PATRYCJA WILCZYŃSKA
University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, Poland
IWONA LEONOWICZ-BUKAŁA
University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów, Poland

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Political Contexts and Their Visualizations in the Animated Films of Communist Yugoslavia

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In the second half of the 20th century, Zagreb, Croatia, was one of the most important centres of film animation in Europe, and a key role in its development was played by the Zagreb Film Studio, which has been operating continuously since 1953. The creators associated with Zagreb Film Studio are often called the Zagreb School of Animation, a term referring to their unique style. The Studio became famous primarily for its short animations, which were distinctive due to an innovative approach in terms of both technique and narrative. Zagreb Film productions have won numerous festival awards and international recognition. An important context for the development of the Studio was the political situation in communist Yugoslavia, which influenced the themes and aesthetics of the films. This article analyses the political context of the Studio's activity and how it was visualized in Yugoslavian animation.

Keywords: Zagreb Film, Zagreb Animation Film, political animation, Yugoslavian cinema

Introduction

The second half of the 20th century was a period of dynamic development in film animation. After the Second World War ended, animation became an important artistic medium that evolved worldwide, not only in the United States, which had previously had primacy in the pre-war years. Post-war and subsequent cultural, economic and political accomplishments significantly impacted the development of animation, both technologically and artistically. The 1940s and 1950s marked important points in the history of Central and Eastern European animation, when individual artists began their experiments with animated films. Until then, animation was mainly associated with Disney productions.[1] For these artists, the financial possibilities and access to new techniques combining visual arts with film were considerably limited compared to the working conditions in animation studios in the USA. Consequently, amateurs from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia needed to develop new, experimental animation

[1] P. Sitkiewicz, *Miki i myszy: Walt Disney i film rysunkowy w przedwojennej Polsce*, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2013.

techniques, such as cut-out, puppet, or stop-motion animation using various objects, paint, or what were called 'non-camera' techniques. Ultimately, these artists changed the perception of animated film to a form of entertainment not only reserved for young viewers. Since then, although still downplayed compared to live-action films, animation has become a medium whose audience also includes adults. Moreover, the development, which was associated with the emergence of so many new artists and the advances in the genre, contributed to the establishment of national animation schools, the founding studios for cartoon and puppet productions, and the popularization of animation film festivals.

One of post-war Europe's most significant centres of film animation was Zagreb, Yugoslavia, where the famous Zagreb Film Studio was established. Thanks to the combined efforts of amateur animation filmmakers, the studio has operated from 1953 to the present day, becoming famous for its short animations. The animators brought together under the banner of Zagreb Film are often referred to as the Zagreb Animation School. This name refers to the distinctive style developed by Zagreb filmmakers, which is described later in this article.[2] Over the years, films produced at Zagreb Film have won numerous festival awards and have received general acclaim for their innovative technical and storytelling approaches.[3]

The most important context for the development of Zagreb Film is the political one. Both art, including animation, and politics are vague concepts.[4] However, artistic activity was and is considered a form of participation in public discourse that shapes political life. The politics of art is understood here as the involvement of artists in relating the story of the outside world (more or less literally), on the one hand and politics' influence on the activity of artists on the other.[5] The first decades of Zagreb Film were the time of the communist regime in former Yugoslavia. The potential interrelationship between the establishment and activities of Zagreb Animation School and the political situation both within the country and the world as a whole, which was extremely tense during the school's heyday, prompts a desire to understand whether and how animated films produced in Yugoslavia conveyed political content. Did the filmmakers advocate particular demands in their animated films? They had, after all, ample opportunity to do so, given the reach Zagreb Film enjoyed.

[2] The term „Zagreb Animation School" does not only apply to creators originating from Croatia. Animators working for the studio's reputation came from various republics of the former Yugoslavia.

[3] One of the greatest successes of Zagreb Film was the Academy Award for Best Animated Film given to V. Mimica for *Samac* (1958), the first time in history that this award won a non-US filmmaker. Adam Snyder, *Zagreb Film: Złoty wiek*, [in:] *Sztuka animacji: Od ołówka do piksela; Historia filmu animowanego*, ed. Jerry Beck, trans. Ewa Romkowska, Arkady, Warszawa 2006, pp. 226–227.

[4] Cf. Magdalena Lorenc, *Polityczność sztuki: Analiza pracy Zbigniewa Libery pt.* LEGO. Obóz koncentracyjny *z 1996 roku*. "Przegląd Politologiczny" 2018, no. 3, pp. 81–96; Kamil Minkner, *Główne problemy konceptualizacji pojęcia polityczności*, "Studia Politologiczne" 2015, no. 37, pp. 50–74.

[5] Kamil Minkner, op. cit.

Historical Context of Founding Zagreb Film and Its Development

To facilitate readers' understanding of the historical context in which the materials being studied were created, it is important to briefly outline the historical aspects of Zagreb Film. The origins of Zagreb Film are closely associated with the political landscape of Yugoslavia. Its initiators were a group of cartoonists from Krempuh magazine, led by Fadil Hadžić. Following Tito's declaration of independence from Moscow in 1948, Krempuh began featuring anti-Soviet caricatures. The artists decided to take their work further, and in 1951, they produced their first animation, *Veliki miting*, created by the brothers Walter and Norbert Neugebauer. This animation satirically criticized the USSR while addressing Yugoslav-Soviet relations.[6]

It is important to note that the communist ideology enjoyed a certain degree of public support in Yugoslavia, gained in the fights against the occupying forces during the Second World War.[7] The communists were not seen as an imposed power, despite their initial dependence on the USSR, although the situation in Yugoslavia at this point resembled that in other countries under Soviet control. Tito's party began to introduce Soviet-style principles: all non-communists were branded fascists and subjected to severe repression; political opponents were sentenced to death; prisons and concentration camps were filled with Catholic clergy and tens of thousands of other innocent victims of the new system.[8]

During the conflict with Moscow stemming from Broz-Tito's pursuit of independence, the public provided robust support to their leader. After breaking with the Kremlin, Tito became a hero and liberator, around whom a cult of personality developed.[9] This is why the Belgrade government liked the content of the Veliki Miting animation, and decided to fund another film institution separate from Jadran Film in Zagreb. The newly established Duga Film was to produce and distribute animated films. It was headed by Hadžić and hired more than 100 artists and enthusiasts of the new field. However, after only a year, the studio was closed down due to limited state funding,[10] yet some Zagreb animators kept their activities alive through institutions such as Zora Film, which dealing with educational short films for children,

[6] Patrycjusz Pająk, *Rozracjunek z rokiem 1948 i jego następstwami w jugosłowiańskim i postjugosłowiańskim filmie fabularnym*, "Zeszyty Łużyckie" 2021, no. 55, p. 176.

[7] As M. Czerwiński explains, the phenomenon of robust social support for the communist movement had its source primarily in the events that led to the liberation of Yugoslav lands from fascist occupation. The struggle for power at the end of World War II was mainly fought between the Croatian Ustasha group, with fascist and nationalist tendencies, the Chetniks, striving to restore the rule of the Serbian monarchy, and the communist partisans, led by Josip Broz Tito. Maciej Czerwiński, *Chorwacja: Dzieje, kultura, idee*, Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, Kraków 2020, p. 570.

[8] Wojciech Roszkowski, *Półwiecze: Historia polityczna świata po 1945 roku*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2003, p. 48.

[9] Ibidem, pp. 566–592; Jerzy Holzer, *Komunizm w Europie: Dzieje ruchu i systemy władzy*, Bellona, Warszawa 2000, pp. 74–75.

[10] Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Animation: A World History*, vol. 2: *The Birth of a Style – The Three Markets*, CRC Press – Taylor & Francis Group, Boca Raton, FL 2016, p. 69.

and Interpublic, founded by the Neugebauer brothers. The latter offered animated commercials and information films to entrepreneurs.[11]

In the early 1950s, Yugoslavia's government consolidated self-management reforms. Although censorship in the Tito state was less intense than in other communist countries, its effects could be seen in the silencing of critical voices during Yugoslavia's separation from Russia, for example. Also, socialist realism, imposed on the art of Eastern Europe, was never officially assimilated by Yugoslavia's authorities and artists. In its place, so-called 'national realism' emerged as an official trend, with very similar features, such as artistic dogmatism and promoting intolerance towards enemies of the system.[12]

Artists of all fields from all the Yugoslav republics rebelled against this style. They demanded equal treatment of each of the possible directions of art, from populism to the avant-garde, and complete liberation of creative processes from top-down guidelines.[13] This attitude was influenced by the Exat '51 group, established in Zagreb in 1951. It brought together artists fascinated by the principles of the Bauhaus (the German school of fine arts and crafts active in the first half of the 20th century[14]) and Constructivism (the abstract art theory from Russia, dating from the beginning of the 20th century[15]). The Exat '51 group's activities were a negation of the national realism promoted by the authorities.[16] The graphic and painting works proposed by the group's members were characterized by abstractionism, geometrization, simplification of form, and colour range. They greatly inspired the creators of Zagreb animations. Two representatives of Exat '51, Aleksandar Srnec and Vlado Kristl, were also involved in the production of animated films.[17] For some time, the authorities sought to restore the previously prevailing political patterns to art. However, under constant resistance from artists, a declaration on the freedom to create was issued in 1954, thus ending the dispute.[18] This period also marked a watershed for artists due to the complete decentralization of cinematography.[19]

In 1953, Croatia's Society of Film Workers founded Zagreb Film, initially producing and distributing documentaries, feature films, and shorts. Three years later, the Cartoon Film Studio was established as a company branch, led by animators from the Vukotić-Kostelac group.

[11] Borivoj Dovniković, *Hrvatska animacija do Zagreb filma*, *Studio za crtani film Zagreb filma*, Zagreb Film, n.d., https://zagrebfilm.hr/o-nama/ (accessed: 22.08.2024).
[12] Mira Liehm, Antonin J. Liehm, *The Most Important Art: Soviet and Eastern European Film After 1945*, University of California Press, Los Angeles 1977, p. 128.
[13] Ibidem.
[14] Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus*, Taschen, Berlin 2019.
[15] *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice*, ed. Catherine Fosnot, Teachers College Press, New York and London 2005.
[16] Giannalberto Bendazzi, op. cit., p. 69.
[17] Hrvoje Turković, *EXAT 51 and the Zagreb School of Animation*, [in:] *EXAT 51: Synthesis of the Arts in Post-war Yugoslavia*, eds. Katia Baudin, Tihomir Milovac, Kunstmuseen Krefeld / Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld 2017.
[18] Mira Liehm, Antonin J. Liehm, op. cit., p. 128.
[19] Ibidem, p. 129.

Soon, Interpublic and the former staff of Zora Film and Duga Film merged. Thus, all the cartoonists, graphic designers, directors, and scriptwriters simultaneously found themselves in one place. They very quickly developed the technique of what was termed 'limited animation'.[20] The artists focused on this particular medium to break away from the Disney style and create a more original, experimental form, inspired by the activities of the Exat '51 group.[21] The images often verged on abstraction but were very clear and refined. The filmmakers also used collages and assemblages.[22] However, the films did not go beyond the second dimension; puppet animation was not popular.

Animators themselves spoke about 'limited animation' and distancing themselves from the typical Disney style, which reflects reality both in movement and design: "Animation conveying the movement of nature directly cannot be creative animation (…). To animate: to give life and soul to a design. Not through the copying but through the transformation of reality."[23] Vutotić also referred to this issue, claiming that Zagreb animation should follow its path, not using the achievements of other creators, and most importantly, not copying techniques or style. This statement closely echoes the Yugoslav 'Third Way' policy. In turn, Vatroslav Mimica noted that thanks to such procedures, animation goes beyond the framework of the unfair claim that it is a genre for children. Making the images unreal and embellishing them with symbolism and metaphor, which are difficult for younger viewers to decipher, gives the work value. These activities were noticed in 1957, when the critic D. Adamović described Zagreb's animations as "rich in ideas, prone to parody, with an ironic tone."[24]

Ultimately, the creations released by Zagreb Film, despite their distorted, abstract, geometric form or inspiration from Suprematism, constituted a substantive image of the reality surrounding the animators daily. They were neither idealized nor criticized but simply presented as they actually were.[25] Boris Kolar explained this issue by claiming that the Zagreb School presents man, society, and the world around him as seen from the perspective of the people "inside."[26]

Another factor determining the development of 'limited animation' in the Zagreb studio was financial limits, which forced creators to simplify drawings as much as possible or reduce the number of

[20] This trend was similar to characteristic style of American studio UPA (United Productions of America) released a few years earlier. Although Zagreb's animators were able to see only some shots of film animation from overseas in the press. Giannalberto Bendazzi, op. cit., pp. 69–70.
[21] Hrvoje Turković, op. cit.
[22] Giannalberto Bendazzi, op. cit., pp. 69–70.
[23] Statement which accompanied screenings of the artists: B. Dovniković, A. Marks, D. Vukotić, Z. Grić, V. Jutrisa, N. Dragić. *Animations: Zagreb*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art. Program, January 8 – January 21, 1968.
[24] Dragoslav Adamović, *Napred ili nazad*, "Filmska kultura" 1957, no. 2, p. 8.
[25] Midhat Ajanović, *Animacija i realizam*, Hrvatski filmski savez, Zagreb 2004, p. 88.
[26] Boris Kolar, *8 Autora i 15 pitanja: Anketa o domaćem crtanom filmu*, interview by T. Butorac, [in:] *Zagrebački krug crtanog filma*, vol. 3, ed. Zlatko Sudović, Zagreb film, Zagreb 1978, p. 104.

frames to a minimum, for example, by using cyclically repeating sequences.[27] Due to the difficult financial situation affecting the entire country, spending on film production was not a priority. Animators just starting out had to cope by limiting the amount of material, e.g., film tape, to the bare minimum. Later, when the studios were privatized and managed their own finances, the situation improved because Zagreb Film had already enjoyed its first successes and, consequently, was in a better financial condition.[28]

Zagreb animation content often dealt with the paradoxes of everyday life, showing simple, tired, and lost people struggling with technological advances, inner problems, and basic needs such as relationships with their surroundings and other people. Despite the overwhelming subject matter, the films abound in grotesque humour and numerous gags.[29] The films' themes can be considered consistent with Yugoslavia's foreign policy and the concerns of society at that time, mainly in terms of technological progress.[30]

In 1959, the film theorists G. Sadoul and A. Martin first used the term "Zagreb School of Animated Film" in the magazine "Les Lettres Françaises" (no. 751/1958) to describe the common characteristics of works produced in Zagreb, while maintaining the individuality of the creators.[31] The term "school" should not be obviously understood as an educational institution. The animators from the Zagreb School themselves interpreted this term as a community of creators with different approaches to the art of animation. They maintained their individuality but identified themselves as part of an artistic group.[32] What the world has come to recognize as the Zagreb School of Animated Film, however, was a stylistic trend that united most of the films produced there. It was distinguished by its modern understanding of the medium, caricature drawing, simplification, stylization, and themes that touched on global problems.[33]

The definition of a "school" in the artistic context is a kind of trend distinguished from others by visual style, the topics covered, intellectual background or a specific philosophy of practicing film art."[34]

[27] Ronald Holloway, *The Short Film in Eastern Europe: Art & Politics of Cartoons and Puppets*, [in:] *Politics, Art and Commitment in East European Cinema*, ed. David Paul, Macmillan Press Ltd, London and Basingstoke 1983, pp. 225–251; Dušan Vukotić, *Jugoslovenska škola crtanog filma*, [in:] idem, *Zaboravljeni vizionar*, Nacionalna Zajednica Crnogoraca Hrvatske: Skaner studio, Zagreb 2014, pp. 246–247.

[28] Elodie Osborn, *Animation in Zagreb*, "Film Quarterly" 1968, no. 22(1), p. 46.

[29] *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film*, vol. 4, ed. Barry K. Grant, Schirmer Books, Detroit 2007, p. 404.

[30] Boris Kolar, *Neke teze o našem animaranom filmu*, [in:] *Zagrebaćki krug crtanog filma*, op. cit., pp. 150–152.

[31] Ranko Munitić, *Zagrebački krug crtanog filma*, vol. 1, ed. Zlatko Sudović, Zagreb film, Zagreb 1978, p. 139.

[32] Ibidem, p. 17.

[33] Midhat Ajanović, *Animation in Croatia: Zagreb School and Beyond*, CRC Press, Boca Raton 2025, p. vii.

[34] Paweł Sitkiewicz, *Film animowany w epoce kina autorskiego i narodowych szkół animacji*, [in:] *Kino epoki nowofalowej*, eds. Tadeusz Lubelski, Iwona Sowińska, Rafał Syska, Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, Kraków 2015, p. 796.

According to P. Sitkiewicz, a school requires a formal or informal leader and an aesthetic programme, which may be presented in a manifesto or through a publishing forum. It should also have flagship works that put its principles into practice, defined geographical and temporal boundaries, and sometimes a specific production system. Additionally, festival successes can enhance the school's reputation. It must foster a community of creators and is typically elitist, drawing support from institutions that promote high culture.[35]

The animators of the Zagreb Animation School worked as a team. In one animation, someone was a drafter, in the next, an animator, and a director would become a scriptwriter in a colleague's film.[36] The studio also created a series. Among the most recognizable were *Inspector Mask* (1962–1963) and *Professor Balthazar* (1967–1978). In the 1960s, the Zagreb studio experienced a crisis when some of its greatest creators parted ways with animation. The gap left by their departure soon began to be filled by former assistants and helpers. This new wave of animators included Borivoj Dovniković, Aleksandar Marx, Vladimir Jutriša, Zlatko Bourek, Zlatko Grgić, and Nedjeljko Dragić.[37] The inauguration of Animafest Zagreb in 1972 was an important factor in boosting the popularity and reputation of animated films from Zagreb at the time. It is the second-oldest festival devoted entirely to animated films (after the Annecy International Animated Film Festival).[38]

The third and final phase of the golden era of the Zagreb school was marked by authors who reached their creative peak in the 1970s. After that time, the studio's creative capacity dwindled, and by the early 1980s, the Zagreb Animation School phenomenon had come to an end. Young animators mostly repeated what they had already seen and achieved. Consequently, Zagreb Film slowly began to lose its position on the international scene.[39] One of the animators of the last wave was Joško Marušić, who believed that one of the main reasons for the decline was a change in the interests of world animation, while Zagreb still focused on political themes and lacked an offer for a mass audience.[40]

During this time, the split between the republics of Yugoslavia increased. Nationalist sentiments were growing in all of them despite the nationwide community policy, the idea of brotherhood and unity, which the authorities had strongly advocated, was starting to deteriorate. The unsatisfactory economic situation also led to misunderstand-

[35] Ibidem.
[36] Ibidem, p. 798.
[37] Midhat Ajanović Ajan, *Little Man at the Turn of the Worlds: A View of the Origin, History and the Ideological Foundation of the Phenomenon of the Zagreb School of Animated Film*, [in:] *Propaganda, Ideology, Animation: Twisted Dreams of History,* eds. Olga Bobrowska, Michał Bobrowski, Bogusław Zmudziński, pp. 164–167.
[38] Borivoj Dovniković, op. cit.
[39] Midhat Ajanović Ajan, *Little Man at the Turn of the Worlds…*, pp. 168–169.
[40] Sanja Bahun, *A Conversation with Joško Marušić: Sending Messages to Unknown Friends*, Kinokultura.com, 2011, https://www.kinokultura.com/specials/11/int-marusic.shtml (accessed: 17.08.2024).

ings among politicians and nations, and criticism of the one-party system became increasingly prevalent. Some advocated for greater independence of the republics, while others postulated concentrating a wider range of responsibility in the hands of Belgrade. The nations inhabiting Yugoslavia began vying for influence and sought more significant decision-making in matters concerning the entire republic. To maintain its leadership role and prevent any republics from dominating, the Yugoslav Nationalist Party eliminated the threat by removing individuals who vocally championed nationalism or wielded excessive power.[41]

The most beneficial solution for the Serbs would be to continue the central policy in which they held a dominant position. If the republics were to become more federalized, they would lose this advantage. On the other hand, Croatia, as the republic with the highest national income, a large part of which derived from its tourism industry, expressed its protests against transferring its profits to the central office in Belgrade. From there, these revenues were redistributed to the other republics, whose earnings was lower. It is worth noting these substantial economic disparities in Yugoslavia, where the poorer southern regions, such as Serbia and Kosovo, faced issues like unemployment, illiteracy, and inadequate infrastructure.

In the 1980s, not only the world of Zagreb animation that was in crisis. After Tito's death, the already weakened idea of the 'brotherhood and unity' of the Yugoslav republics was crumbling. Croatia and Slovenia experienced urban development, industrialization, and a gradual shift away from agriculture. This situation motivated Croats to seek independence, aiming to retain their income The Serbs wanted to maintain a central policy. the Albanians living in Serbian Kosovo sought to establish their own republic. There was still resentment over the victims of the Second World War, and the republics blamed each other for the deaths of their compatriots. Hence, the growing dispute between them concerned not only the aspiration for a privileged political position, but also, friction of a nationalistic nature.[42]

Citizens' incomes fell dramatically; inflation, debt, unemployment and social discontent were growing; the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia was becoming weaker.[43] At the end of the 1980s, the one-party system collapsed. The republics sought independence and democracy but met resistance from the Yugoslav military, leading to armed conflicts in Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995.[44]

[**41**] Robin A. Remington, *Yugoslavia*, [in:] *Communism in Eastern Europe*, ed. Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984, p. 246.

[**42**] Joanna Rapacka, *Godzina Herdera: O Serbach, Chorwatach i idei jugosłowiańskiej*, Wydawnictwo Energeia, Warszawa 1995, p. 9; Maciej Czerwiński, op. cit., pp. 604–606; Jerzy Holzer, op. cit., p. 115.

[**43**] Nora Beloff, *Tito's Flawed Legacy*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo 1985, pp. 212–217.

[**44**] Maciej Czerwiński, op. cit., pp. 632–665; Maciej Kuczyński, *Krwawiąca Europa: Konflikty zbrojne i punkty zapalne w latach 1990–2000; Tło historyczne i stan obecny*, Bellona, Warszawa 2001, pp. 265–266.

In conclusion, it is important to consider how the communist reality of Yugoslavia and its political situation influenced the artistic content produced there. Were the political and ideological tensions of the socialist state reflected through creative works, including Zagreb Film animations?

Methods

This article aims to determine whether historical and political conditions influenced the activities of Yugoslav animators and how they affected their artistic work. This will be done by analysing the content of selected film animation productions in Yugoslavia in the context of the prevailing conditions during the period that coincided with both the most intense development of the field and the period of communist rule. Analysing selected animated films will determine whether political content was used in Yugoslav animated cinema and, if so, what narrative strategies and techniques the filmmakers used to convey an ideological message to the audience. The selection of films should be described as purposeful: items were selected basing on the description of the film and their titles, which were connected with the political and historical background of Yugoslavia. Online directories (IMDb,[45] FilmAffinity[46]), the official channel of the Zagreb Animation School on the YouTube platform,[47] and the subject literature were researched.

Unfortunately, due to their inaccessibility, not all of the films found this way (ten in total) could be analysed. It is likely that some footage has not survived to the present day.[48] In the end, five films were analysed: *Veliki Miting* (1951) by Walter Neugebauer; Vatroslav Mimica's *Samac* (1958); *Piccolo* (1959) and *Igra* (1962) by Dušan Vukotić; and Borivoj Dovniković's *Skola hodanja* (1978).

The first is the animation film which actually contributed to creating the Zagreb Animation School. *Samac*, *Piccolo* and *Igra* are works produced during the School's heyday. The last item is an animation film from the time when Zagreb Film was approaching a crisis. All the selected items are short feature films between 8 and 20 minutes in length. *Samac*, *Piccolo* and *Skola hodanja* represent the 'limited animation' style, while the earliest of these, *Veliki Miting*, still refers strongly to the Disney style. *Igra*, on the other hand, combines elements of live-action and cartoon animation. These films were chosen for their formal and stylistic diversity, as well as their political content. The films were analysed both in terms of narrative, semiotics and visual form; the significant elements for the subject of the study were also compared with the political and ideological context of Yugoslavia in which the productions were made.

[45] https://www.imdb.com/ (accessed: 9.09.2024).
[46] https://www.filmaffinity.com/us/main.html (accessed: 9.09.2024).
[47] https://www.youtube.com/@zagrebfilmanimation (accessed: 10.09.2024).
[48] An example is the film *General in resni človek* (*The General and the Serious Man*, 1962). The work clearly alluded to Tito's repressive rule; the film was censored and all available copies destroyed. Cf. Hrvoje Turković, op. cit.

Findings

Veliki Miting (1951), dir. Walter Neugebauer

This is a black-and-white animation and can be considered a stylistically successful copy of Disney cartoons. The political content of this film is direct: there are no veiled metaphors, and it is very simple to connect the scenes and characters on screen with the events of the time. The plot clearly relates to the Yugoslav-Soviet conflict, referred to as the Informbiro period, which began in 1948 with a resolution from the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties (Kominform) revoking the membership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.[49] The action begins in Bucharest, the headquarters of Kominform, where the Soviet official Pavel Judin works. The city, and the office, are depicted as backward, the buildings decrepit and neglected. Resolutions and information are transmitted there via 'flying ducks' that arrive from Moscow, which is a satire on the backward solutions offered by the USSR.

Judin's task is to prepare the text of the above-mentioned Informbiro resolution. He decides to send his subordinate to Albania – the neighbour of Yugoslavia, which became an ally of the USSR during the same period. The Albanian leader of the time, Enver Hoxha, is portrayed as a 'defender of frogs and mosquitoes,' himself being the largest amphibians, being humorously depicted as a toad. Interestingly, there is a map on Judin's wall, on which Yugoslavia is called 'the country of monsters.' Judin does not allow a young journalist to see what is hidden under the inscription (propaganda and falsifying accurate information). The purpose of the younger journalist's trip is to incite a revolt against the Yugoslavs and to discredit them. The object of the disputed demonstration is supposed to be the drying out of Lake Škodersk, located on the border between Montenegro and Albania.

After the failed attempt at provocation, the young journalist returns to Belgrade in his duck plane. However, a storm forces him to fly over Yugoslavia, a country that Yudin deems 'monstrous.' The frames illustrate the landscape of Yugoslavia, contrasting it with old-fashioned, backward Belgrade. When the envoy finally reaches the Kominform headquarters, he relays information to his superior about Tito's country's high level of development. Judin is furious to hear this news and sends his aide to prison.

Judin's character epitomizes the qualities that Tito's supporters attributed to Stalin's policies at the time. He is selfish, deceitful, manipulative, and impulsive. Not only does he conceal the truth about facts unfavourable to him, in this case, the development of Yugoslavia, but he also vilifies the enemy state. He is merciless to his subordinates when they tell him the truth.

The actions of the characters from Bucharest and Albania, based on provocation and manipulation, reflect the characteristics of the communist regime. Moreover, their efforts do not achieve the intended

[49] Maciej Czerwinski, op. cit., pp. 570–571.

goals and prove to be unreliable. The film suggests that the Soviet Union, Cominform, and their allies are incompetent, and their dishonest policies ultimately lead to self-destruction. In contrast, Yugoslavia is portrayed as a developed, well-organized, and morally upright country following an independent and virtuous path.

The film is obviously politically biased – it directly discredits the Soviet side. It is also a form of celebration of Tito's introduction of self-government and support for his decisions. The film enjoyed an extremely positive reception in Yugoslavia from the propaganda and censorship apparatuses and the public.

Interestingly, *Veliki Miting*'s director had prior experience in producing propaganda films. Walter Neugebauer's first film was *Narod odlučuje – Svi na izbore* (1945), a short advertising-propaganda animation created for the Film Directorate of the People's Republic of Croatia. The message of the screen adaptation was that war criminals, who had committed crimes only a few months earlier, could be hiding among the candidates in the upcoming elections. At one point in the film, one of the candidates is shown as a smiling sheep before transforming into a monstrous man in a Ustasha uniform brandishing a knife. The approach calling for the lynching of ideological enemies was typical of the propaganda of the time, both at the national and global level.[50]

Early Yugoslav animation also collaborated with the authorities, creating outright propaganda works in support of the politicians' demands. Examples include anti-Stalinist satires, extremely popular during the conflict with the Soviet Union: *Professor Budalastov* (1948), dir. Branko Marjanović, Oktavijan Miletić, *Iz Kerempuhova dnevnika* (1950), dir. Bogdan Maračić and *Tajna dvorca I.B.* (1951), dir. Milan Katić.[51]

Samac (1958), dir. Vatroslav Mimica

It is a textbook example of 'limited animation'. It presents the issue of the individual's alienation, progressive mechanization, and the social alienation that accompanies it. The protagonist is a clerk who works all day typing on a typewriter. He is surrounded by his co-workers, all doing the same thing in the same rhythm, with the same impassive expression. No one speaks to anyone; the only sound heard is the irritating clatter of keys. This multiplication of working people identically and sounds conveys the scale of the protagonist's problem.

He is overwhelmed by the situation, entombed by the devices around him. At one point, the workers themselves transform into working cogs. With this meaningful trick, the author conveys the idea of dehumanization, comparing individuals to the mindless machines that make up the whole system. The protagonist returns home overstimulated and falls asleep, seemingly the only escape from reality.

[50] Daniel Rafaelić, *Walter Neugebauer: Ćovjek koji je stripom mislio film*, Arteist.hr, 2013, https://arteist.hr/walter-neugebauer/ (accessed: 18.05.2023).

[51] Patrycjusz Pajak, op. cit., pp. 174–176.

It is the only place where he is free, calm, and happy, surrounded not by noise but peaceful music. However, after a while, a beautiful dream turns into a nightmare reminiscent of the ugliness of the mechanized world plaguing the protagonist. Yet the film has a happy ending – the man finds a soulmate who shares his feelings and, like him, seeks a relationship with another human being.

Mimica's film puts forward the public's fear and distrust of progressive technicalisation. Similar sentiments emerged in the communist states, which were undergoing a similar process of change in line with state objectives, including boosting labour productivity. This film was one of the first voices in animation somewhat 'against' what was happening in communist Yugoslavia. It attempts to show reality as it really is, taking into account the element of socialist society. Presented as objective in principle, it creates a powerful sense of anxiety, sadness, and sympathy for the protagonist.

***Piccolo* (1959), dir. Dušan Vukotić**

It tells the story of two neighbours who live in friendship and help each other at every turn. Their relationship changes drastically when one of them buys a harmonica. The sound enrages the other neighbour, who decides to equip himself with a louder instrument in revenge.

Thus begins a string of rivalries between old friends over who would get the noisier instrument and make the other's life more miserable. The two neighbours, already hostile to each other, are driven by jealousy and a desire to score points. At the culmination, each brings his henchmen, with whom the neighbours engage in a stand-off. Both groups look like armies conducted by their bandleaders, they sing military songs in chorus. There is a buzz of aggression, which is also excellently conveyed by the cacophonous sounds, no longer associated with music but reminiscent of gunshots and explosions. The whole situation is reminiscent of an arms race, with conflict and destruction its grim conclusion.

Escalating Growing military resources was a highly topical issue at the time the film was made. This primarily concerned the USSR and the USA, along with other states. In addition, the aspect of brotherhood turning into enmity can be related to the then-escalating conflict in Germany, which led to the erection of the Berlin Wall, a symbol of the division of the German nation and the Cold War.

The issue closest to the film's creator, which according to some sources is an actual parallel to the events depicted in the animation, is the division and deepening aggression between Serbs and Croats.[52] In *Piccolo*, Serbs, Croats and other Yugoslav nations are depicted as geographical neighbours. The creators worked during a time when

[52] Midhat Ajanović Ajan, *Little Man at the Turn of the Worlds…*, p. 162.

tensions among these groups were intensifying, suggesting that their depiction of reality through film reflects the growing hostility and resentment in the region. The dependencies and increasing conflicts between these nations, as discussed earlier in the article, contributed to the dramatic events of war, which are hinted at in the animation through the soundtrack, the portrayal of "leaders," and military formations. Interestingly, the creators do not take sides; instead, they portray the actions of all parties comically, highlighting the absurdity of such conflicts. The trivial nature of the disputes further emphasizes this perspective. Therefore, regardless of the specific events and situations referenced in *Piccolo* (which may reflect a broader commentary on several conflicts), it serves as a warning to society at that time – both within Yugoslavia and globally.

***Igra* (1962), dir. Dušan Vukotić**

The visuals of this work are differ significantly from those found in Vukotić's previous productions, which are typical for the Zagreb School. *Igra* is the result of an experiment – Vukotić's first film to combine acting with elements of cartoon animation.

It features two children sitting among a scattering of coloured paper and crayons. When one of them draws a shape, it comes to life and starts moving on the surface of papers spread around. The animation of the drawings is accompanied by sounds articulated by the children, such as the growl of an engine or the barking of a dog.

Initially, a fun game, it begins to turn into a rivalry. The objects created by the two little illustrators begin to fight each other: a car destroys a flower; a dog frightens a girl's character. The children also change their attitudes; their faces show anger and determination to take revenge and defeat their rivals. The drawings become increasingly aggressive, with planes, tanks, and bombs appearing, attacking the sketched house. The music also reinforces the sense of unease, gradually becoming more dramatic. At the climax, the explosion of an animated bomb is replaced by an ink spill that irreversibly destroys all the children's work, causing the kids to come to blows. After a while, however, they realize that it was themselves who have caused the disastrous situation. Terrified by the consequences of their actions, they begin to cry. The movie ends with a picture of distraught and confused children.

Igra is an obvious allegory of the arms race and the tragic consequences of military conflicts, whose recent memory remains vivid. The fact that the film features children perceived as carefree and innocent prompts the conclusion that seemingly harmless behaviour can lead to serious consequences that both sides will later regret.

The symbolism of catastrophe is very telling in this film. The little aggressors in Vukotić's film become victims; after the conflict, there are no winners, only ruins and despair. The children cry, suggesting that only after a catastrophe does awareness of the consequences come, as with societies that become aware of its tragic effects only after the war.

In 1960s Yugoslavia, this could, analogously to *Piccolo*, refer to hidden ethnic and ideological tensions that years later led to the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. It can also be read more broadly – as a warning against propaganda and manipulation that turn friendly societies into hostile factions.

***Škola hodanja* (1978), dir. Borivoj Dovniković**

At first, a happy, whistling man enters the frame in his characteristic way, hopping up every other step. After a while, he encounters more figures on his way who command him to use their preferred form of movement. The protagonist, believing in the good intentions of the interlocutors, submits to every method and tries to combine them all. The moment the protagonist defies the next person he meets and their command as to how to move, he receives a threat, a warning shot from a gun. After that, he is honoured with an order for obedience. Such a course of action is reminiscent of the methods that the communist authorities used against insubordinate citizens. Because of all the changes imposed on him, the protagonist's gait no longer consists only of jumping but also of waving his elbow, nodding, marching, and limping. Comical though it looks, this all causes significant discomfort. We see how tired and frustrated the protagonist is, struggling to meet the criteria of "correct" gait. Thus, *Škola hodanja* tells a simple story about the phenomenon of conformity. The trivial situation of learning to walk may be applied to many issues, such as abandoning one's values in favour of adjusting to the environment and external pressures. Mistreated by his environment, the little man who fights for his way of life, independence and neutrality was the common denominator for most Zagreb School creators, regardless of their artistic profile, and cinematic and visual expression.

This story may symbolize the influence of political and social systems on the individual, with initial freedom gradually limited by norms and control. In the context of states with totalitarian systems, the film can be read as a critique of the ideological formatting of citizens trained in the spirit of state doctrine since childhood. It can be interpreted as both a critique of the communist system and a warning against any system seeking complete control over the individual.

By restricting the visual scope to the characters in *Škola hodanja*, the film focuses the viewers' attention entirely on their experiences while introducing the effect of the story's universality. This decontextualization makes it difficult to assign the story to a particular place or time. Such a procedure may allow the broadest possible audience to relate to it. However, an alternative explanation for this visual approach could be the filmmaker's attempt to avoid unpleasant consequences related to criticising the authorities (particularly if there were too many literal references to Yugoslav reality in the film). Thus, we may be dealing with a phenomenon of self-censorship.

Borivoj Dovniković often tackled the topic of war in his work, such as *Krek* (1968), a satire on the army, or *Lubitelji cvijeća* (1970),

where beautiful flowers turn into deadly bombs. On the other hand, in Ante Zaninović's *O rupama i čepovima* (1967) or Aleksandar Marx and Vladimir Jutriša's *Muha* (1966) and *Sizif* (1967), we can find the motif of a self-confident man facing all sorts of dangers, deception, and hostility.[53]

Conclusions

While the filmmakers covered in this article rarely confronted the system, nor did they praise it in their animation films (apart from *Veliki miting*). Vatroslav Mimica and Nedeljko Dragić were members of the Central Committee of the Communist Union,[54] and this status, along with international success, resulted in government support and funding. However, as the filmmakers themselves point out, in return, they were never required to implement specific ideas in their films, nor were they prohibited from publishing the content they had developed as long as it did not directly criticize the ruling party and those in power. Dovniković admits in one of his interviews that the Zagreb animators felt no need to create films opposing the government.[55]

Hence, the animators' work did not require frequent interference from the authorities, and the institutions controlling the artists' actions even ceased to exist at some point. However, this does not mean there were no individual cases when the creator openly criticized the system. After ending his cooperation with Zagreb Film, Vlado Kristl produced a short adaptation of *General in resni človek* (*The General and the Serious Man*, 1962) at Viba Film in Ljubljana. The work referred to Tito's repressive rule, and was consequently censored, with all available copies destroyed. After this incident, Kristl moved to Germany, where he remained for the rest of his life.[56]

The flagship technique employed by the Zagreb animators was satire; most of the founders of the film animation movement had previously worked as caricaturists, commenting on current national and world events. Their films are, therefore, full of humour, grotesque, and parody. The object of ridicule, however, is not one's own country or political system but rather global problems affecting the individual, such as racism, conformism, fear of war, the atomic bomb, or technology in general. As Stangeby writes, the animators used metaphor to translate mundane, seemingly trivial situations, laced with humour, into more significant events in the world of that time.[57] They presented universal punchlines in funny films.

However, although the Zagreb animations were rather positively or neutrally disposed towards the communist government, over time one can notice a certain tendency emerging.

[53] Ibidem, p. 172.
[54] Ibidem, p. 170.
[55] Paul Morton, *Boomerangs and Bombs: The Zagreb School of Animation and Yugoslavia's Third Way Experiment*, "Slavic Review" 2020, no. 79(1), p. 119.
[56] Hrvoje Turković, op. cit.
[57] Adam Stangeby, *Black Optimism – The Animated Films of Dusan Vukotić*, https://www.academia.edu/8856271/Black_Optimism_The_Animated_Films_of_Dusan_Vukotic (accessed: 9.09.2024).

Interestingly, in the film *Veliki miting*, the country's modernization was presented as an advantage and a sign of prosperity. In *Samac*, made seven years later, we see its other aspect, shown from the perspective of a particular individual rather than the entire Yugoslav population, and it is already much more damaging. Typical propaganda films started to appear less and less as time passed, and in subsequent productions, more ironic comments on the country's political situation, tensions, or social mood were discernible. Although the Zagreb School films never lost their playful nature, it is hard not to get the impression that the filmmakers tried to smuggle in important and challenging messages. The scales of the animators' favour towards the authorities began to tilt over time – perhaps not towards overt criticism, but certainly more scepticism.

One notable observation from research into the Zagreb School of Animation is the expressiveness of the reality depicted in their films. Although the artists sought to avoid confrontation with the system, their works, which "present reality as it is," provide significant insight into life in communist Yugoslavia, reflecting the society's moods and fears. Among the various fears prevalent during this time, one of the most significant was the fear of war. This motif appears frequently in the films discussed in this article and across a substantial portion of works from that period.

Despite the satirical tone of these productions, it can be inferred that the lives of Yugoslavs were often filled with uncertainty and anxiety. Parody and caricature are particularly noteworthy, and most likely enhance the comic effect. Typically, we do not mock ideas or individuals we agree with but rather those that we perceive as incorrect. In the animations from the Zagreb School, this technique helps to expose absurdities and subtly critique the system and the international situation.

Parody and caricature also enabled the filmmakers to address serious issues in a more accessible manner. Skilled viewers could decipher the more veiled messages and find allegories of actual events. At the same time, the metaphors used were not prominent enough to suggest any malicious intentions toward the authorities. These animations still possess humour and aesthetic value, appealing to those less familiar with the context, including children.

By freeing itself from USSR control in 1948, Yugoslavia created more favourable conditions for animators than other countries under communist regimes. Although the country still exhibited the characteristics of a communist regime, Tito offered Yugoslavs greater civil liberties, which led to increased creative freedom. There was also a lack of a censorship apparatus, thus allowing animation film studios to evolve more smoothly. As a result, Yugoslav films do not contain as much overt criticism of the system as films from Poland or Czechoslovakia during the same period. However, it is important to note that the Yugoslav communist system remained a one-party system marked by manipulation and oppression. It relied on propaganda and the cult of

personality, and targeted its citizens with repression, capital punishment, or imprisonment in concentration camps.

Yugoslav animators often incorporated indirect criticism of the world outside their country in their work or attacked the enemy in the form of the USSR. The work of Yugoslav artists was thus largely subordinated to and ideologically convergent with the underlying principles of the ruling communist government in its specifically Yugoslav variant. Although their films are critical of certain aspects of life in the communist state (fear of mechanization, war, lack of individuality, loneliness, the feeling of being a 'cog in the machine'), they are not so aggressive or overtly aimed at state institutions as to cause conflict between the artists and the authorities. Notably, the tendency to reproduce similar topics is a common denominator for creators in all communist countries.

Both the subject matter of the films and access to technological solutions depended on the political and social context, and economic factors. For example, Zagreb Limited Animation, the hallmark of Yugoslav animated film, originates from the equipment-, time-, and financial constraints faced by the fledgling makers of Zagreb Film. Anti-Stalinist satires in Yugoslav cartoons appeared when the dispute between Tito and the USSR emerged, and the arms race motif appeared as the Croatian-Serbian conflict developed.

Filmmakers conveyed political content mainly through satire, grotesque, and parody. They often humorously depicted currently relevant events in their films. Despite their light-hearted form, the animations are usually laced with a warning or moral, which a viewer of the time, aware of the situation in the country and the world, would have picked up on without great difficulty.

A suggestion for future research into the political contexts in animated films from Yugoslavia might be to analyse precisely how society received the content of the films at the time. Of course, finding such people who remember events and films from the second half of the 20th century may be difficult. Nevertheless, simply investigating whether people living in communist Yugoslavia remember any animated films with a political context could reveal a great deal about the attitudinal potential of these films. Expert interviews with historians and the filmmakers themselves would be most reliable source. Moreover, an analysis of the press of the time in terms of whether these films were commented on and, if so, in what spirit would also be a valuable enrichment of the analysis.

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