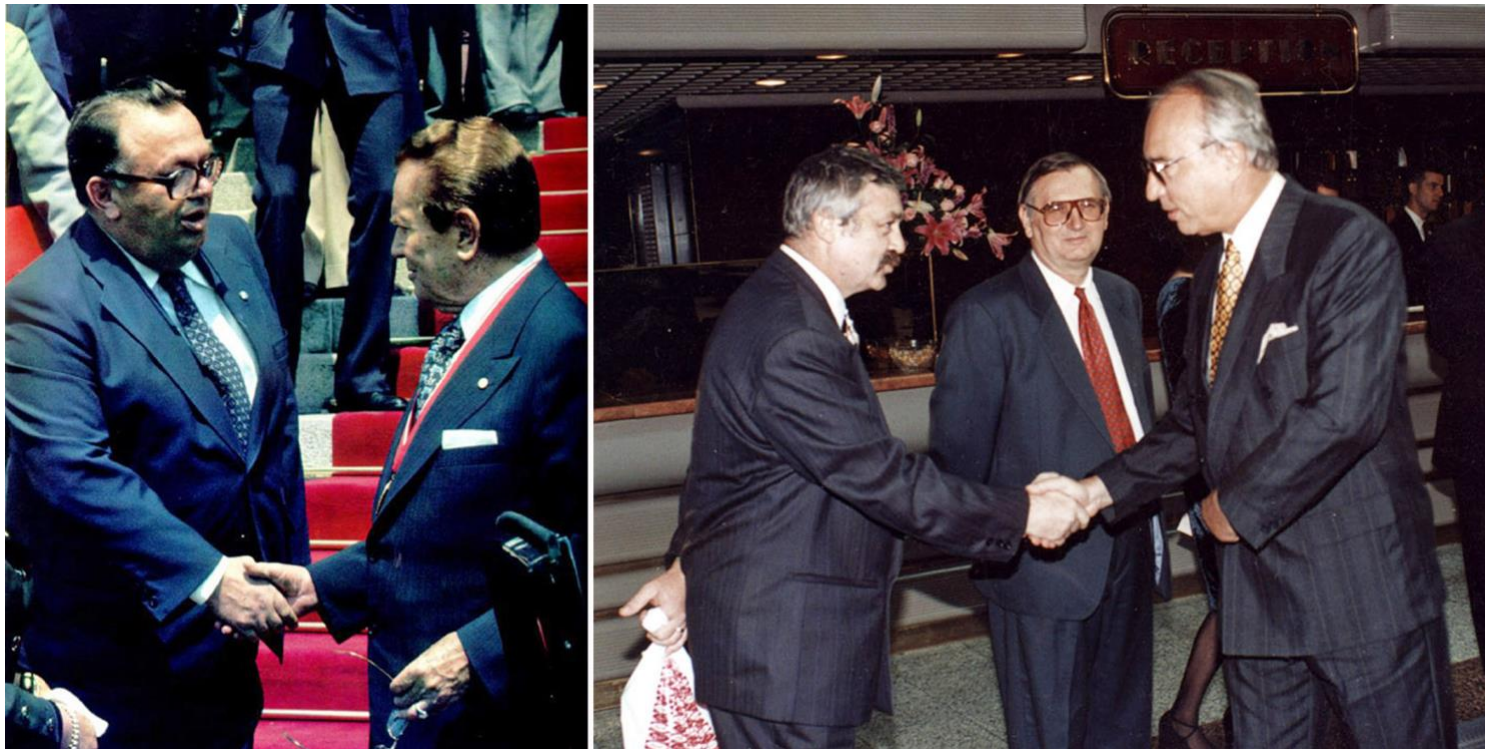




















All images above: Paula Muhr, from the series Tito/Tata, 2008. Courtesy of the artist, photographers unknown.

None of the photographs that constitute my work *Tito/Tata* were taken by me. In fact, most of the photographs included in this work were taken by anonymous individuals, people I have never met. Moreover, these images document events that had taken place long before I was even born or that I was too young to remember. Yet both men whose moments of purported glory and social importance were captured in these photographs had fundamentally shaped my childhood. In fact, both men embodied two symbolically always present but physically perpetually absent patriarchal figures. The first, Josip Broz Tito, was the founder and “president for life” of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the country where I was born and grew up and whose violent dissolution in the early 1990s I reluctantly witnessed. The second is my now-retired father (Serbian: tata), the former general manager of one of the largest Yugoslav state-owned confectionary factories, conveniently named Pionir (English: pioneer).

Tito died on May 4, 1980, when I was three years old. Despite this, photographs of him were everywhere as I was growing up. They hung prominently in every official building as well as quite a few private homes. They were also printed on the first page of all my schoolbooks. Even more confusingly, year after year, we sang songs about Tito at school (“Comrade Tito, you white violet, the whole youth loves you”) and were instructed to pledge allegiance to him as if he had still been alive. At the age of six, during my first school year, I was inducted as one of Tito’s pioneers and received a red scarf and a blue hat with a red star on the front. According to the gender norms of the time, and to my endless chagrin, as Tito’s pioneer I was also expected to appear at official school events wearing a white blouse and a dark blue skirt. At that point, becoming Tito’s pioneer was not a matter of personal choice, as it was still considered obligatory. In fact, becoming a pioneer was the first official preparatory step toward becoming a future member of the Yugoslav Communist Party, which for those who became adults in the early 1980s was equally obligatory.¹

During most of my childhood, in a curious parallel to Tito, my own father was a similarly spectral presence. I hardly ever had any contact with him; he was constantly away on some business trip or in an important meeting. Or, perhaps more mundanely, when not busy, he failed to find time for me because he was currently divorced from my mother (they divorced each other altogether three times.) But in my hometown, my father was an important public figure. Thus wherever I went, people seemed to know my father and could not stop talking about him. And although I rarely saw him in person, I kept seeing his pictures and reading about him in the local

newspapers. The public sphere and private life strangely intermingled throughout my childhood, as I kept growing up surrounded by images of Tito and “Tata,” as I used to call my father.

Many years later, while I was living in a different country as a practising visual artist, I decided to revisit the images of the two absent men who had informed my childhood. As a child, I had taken these images for granted. Having been surrounded by them and repeatedly exposed to them ever since I can remember, I had perceived these images naively as mere windows into the lives of the two men who had otherwise eluded me. As a child, I looked at the image and had the impression that I was partaking in the events that were beyond my reach except through the photographs. Owing to these photographs, both Tito, as the father of our country (or so I was told), and my absent father felt less distant, less out of reach. As a child, I viewed these photographs as apparently authentic records of the reality to which I had no alternative access. As long as I viewed them in this way, I never considered the images’ formal qualities or asked myself how their visual makeup and iconography may have affected me while I was growing up. All of this changed when I decided to actively and critically engage with these images to create the work I titled *Tito/Tata*.

The individual images I used as source material for my work *Tito/Tata* come from various sources. Images of Tito were primarily taken from the internet, where I found them posted on various blogs and chat forums, in most cases without any accompanying information about their provenance.² Searching for images of Tito, I visited various websites that, in one form or another, dealt with Yugonostalgia. Broadly “defined as nostalgia for the fantasies associated with a country, the SFRY, which existed from 1945 to 1991,” Yugonostalgia is inevitably intertwined with nostalgic fantasies about Tito.³

By contrast, the images of my father were culled from his private photo album. Yet, like photographs of Tito, all images of my father were documentary photographs of official events in which my father took part as the general manager of a large and strategically important factory. To be more exact, these images were taken by various photographers hired by and paid for by Pionir and were used by the factory’s PR department as well as sent to the local press. Although they were initially intended for public purposes, the images of my father in his role as the general manager ended up in our private family album for two reasons. The first was that my father always received a copy of the photographs taken of him in his official capacity as the general manager of Pionir. The second was that there were almost no images of my father participating in our private family events. Thus the official images of my father as the general manager were imported

into our family album to fill in the visual gap left by the conspicuous absence of his private images as a family man.

Hence, although one set of images (of Tito) stem from the internet and the other set (of “Tata”) from a private photo album, both sources can be termed as informal archives. There was no designated historian, art historian, archivist, editor, curator, or even a censor, who selected, catalogued, classified, and systematised these images. For reasons they left undisclosed, internet users chose to upload some images of Tito and to ignore others. Google’s search engine led me to some websites while omitting others. For reasons probably not known even to herself, over the years my mother threw away some images of my father while keeping others. Even my father, while perennially moving in and out of our family home, managed to lose some of the images that documented what he perceives as his “golden past.” Therefore, the fact that I have come across particular images of both Tito and Tata as opposed to others that remained beyond my reach was entirely accidental, or better yet, serendipitous. Notably, both the randomness of their selection and the informal character of their original sources are reflected in the poor technical quality of the images that I have collected over the years. Pixels and other digital artefacts are apparent in the enlarged images of Tito, while the large scratches and usage marks are evidence of the wear and tear of my father’s photos.

However, despite my decision to retain the visible marks of their vernacular origin, by selecting the particular photographs out of the larger collection and then bringing them in relation to one another, I do not aim to emphasise their purported documentary character. In other words, I am not treating any of these images as authentic “pictorial evidence” of things as they were.⁴ Instead, in pairing the photographs of Tito with those of my father, although these were often taken years or even decades apart, I am following a different agenda. Just as importantly, whereas the range of individual images in my personal collection was largely governed by chance, my pairing of particular images is neither random nor arbitrary. Instead, my carefully constructed juxtapositions of the archival material aim to disclose striking formal similarities in the framing and the posturing of both Tito’s and my father’s bodies in the respective photographs. Such resemblances, so I argue, point to the underlying stereotypes that have influenced how powerful men had been photographed in communist Yugoslavia. The fact that these photographs spanned decades and had been taken by many different individuals suggests that the similarities were not intentional but an expression of what Walter Benjamin had pertinently termed “the optical unconscious.”⁵ Admittedly, the optical unconscious is a vexingly elusive concept whose definitions kept changing across Benjamin’s oeuvre.⁶ Yet broadly speaking, and this is the definition used here, the optical unconscious

encompasses “all that is not consciously controlled in the making, circulation, and viewing of photographs, the contingency involved in the production and consumption of images, as well as the unexamined motivations and effects of this technology’s pervasive spread.”⁷ And, based on the careful scrutiny and visual analysis of the numerous photographic images of Tito and my father, it appears to me that, in this particular context, the optical unconscious operated at two distinct levels.

First, the optical unconscious structured how powerful male figures—from the head of the nation (Tito) to the head of a large factory (my father)—gestured and presented themselves to the photographic camera of whose unavoidable presence at any official event they were keenly aware. Second, the optical unconscious also influenced how various photographers across decades chose at which specific moments to capture powerful male figures and how to frame them in relation to their surroundings. In other words, I suggest that the optical unconscious consisted in implicit visual codes of which neither the individuals who repeatedly reenacted the role of patriarchal masculinity in front of the camera nor photographers who documented and thus perpetuated these reenactments in the form of reproducible two-dimensional images were entirely aware.

Yet these unconscious visual codes did not just fundamentally shape the behaviour of the individual actors—both the powerful men and their photographers. Instead, through the resulting stream of images disseminated in the local and national press, these codes also substantially informed the collective perception of patriarchal masculinity. Thus both in their elevated (Tito) and more local (my father) versions, such images effectively cocreated and perpetuated the shared unconscious fantasy of an authoritarian yet also lovable and loving father figure who presided over our personal and collective safety. The unspoken and unspeakable undercurrent of this essentially infantile fantasy was the perpetual fear of a future without the father figure and his purported protection or, simply put, the fear of having to grow up. The images thus not only glorified the all-around presence of the powerful father who always watched over us but also implicitly nurtured the fear of losing him. Just as importantly, these images cultivated the kind of a docile spectator who approached them uncritically with childlike admiration and unconditional love for the father figure that they represented. Such an intended spectator, and I as a child unknowingly and wholeheartedly occupied this role, necessarily remained oblivious to the optical unconscious content of these images.

The optical unconscious, in the sense that I have delineated above, informed every single image in my work *Tito/Tata*. Nevertheless, even for a less docile spectator than I was as a child, the presence of the optical unconscious content is not immediately apparent in any of the single

photographs of either Tito or my father when these are viewed in isolation. Instead, the shared unconscious visual codes of the patriarchal masculinity become fully visible only through my intervention of carefully selecting and then repetitively pairing particular photographs of Tito and my father. It is the repeated juxtaposition that reveals the visually formulaic nature of these purportedly transparent documentary images. The pairing also uncovers an almost comical element of the images' implicit theatricality. Moreover, this particular arrangement of images allows me to foreground the uncannily repetitive character of the two men's gestures and postures. In doing so, I open up these images to a variety of possible interpretations, none of which were initially intended by their producers and original users. Admittedly, the intervention of pairing is seemingly minimal, as it changes neither the content nor the visual makeup of the individual images. But nevertheless, my intervention has a transformative semantic effect, as it subverts the purported uniqueness and factual authenticity of these images. It does so by unseating the images' intended aura, that is, "the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be."⁸ In fact, through the juxtaposition of the individual images, the seductively "auratic appearance" of the powerful male figure is revealed to be a mere pose.⁹

Hence, to an observer of *Tito/Tata*, more than actual photographic documents of a bygone era, the paired images may appear as highly artificial, fictional scenarios enacted with slight variations by two different actors. Another observer may even detect that, when viewed as a whole, the series of the paired images seems to reveal that the two main actors are caught up in a relentless compulsion to obsessively perform the same gestures across different contexts. Or to borrow Sigmund Freud's words, both men appear unable to break free from rhythmically repeating their performance in front of the camera "with wearisome monotony" that keeps them "isolated from other actions."¹⁰ Yet another observer might suggest that far more than documenting particular historical events, the paired images, in fact, visually embody the oppressive and fundamentally contradictory fantasy of the omnipotent yet benevolent patriarchal figure. And who is to say that such observers would be wrong? Even when reflected in purportedly factual documentary photographs of that era, one's memories of childhood might, in retrospect, appear stranger than any fiction.

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Paula Muhr is a Serbian-born, Berlin-based visual artist and researcher. She studied visual arts with a focus on photography at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig, Germany. In 2021, she completed her PhD at the Institute of Art and Visual History, Humboldt University in Berlin. Her PhD thesis is titled

“From Photography to fMRI: Epistemic Functions of Images in Medical Research on Hysteria.” The focus of her academic research, which is at the intersection of image studies, STS, and history of science, is on examining knowledge-producing roles of various types of images in the context of natural sciences. In parallel, through her research-based artistic practice, Muhr examines sociocultural strategies of constructing sexuality, gender, desire, and normality. Her work has been shown internationally at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rijeka (Croatia), Fotogalerie Wien, Kunsthalle Leipzig, Fotogalleriet Format Malmö, Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Tenerife, Centre national de l’audiovisuel Luxembourg, MAMAC Liege (Belgium), Einstein Forum Potsdam, and Shenzhen Fine Art Institute (China).

Notes

¹ For a detailed analysis of how becoming Tito’s pioneer necessarily entailed an initiation into the ideological values of the Communist Party, which were imparted to schoolchildren by their teachers, see Ildiko Erdei, “‘The Happy Child’ as an Icon of Socialist Transformation: Yugoslavia’s Pioneer Organization,” in *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of Twentieth-Century Southeastern Europe*, edited by John Lampe and Mark Mazower (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006), 154–79.

² Consequently, for many of the photographs of Tito from my personal collection, I have no direct provenance information. If you are the photographer of these works, or know who the photographer is, I would love to gather this information, and welcome any additional background information.

³ Nicole Lindstrom, “Yugonostalgia: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in Former Yugoslavia,” *East Central Europe* 32, no. 1 (2005): 229, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1876330805X00108>.

⁴ Ian Walker, “‘Things as They Are’: The Problematic Possibilities of Documentary,” in *A Companion to Photography*, edited by Stephen Bull (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 371, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118598764>.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography” (1931), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2, 1927–1934*, translated by Rodney Livingstone et al., edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 511–12. See also Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1936), in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 3, 1931–1938*,

translated by Rodney Livingstone et al., edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 117–18.

⁶ For an overview of this concept's multiple meanings, see Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski, introduction to *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, edited by Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 1–31, esp. 4–9,

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822372998>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ Benjamin, “Little History,” 518.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 517.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “General Theory of the Neuroses (1917 [1916–17]),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 16, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis: Part 3 (1916–1917)*, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 270.