

## Visual Studies in and on Southeastern Europe

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Over the past few decades, visual studies have emerged as a vibrant interdisciplinary field, deeply influenced by the media and technological revolutions of recent years. The latest volume of *Ethnologia Balkanica*, published for the first time in an online format as a guest issue in *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* (CSE), focuses on visual culture within Southeastern Europe. This issue explores the role of visual media (ranging from photography to film and documentary) in shaping and reflecting questions of power, representation, gender, identity, and memory in Southeast Europe. The focus is specifically on images—both static and moving—with attention divided between their representational power (content analysis) and broader considerations such as their materiality, social biographies, and the ways in which they function as carriers of memory. Despite the growing prominence of visual studies, Southeast European scholarship has often lagged in fully embracing visual methodologies, still relying heavily on textual sources. This issue aims to bridge that gap, offering diverse perspectives on how visual culture informs the understanding of identity, history, and power in the region.

**Keywords:** visual culture, Southeast Europe, representation, photography, film, memory

### Introduction

Over the last few decades, visual studies have become a very lively field of research. A glance at the new academic publications, conferences, and seminars that deal with visual studies topics makes it clear that there are hardly any disciplines left that have not incorporated the findings and methods of visual studies or are themselves concerned with them. Unsurprisingly, this development has taken place against the backdrop of the media and technological revolutions of recent decades.

Nowadays, images (still, moving, and digital) are omnipresent; they permeate our academic work and our everyday lives; they set the tone in digital and social media and determine our ways of seeing and interpreting the world. The visual is now inextricably linked to how we see ourselves and others, how we remember the past and project the future and how we define our identities and our lifestyles.

Increasingly precise technologies of recognition, surveillance, and identification are used to control borders and identify people (of different origins, colours, cultures, etc.) for purposes of espionage and for waging wars. Visual culture practices through various mediums are in a constant dialectical relationship with power. Different media are not only controlled by power (e.g., government), but they also shape and influence power. This dynamic is sometimes hidden or selective; under autocratic regimes, power hides and/or selects certain imagery from the public. At other times, this imagery escapes control from the past to the present. This interaction demonstrates how visual culture can both reflect and challenge power structures.

New technologies not only change the way we interact with each other, but they also affect our research methods and our way of seeing, perceiving things and processing them (as images, metaphors, and ideas). Imaging devices (cameras, smartphones, video cameras, drone recordings, GPS devices, etc.) have become standard in ethnographic research. The same is true for the media we use to communicate our research findings to the scientific community and to the broader public. New image design devices through artificial intelligence (AI) have only just begun to be exploited. Also, the localities of ethnographic research have shifted, often taking place in our neighbourhoods or in virtual spaces accessible via digital communication. Today, field research can be conducted with people who have never met in person, intensifying the visual moments of communication.

These are just some of the aspects of the current digital revolution attracting the attention of researchers in various fields. Research in the social sciences and humanities in Southeast Europe has also kept up with these trends, although the priorities have taken different paths.

### **Studies on the Representation of the Balkans in the Wake of the Visual Turn**

The pictorial or visual turn (in German *die ikonische Wendung*) originates from a fundamental exploration of the nature and meaning of the image. Questions such as what an image is, what its relationship to reality, perception, power, tradition, etc., dominated the theoretical debate. This debate was instigated among others by literary scholar William J.T. Mitchell (1986), who raised the question of the nature of the image.<sup>1</sup> In many of his subsequent essays, Mitchell dealt with the visual in film, photography, and TV, as well as with questions of media effectiveness, the connection between the sphere of art and the visual worlds of everyday life and discourse-analytical ideological criticism.<sup>2</sup>

The increasing awareness of the visual was a response to a long-held and widespread disregard for the image as an object and medium of research in the social sciences and humanities. The casualness with which images were encountered was among other things also the consequence of a fixation on text and language in studies on culture and society.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, William J.T. 1986. *Iconology, image, text, ideology*. London: Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> On his publications visit his webpage: <https://arthistory.uchicago.edu/faculty/profiles/mitchell>

<sup>3</sup> Demmerling, Christof and Thomas Blume. 1998. *Grundprobleme der analytischen Sprachphilosophie*. Paderborn, München, Wien & Zürich: Schöningh, 9.

Epistemological considerations and hermeneutic approaches played an important role in studies on the representation of the Balkans. In the 1990s, ground-breaking work on that topic was produced by Maria Todorova, Vesna Goldsworthy and Milica Bakic-Hayden.<sup>4</sup> Their work, each in their own merit, examined the dominating post-imperial Western discourse on the Balkan from the late 19th century until the demise of Yugoslavia. These studies emerged during the Yugoslav wars, among others, as a response to the stigmatisation of the whole region (even though the war was waged only in Yugoslavia) as backward, conflict-ridden, prone to friction, violence, and barbarism. The motivation behind these studies was to identify the causes of ethno-religious enmity and to reveal the discursive patterns applied to fuel, perpetuate and radicalise the conflicts.<sup>5</sup> This focus on representation has increased awareness of reciprocal attributions in academic circles and highlighted the deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes within local and regional taxonomies (urban vs. countryside, mountain vs plain, western vs eastern, educated vs uneducated). Most of these studies have a semiotic-discourse-analytical orientation and deal with images as ideas and metaphors. Only rarely were concrete image sources included in the analysis, although it was precisely the images – whether photos or films – that made the strongest impression on the majority of the population.<sup>6</sup> Thus, with regard to Southeastern Europe, there is still a noticeable reluctance to deal with concrete image sources. This is also due to the fact that new research approaches and methods, at least in anthropology and certainly also in history, have, with few exceptions, hardly been taken up to date. However, the tendency to prioritise text over visuals is not unique to Southeast Europe.

### The Reticence Towards Photographs as Sources and Objects

Images as sources and objects of research are still usually only assigned a subsidiary role. For the most part, photographs, for instance, are used only for illustrative purposes as a kind of visual accessory. This disregard for the image as a source runs through several disciplines. The photo theorist Ulrich Baer argues that we mainly use images to substantiate or illustrate something that is already known from other sources. It hardly ever happens that we allow stories to emerge from the traces present in the image itself.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, historian Frank Ankersmit points out the difficulty of engaging with the specifics contained in photographs. Even before one gets involved with the details of an image, an overall idea, a general impression, is formed. Ankersmit expresses this succinctly when he says that “the gravity of the context [...] sucks all the content out of the motif or the depicted, so much so that the thing itself has little to say.”<sup>8</sup> Ankersmit thus points to a common behaviour in connection

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<sup>4</sup> Todorova, Maria. 2009. *Imagining the Balkans* [Updated edition]. New York: Oxford University Press; Goldsworthy, Vesna. 1998. *Inventing Ruritania: The imperialism of the imagination*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press; Bakic-Hayden, Milica. 1995. Nesting Orientalisms: The case of Former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54(4), 917-931.

<sup>5</sup> Another related strand of research deals with the view of Western travellers to the Balkans. See, among others: Jezernik, Božidar. 2015. *Das wilde Europa. Der Balkan in den Augen westlicher Reisender*. Translated by Karin Almasy. Wien: Böhlau Verlag.

<sup>6</sup> Kaser assumed that *balkanism* was less influenced by textual narratives than by visuals circulating in Western media during the Balkan wars and the First World War. See Kaser, Karl. 2015. *Visualizing the Balkans: The Balkan Wars, the Great War and visual modernity*, in *Contextualizing changes: Migrations, shifting borders and new identities in Eastern Europe*, edited by Hristov, Petko / Kassabova, Anelia / Troeva, Evgenia and Dagnosław Demski. Sofia: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Science, 13-27; Kaser, Karl. 2019. The Visual Cultures of Southeastern Europe: Elements of decentred theory construction. *TheMA: Open Access Research Journal for Theatre, Music, Arts* VIII(1-2), 1-13, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Baer, Ulrich. 2002. *Spectral evidence: The photography of trauma*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ankersmit, Frank. 2012. *Meaning, truth, and reference in historical presentation*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 279.

with viewing images: Before one takes a close look at a picture, before one – to paraphrase Roland Barthes – engages in its *studium*, a judgement is already made. The judgement, whether good or bad, derives from the context in which the image is placed. Always, however, this judgement derives from our mental map, which is fed by attitudes and assessments acquired over time. We thus fit the image into a certain form of historical understanding without giving the image the opportunity to tell a story on its own.<sup>9</sup>

Photography historian Elisabeth Edwards points to another aspect when she speaks about a paradoxical proximity-distance effect when viewing photographs. Photographs blur the idea of a temporal distance to the past; they belong irrevocably to the past in every respect, but at the same time, give the impression of immediacy. This is precisely what Roland Barthes calls the aura of photography, the appearance of a distance in the present.<sup>10</sup> Referencing Georges Didi-Huberman, Edwards writes that photography is given too much or too little credit: either expected to reveal whole truths and failing or dismissed as mere simulacra, “the net result is the same, an inattention to photographs because they are found somehow inadequate to the task of doing history.”<sup>11</sup>

What Edwards states for historical studies is also evident in other disciplines. Even in art history, where the image is central, addressing new themes and forms of visual language has been challenging. Susanne von Falkenhausen explains that the 1980s saw feminism reshape academia into gender studies, and marginalised groups in the UK and US fought for visibility, making it a social and political issue. By the early 1990s, this led to the emergence of visual culture studies and the concept of visuality. Von Falkenhausen contends that visual culture studies critique art history for failing to address issues like global migration, identity politics, and new media technologies while upholding elitist Western traditions. She also demonstrates that visual studies is a transdisciplinary field encompassing gender, queer, postcolonial studies, media, and art studies. Images are culturally gendered and socially marked, playing a crucial role in power relations, much like texts, and both their production and perception are embedded in processes of seeing, desiring, feeling, thinking, and technical mediation.<sup>12</sup>

### Visual Studies in the Balkans

We are not in a position to provide an overview of the state of research in the field of visual studies in the Balkans; the field is too broad, the disciplines too scattered and our insight into studies carried out in the respective countries too limited. We concentrate in particular on anthropological and historical-anthropological studies, which also form the focus of the articles in this special issue.

As already mentioned, the groundbreaking work of Todorova, Bakić-Hayden and Goldsworthy has triggered a boom in studies on the representation of the Balkans in the West as well as mutual perceptions and processes of othering on various levels. These studies

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<sup>9</sup> There are, however, also exceptions to this approach as exemplified by the art critic, painter and writer John Berger, who, together with the photographer Jean Mohr, was already in the early 1980s exploring ways of photographic storytelling. Berger, John and Jean Mohr. 1982. *Another way of telling*. New York: Pantheon Books; Berger, John. 1990. *Ways of seeing*. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>10</sup> See also Ammann, Daniel. *The aura of photography. Roland Barthes' remarks on photography in a new light* (accessed: 29 July 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Edwards, Elisabeth. 2016. *Der Geschichte ins Antlitz blicken: Fotografie und die Herausforderung der Präsenz, in Aufzeigen oder Beweisen? Die Fotografie als Kulturtechnik und Medium des Wissens*, edited by Wolf, Herta. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 305-326.

<sup>12</sup> von Falkenhausen, Susanne. 2020. *Beyond the mirror. Seeing in art history and visual culture studies*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 7.

range from textbook research<sup>13</sup> and the analysis of interethnic and intercultural perceptions to questions of social othering based on origin, race and class.

Apart from this, numerous activities testify to an enormous interest in historical image sources, reflected in lively publication activity, the presentation of important historical photo collections and the realisation of numerous projects to collect and document analogue image sources about everyday life in “the analog era”. The Marubi collection<sup>14</sup>, which can now be visited in a modern museum in Shkodra, and the Manaki brothers’ collection in Bitola are particularly worthy of mention.<sup>15</sup> In Romania, the interesting photography project *Azopan* went online in 2020. The aim of this project is to collect, digitise and edit analogue photographs and make them accessible to the general public. In doing so, the project seeks to provide insights into the country’s otherwise often-forgotten everyday history.<sup>16</sup> A similar project was launched in Bulgaria with the idea of preserving Bulgaria’s visual cultural heritage through found and donated photos. This archive currently contains over 16,000 photographs. The founders of the Bulgarian Visual Archive<sup>17</sup> have committed themselves to building, preserving, and distributing an independent public visual archive of photographic and video materials. One of the main goals of the foundation is to be able to provide visual content that explores the past for the needs and goals of historians, researchers, and artists, as well as future generations. Another exciting project is *Memories on Tape*, founded by analogue enthusiasts in Zaječar, Serbia, with the aim to collect amateur films, photographs, photo negatives, slides, 8mm and Super8 films, VHS, and audio tapes in the former Yugoslav countries and to process them for further historical visual studies. Recordings that capture moments of life in Yugoslavia, places where Yugoslavs lived and travelled, and events they celebrated are collected here and processed for research. The cultural magazine SKVER, which is also significantly involved in the Memories on Tape project, is carrying out another project involving the digitization of 8,000 negatives that bear witness to the work, leisure activities and social life in two former socialist factory giants: Crystal Factory, and Leather and Textile Industrial Complex “Zaječar.” The photographic sources contained therein can make a valuable contribution to the reappraisal of Yugoslavian industrial and labour history.<sup>18</sup> Historical photographs are also shown on various online platforms, which indicates their great popularity.

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<sup>13</sup> See, among others, Karge, Heike. 1999. The image of the “other” – the neighbour in school textbooks of the Balkan countries. *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 21(1), 90-94; Trošt, Tamara P. and Jovan a Mihajlović Trbovc. 2023. Symbolic nation-building through images in Post-Yugoslav history textbooks. *Journal of Educational Media, Memory and Society* 15(1), 20-42.

<sup>14</sup> The Albanian photographers Pjetër, Kel and Gegë Marubi ran a photo studio in Shkodra for three generations in the 19th and 20th centuries. They took, among others, pictures of landscapes and everyday life towards the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century, which represent a unique cultural artistic testimony to Albanian history. Their pictures also show the political events and social changes in the city of Shkodra and its surrounding area over a period of almost 100 years. In 1970, their studio was transformed into an archive (Fototeka Marubi) and in 2016 became the Marubi National Museum of Photography. See Mancini, Roberto. 2014. *Historiae Patriae: Marubi’s photographic documentation (1958-1970) and the birth of the Albanian nation*, in *Photo archives and the idea of nation*, edited by Caraffa, Constanza. Berlin, München & Boston: De Gruyter, 119-140.

<sup>15</sup> The brothers Yanaki (1878 - 1954 ) and Milton (1882 - 1964) Manaki were two pioneers of photography and film who shot the first films on the Balkan Peninsula and in the Ottoman Empire. The collection contains more than 17,000 photos and over 2000 metres of film material and is located in Bitola. The Manaki Brothers Film Festival is held every year in Bitola in honour of the two brothers. See Cineculture. *The Manaki brothers photo studio* (accessed: 8 September 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Marcel, Gascón Barberá. 2020. *Online photo archive brings Romania’s history back to life*. *Balkan Insight*, 11 June 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Bulgarian Visual Archive. *Bulgarian Visual Archive* (accessed: 17 September 2024).

<sup>18</sup> Facebook. *SKVER magazin* (accessed: 8 September 2024).

The mass of floating images, the newly created museums, and the numerous projects and initiatives demonstrate the widespread interest in engaging with analogue image sources and using them for different purposes. This also testifies to a strong nostalgic longing to look back on the often not-so-distant past, which is not surprising given the dramatic upheavals the societies have faced since the end of socialism. However, not all these initiatives are geared towards research interests, and the processing of the images is not always guided by professional concepts. Nevertheless, these image data form an excellent basis for historical and/or anthropological research, which more and more researchers are using.

One of the researchers who has been involved in photographic studies for quite some time already is the anthropologist Gilles de Rapper. De Rapper, who gave a key lecture at the Graz conference, is interested in photographs produced during the communist period in Albania and their role in the current perception of the communist past. This is both an oral history study of the appropriation of photography in this particular context in order to better understand the functioning of the communist state and a reflection on photography as an object of anthropological research. In another article, he also engaged with the constitution of photographic archives and the question of the production and circulation of photographs in Albania.<sup>19</sup> His research, however, points beyond the Albanian case to the relationship between people and photographs from the perspective of an ethnography of photography.<sup>20</sup> In a special issue of the journal *Science and Video*, he put together several articles on family photography in the Mediterranean region.<sup>21</sup> A collaboration with the artist and photographer Anouck Durand has resulted in an exquisitely composed photo novel with collages consisting of Albanian archive photographs and texts that shed light on Albanian-Chinese relations.<sup>22</sup> This cooperation also demonstrates the diverse possibilities of dealing with visuals in an artistically creative way beyond the academic mainstream. Anthropologists are also increasingly seeking to cooperate with photographers and/or media artists, or they are independently exploring artistic forms of image production, the use of images and ways of mediating them.<sup>23</sup>

For anthropologists, the study of visual sources is by no means reduced to content analysis. Visuals are used to stimulate memories or to generate questions. They can open doors, build trust and encourage informants to engage with a topic. The various ways of *doing visual anthropology* will not be discussed here because none of the articles in this special issue is based on self-produced image sources. At this point, we will confine ourselves to referring to two seminal works that reflect the state of research in this field<sup>24</sup> and to a few anthropological studies that have been carried out in the region in the last couple of years.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> 2023. Photographic archives and the anthropology of Communism in Albania. *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70(4), 608-641.

<sup>20</sup> de Rapper, Gilles and Durand, Anouck. 2017. Une autre image de l'Albanie communiste? Un essai d'ethnographie de la photographie amateur. *Ethnologie française*, 2017, Albanie. Renaissance d'une discipline, XLVII(2), 263-276; de Rapper, Gilles. 2016. Katjusha. La photographe du dictateur. *Ethnologie française* 2016(3), 415-424.

<sup>21</sup> de Rapper, Gilles. Introduction. La photographie de famille en Méditerranée, de l'Intime au politique. *Revue Science and Video* (accessed: 29 July 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Durand, Anouck. 2017. *Eternal friendship*. Paris: Siglio.

<sup>23</sup> See among others: Pula, Edit and Robert Pichler. 2020. *Albania's 90s. Photographs and narratives / Shqipëria e viteve '90: Fotografi dhe tregime*. Wien: Bahoe.

<sup>24</sup> Tinkler, Penny. 2013. *Using photographs in social and historical research*. Los Angeles: SAGE; Pink, Sarah. 2022. *Doing Visual Ethnography*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

<sup>25</sup> See, among others: Mancheva, Svetoslava. 2022. *Digital stories of the village: Transitions, communities, places, in The village in transition: People and places*, edited by Krastanova, Krasimira and Stoyan Antonov. Plovdiv: Plovdiv University Press, 68-74; Filak, Manca. 2019. A long term visual ethnography in a Bosnian village: Tracking epistemological and methodological issues. *EthnoAnthropoZoom* 16(16), 251-297; Topali, Pinelopi. 2020. Visual regimes of mobility photographic exhibitions on refugees during the financial crisis in Greece. *Visual Anthropology*

All these factors have contributed to the wide acceptance of visual dimensions in various scientific disciplines. Today, hardly anyone doubts the epistemological value of images (still, moving or digital) in relation to texts. Post-positivist theories recognize images as having both subjective and objective value, depending on the methods of decoding used. The critical postmodern theoretical approaches to subjectivity, experience, knowledge and representation, as well as (self-)reflexive methodological considerations and an emphasis on interdisciplinarity, enable approaches to image studies to produce exciting and innovative results.

### **About Ethnologia Balkanica's New Appearance**

*Ethnologia Balkanica* was traditionally published first in hard copy format and subsequently made available online through the Central and Eastern European Online Library (CEEOL). Following a decision by the InASEA Board, this 24th issue is being published in digital form only and open access for the first time. This decision was prompted by the widespread request among members of the association and the executive board to change the format of the journal. This, to a certain extent, coincided with changes happening within InASEA. Among others, also with the retirement of one of the founders of InASEA, Klaus Roth, a remarkable contributor to its development and long-standing editor-in-chief of *Ethnologia Balkanica*, who tirelessly kept the organisation going despite challenges. The void he leaves behind will be difficult to fill.

Since InASEA does not have the capacity to publish *Ethnologia Balkanica* independently as an online journal, we approached Florian Bieber, the director of the Center for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, whether the upcoming edition could be published as a special issue in the journal *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, which is published at the same centre in Graz. In response to the kind invitation, we have significantly reduced the size of the current issue in accordance with the journal's specifications. In return, all eight articles on this special issue have undergone a double-blind review procedure and are now available for open access.

### **About the Creation of this Edition**

As it is customary for InASEA conferences, the topic for the subsequent journal edition is decided during the InASEA General Assembly meetings that take place during each conference edition. In the 9th conference edition held in Zadar, Croatia, in September 2018, Karl Kaser, who was also one of the association's co-founders, proposed that the topic of the forthcoming conference could be *Visual Culture in Southeast Europe*. He also suggested that the host of this conference edition would be the Southeast European History and Anthropology (SEEHA) working unit at the Institute of History, University of Graz.

Considering the relatively recent exploration of visual culture in the Balkans and the tendency of Western visual studies across social science disciplines to impose Western views on modernity and postmodernity on other parts of the world<sup>26</sup>, Kaser aimed to explore the topic of visual culture under the umbrella of InASEA's conference. The suggestion for both the topic and the host was influenced by two factors. The first was the extensive research, spanning over two decades, conducted under Kaser's mentorship and collaboration at SEEHA

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*Review* 36(2), 201-241; Bonini Baraldi, Filippo. 2020. Between film and the world: Roma ways of seeing and perceiving persons. *Visual Anthropology Review* 36(2), 361-378; Kalo, Sofia. 2017. "The red kiss of the past that does not pass": State Socialism in Albanian visual art today. *Visual Anthropology Review* 33(1), 51-61.

<sup>26</sup> Kaser, *The visual cultures*.

with colleagues from both within the University of Graz and beyond.<sup>27</sup> Kaser, who for many decades led SEEHA and was among the pioneers exploring dimensions of visual culture in the Balkans, by that time had moved on to researching the digital aspect of visual culture in connection to femininities and masculinities, which resulted in a book – the last one he published – “Femininities and Masculinities in the Digital Age: Realia and Utopia in the Balkans and South Caucasus” (2021). The second factor was that the 10th InASEA conference, scheduled for 2020, would coincide with the 50th anniversary of SEEHA. However, due to the pandemic situation, the conference had to be postponed twice. In the meantime, in early 2022, Kaser’s health deteriorated. Untimely, he passed away on April 13, 2022. The 10th InASEA conference, “Visual Cultures in Southeast Europe: Globalization, Gender, Power, and Resistance,” took place on September 24-26, 2022, in memory of Karl Kaser, and this issue of *Ethnologia Balkanica* is also dedicated to his immense contribution on Visual Studies in the Balkan. In the wake of Kaser’s passing, Elife Krasniqi, who completed her PhD at SEEHA under Kaser’s mentorship and taught and researched at SEEHA (2018-2023), continued organising this conference edition. In the last months before the conference, the assistance of Hana Stein, a then-PhD candidate at SEEHA, also under Kaser’s mentorship, and Eva Schafzahl, the office secretary of SEEHA, were crucial.

Kaser’s interest in visual topics dates back to the early 2000s. He was among the rare scholars who quickly absorbed new debates and trends and sought to make them useful for his research. This was also the case with the reception of the so-called pictorial or iconic turn, which has been debated in the social sciences and humanities since the early 1990s. One of the first steps that Kaser took in his exploration of the visual cultures of Southeast Europe (SEE) was the creation of the digital image database Visual Archive Southeast Europe (VASE). After some initial difficulties, the first VASE project, which is a pioneering project on Visual Culture on SEE, went online in 2012.<sup>28</sup> By now, the database has grown to comprise more than 5000 photographs collected and processed as part of several historical-anthropological research projects in the field of visual studies.<sup>29</sup> As the University of Graz did not guarantee permanent support for VASE, further development was dependent on the acquisition of external funding. Cooperation with Nataša Mišković from the University of Basel proved to be particularly important in this process. Software development and technical support were provided by the Center for Information Modelling (ZIM) at the University of Graz. With the passing of Karl Kaser, the further development of the database was transferred to the Institute for Habsburg and Balkan Research at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. VASE enables systematisation, classification and comparative observation and analysis, which are crucial for the processing of large image data. The epistemological novelty at that time was that VASE drew attention to the image as a primary source and as an object and that it promoted innovative research methods. In doing so, its mission was, and still is, to support projects that deal explicitly with the visual history and culture of the Balkans.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gruber, Siegfried / Gutmeyr, Dominik / Jesner, Sabine / Krasniqi, Elife / Pichler, Robert and Christian Promitzer. 2020. *From the Highlands to Hollywood: Multidisciplinary perspectives on Southeastern Europe. Festschrift for Karl Kaser and SEEHA*. Wien: Lit Verlag, 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> In its initial phase, the development of a digital photo database was largely driven by historian Barbara Derler, who, together with IT expert Georg Piwonka, tried to set up an image software to manage the enormous number of pictures collected within an ethnographic project on Macedonia. Lack of financial support, however, prevented further progress.

<sup>29</sup> On the development of VASE see Derler, Barbara. 2020. *Südosteuropaforschung delokalisiert & digital. Das Visuelle Archiv Südöstliches Europa (VASE)*, in *From the Highlands to Hollywood. Multidisciplinary perspectives on Southeastern Europe. Festschrift for Karl Kaser and SEEHA*, edited by Gruber, Siegfried / Gutmeyr, Dominik / Jesner, Sabine / Krasniqi, Elife / Pichler, Robert and Christian Promitzer. Wien: Lit Verlag, 163-180.

<sup>30</sup> Austrian Academy of Science. *Visual Archive Southeastern Europe (VASE)* (accessed: 6 September 2024).

### The Contributions of this Issue

This issue presents the work of eight authors whose research sheds light on contemporary visual culture, both in terms of topics and mediums. The order of the articles primarily follows the selection of mediums, with photography being particularly prominent.

**Vida Bakondy**, in her article “An Album for Tito. Belonging, Transnational Unity, and Social Critique in a Photo Album by the Yugoslav worker’s club Jedinstvo Vienna”, examines the significance of photographs from Yugoslav labour migrants in Austria, compiled in an album now housed in the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade. Created by the migrant workers’ association *Jedinstvo* (Union) in Vienna in 1972 and presented to President Josip Broz Tito, the album is a primary source for exploring migrant self-presentation, self-empowerment, and belonging within a transnational context. Bakondy examines the criteria for photo selection, filling strategies, and commemorative practices. The visual material not only documents workers’ experiences but also critiques the Yugoslav state’s neglect of their living conditions. The author simultaneously shows how the photo album reflects loyalty to Yugoslavia and highlights the structural discrimination and marginalisation faced by Yugoslav migrants in Austrian society. The author also marks the missing presence of photos depicting interaction with Austrian society, which show the migrants’ social isolation. This aspect is also important because it offers space for future comparative research on contemporary transnational spaces and migrant various aspects of inclusion.

The work of **Ioannis Karachristos**, “Visual Memory and Identity: A Case Study of the Greek-speaking Refugees from Sinasos, Anatolia,” also deals with a photo album compiled by Greek-speaking refugees from Sinasos (Anatolia). Following the 1927 Lausanne Treaty for Compulsory Exchange of Population between Greece and Turkey, the villagers of Sinasos organised a photo shoot of their town before being forced to leave their homes and become refugees. Through various stages of analysis—production, viewing, interpreting, archiving, exhibition, and reproduction—combined with oral interviews that the author conducted with descendants of refugees from Sinasos, Karachristos shows how images of the homeland, often accompanied by discourses of loss, impact the group’s cultural memory and identity. He also examines the photographs absent from the album, arguing that the criteria for visual representation aimed to serve a role: a specific preservation of the memory of the homeland.

Using the work of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen on visual semiotics, specifically their views on the representational, interactive, and compositional meta-functions of visual sources, **Esilda Luku**’s article “Image as a Propaganda Tool? Visual Representations of the ‘New Man’ in History Textbooks of the Socialist Era” examines the state’s construction of the “new man” and “new socialist society” in Albania. Luku analyzes the images in Albania’s national history textbooks based on three main criteria: subject (women, men, youth and work), publication date (1970s and 1980s), and school level (grades four and eight). The images analysed within the chosen timeframe reveal the state’s use of propaganda to mobilise society towards completing the construction of a socialist society against the backdrop of the country’s total isolation.

Within the context of communism in Romania, **Petruța Teampău** analyses the visual representation of women during Ceaușescu’s regime. Her article, “A Modest Soldier in the Great Army of Communists: Visual Representations of Women in Ceaușescu’s Romania,” provides a thorough analysis of images appearing in the official media outlet of the National Council of Women, “*Femeia*”, from 1965 to 1989. From the visual material of the magazine,

Teampău identifies various codes, such as the working woman, motherhood, and attractiveness, selecting the most representative images that transmit the state's propagandist discourse. Furthermore, Teampău highlights the selective criteria of the state's visual representation, which targeted socially and economically active working women while neglecting other categories of women based on age (too young, too old) and civil status (single, childless). The author demonstrates the state's paradoxical way of discursive and visual representation of women: while women were praised and encouraged for emancipation, they were simultaneously left anonymous, presented uniformly, and undermined through various means.

Another significant work on communism in Albania is the article "The National Folklore Festival of Gjirokaštër: An Analysis of its Audiovisual Representation" by **Mikaela Minga**. This article examines the audiovisual representation of the National Folklore Festival, a major national event organised by the state every five years in Gjirokaštër. Minga analyses five documentary films produced for the festival's editions from 1968 to 1988, focusing on how these documentaries were framed and crafted as cinematic experiences. The author highlights several reasons for the importance of analysing this visual material. Previously unexamined, the documentaries present the festival as an event *per se*, with ritualised character, detailing its historical background and visual and interpretative significance. Additionally, the author argues that the way these documentaries were framed and screened in contemporary times reveals significant dynamics of state-oriented cultural heritage processes. Through a thorough analysis, Minga demonstrates that beyond their ideological and propagandistic roles, these documentaries also had two significant dimensions: the personality cult of Enver Hoxha and the nationalist myth.

**Boris Ružić and Marija Katalinić**, in their article "(In)visible Landscapes of Migration: Corporality of the Image in The Passage," examine the exhibition *The Passage* – a collection of memorial portraits of migrants that lost their lives in the bordering regions of Croatia, and workshop in Rijeka, Croatia. *The Passage* consists of a collection of portraits of migrants who lost their lives in the bordering regions of Croatia since the so-called refugee border crisis of 2015. Using landscape as their main concept and drawing from various theoretical frameworks, the authors ground their critical visual analysis in artistic practices of representation. In their analysis, apart from exploring the media landscape, the canvas is also viewed as a landscape (in its potential to generate ways of rearticulating and reimagining migrant presence) and as an image (in its literal and symbolic presence). The authors argue that exile is not just a straightforward force that pushes people away from their homeland "but a rhizomatic, meshed movement of potential material and visual techniques of entry and deportation." Furthermore, they advocate for a systemic change in the power relations of representation, which sees migrant presence beyond tropes of victimisation, generalisation, or absence.

The article "Selling the Otherness – the Stereotyped Image of the Balkans in Serbian Art of the Early 2000s" by **Milena Jakanović** analyses the work of various Serbian artists from the 2000s within the context of Western Balkanism. Against the backdrop of the post-Yugoslav wars, the Western art industry sought artists who would conform to their preconceived notions of the Balkans, shaped by the concept of Balkanism. This led to the creation and promotion of the term "Balkan art," which was artificially constructed by Western institutions. While highlighting the conditionality of power imposed on artists for visibility, the author shows how this type of art became commodified and marketable. Many artists exploited this dynamic as a means to gain visibility. However, the author contends

that even when artwork did not contain commodified messages aligning with the Western gaze, the socio-political context of the region from which the artists originated still influenced how their art was perceived.

The article by **Milena Benovska** explores the growing international popularity of Turkish TV dramas, particularly in Southeastern Europe, against the backdrop of historical narratives and rising nationalisms. It investigates the qualities of these TV productions and their impact on viewers' tastes and engagement. The research utilises a combination of methods, including analysis of social media, viewer comments, and informal conversations, emphasising the visual richness and veracity of Turkish dramas as key factors in their success. The study also delves into the economic and political contexts, including neo-Ottoman influences and cultural diplomacy, which have facilitated the global reach of Turkish TV series. Finally, it considers the broader implications of globalisation, suggesting that Turkish dramas represent a form of "glocalization" that blends Western models with local cultural elements.

#### Notes on authors

Elife Krasniqi is an anthropologist and writer. She has researched the changes and continuities within Albanian families, the patriarchal system, and feminist responses from the mid-20th century to the early 21st century in Kosovo. Her current research focuses on the Black African presence in the Balkans (the lineage of Ottoman domestic slavery), analyzing the intersection of gender, race, and class in their everyday lives from a visual perspective since the late 19th century.

Robert Pichler is a historical anthropologist and photographer specializing in migration and visual studies at the Institute for Habsburg and Balkan Studies at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His most significant work in the field of visual studies was published in 2020, in collaboration with Edit Pula, titled *Albania's 90s: Photographs and Narratives*. For further research on migration and visual topics, see <https://www.oeaw.ac.at/ihb/personen/pichler-robert>.

#### Acknowledgements

On behalf of InASEA and as editors of this special issue, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Florian Bieber, Director of the Center for Southeast European Studies (CSE), and Armina Galijaš, Editor-in-Chief of *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, for hosting *Ethnologia Balkanica* Vol. 24. We are also particularly grateful to the editorial team, especially Branimir Staletović (editor) and Claudia Laštro (editorial assistant), for their dedicated work, collaboration, and support.

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