

The animated films of Dusan Vukotic position themselves centrally within the canon of Yugoslavian animation, as well as having made a powerful mark on the international scene. One of the founders of the “family “ of animators and artists referred to as ‘the Zagreb school’, Vukotic, expounded the tenets of the ‘reduced animation’ movement throughout his career while infusing his films with a candid optimism lacking in the work of many of his colleagues. I would like to suggest that the films of Dusan Vukotic tend toward being apolitical, yet they have a light parodic fanfare and lively satire reflective of Vukotic’s own belief that one should be able to laugh at oneself and his optimistic outlook that tries to see the better part of everything around him. The enigmatic, Vukotic, has made the summary of his work a contentious articulation by being quoted as having said that, “there isn’t a Vukotic ‘style’; my style is without style. Each story has to have its own technique.”<sup>i</sup> Dusan Vukotic passed away, of natural causes, in his 71<sup>st</sup> year in 1998 having left a distinct imprint on the world of animation; he was more than just a talented animator grinding out frames at the workbench - Vukotic was an inspiring leader, accomplished theorist, gifted innovator and staunch advocate of personal vision and freedom that rendered his professional career a blessing to Yugoslavia and the world. It is no wonder then that Vukotic claimed the first Academy Award for animation awarded outside the United States, for his clever short, Surogat, produced the same year, in 1961. Through the work of Dusan Vukotic and his influence within the Zagreb school, it is possible to trace Yugoslavian animation’s connection and coordination with narrative film movements of coinciding chronology, especially with respect to ‘Novi film’ also known as “The Black Wave”.

Movement in animation is hand-made, as noted by Ralph Stephenson, making it very different from live-action film as it is not movement of the real world, per se.<sup>ii</sup> This aspect of animation has advantages and disadvantages over other art forms and film forms, specifically.

Chris Robinson has claimed that a major impasse for the independent animation film to permeate culture and capture the public's continued interest has been the shift to television spectatorship and its emphasis on episodic formats over creative single installment-based narratives.<sup>iii</sup> Live-action film involves selection and arrangement in conjunction with, and as a result of diverse collaboration.<sup>iv</sup> Animation has the distinction of providing complete control to the creator with regard to the entire process of producing a film, leading foremost animation theorist, Paul Wells, to recognizing animation as having a "complex relationship to auteurism."<sup>v</sup> The result of this intrinsic auteurist art form is highly individual poetry evidenced most poignantly in the work of Central European animators of the early 1960s through to the late 1970s (the films of the Pole, Borowczyk, the Czech, Svankmajer and the Croat, Kristl, stand out as exemplar). The Zagreb school also emphasized originality and personal growth, with Vukotic remarking that his own filmmaking, "is a materialization of my memories, my present life and my dreams. Even in the characters I create, I later discover parts of my own personality."<sup>vi</sup> Furniss suggested that all animation may be placed within a continuum between mimesis and abstraction creating varying relations to its representational forms.<sup>vii</sup> Rattemeyer commented that the Zagreb school was transforming the language of abstraction into new forms of narrative while the Zagreb school's own written statement and credo attested to an endeavor to make animation a "transformation of reality".<sup>viii</sup> Quoting Vukotic, "film must not be just an imitation of life, but an interpretation of life," attesting to Furniss's definition of the art form.<sup>ix</sup> The nature of animation as a pure auteurist film form makes it especially conducive to being understood as part of film movements based in highly individualized modes of expression, such as the films of Pavlovic, Zilnik and Makavejev of the Black Wave.

To understand the Zagreb school's possible connection to narrative film movements of

Yugoslavia, I would like to suggest that it is important to first examine the history and work of the Zagreb school, with a close examination of the films of its most prolific and foremost director, Dusan Vukotic, and with a comparison of the Vukotic films to the films of other animators working with Vukotic at the Zagreb School of Animated Films. The Zagreb school's innovation of 'reduced animation' may be understood as producing a particular aesthetic that resembles qualities of the aesthetic of Black Wave films, however, I would like to suggest that the connection may stem from similar sources sooner than as being the product of a synergy between them. In light of this consideration, it may be possible to understand the Zagreb school as evolving independently from other film movements of Yugoslavia and Europe. That being said, I believe it would be reasonable to posit that the 'auteur' in both film forms (narrative and animated) can take similar life experiences and contexts and translate them into comparable modes of expression within their films.

Ronald Holloway has provided, through books and essays, an in-depth history of the animation industry in Yugoslavia. The pioneer of Yugoslav animation was Sergei Tagatz, a Pole who worked on the first Russian cartoons of the early 1920s.<sup>x</sup> Tagatz, along with the Maar Brothers (from Berlin) used animations in advertising throughout Yugoslavia.<sup>xi</sup> During World War II, film production was banned in Yugoslavia and it wasn't until after the war that the director and scenarist, Fadil Hadzic was able to revive animation.<sup>xii</sup> In 1949, Hadzic organized a group of animators who produced the film, A Big Rally, in celebration of Yugoslavia's estrangement from the Soviet Union. Dusan Vukotic was one of the animators who worked on the film, which turned out to be extremely popular in Central Europe. As a result of the success, the group, led by Hadzic, began their own studio in Zagreb called, Duga Film. Duga productions sought to imitate the Disney style of animation that had become so popular, worldwide.

Eventually, Vukotic led a group of the Duga animators away from the company and thus the Zagreb Film Studio and “Zagreb school” were founded in its place.<sup>xiii</sup> Duga had proven to be unsustainable economically and Vukotic was more interested in following the great Czech animator, Jiri Trnka toward animation that did not subscribe to the anthropomorphic imitations, naturalistic movements and costly full-animation processes of Disney Studios.<sup>xiv</sup> If Disney was an extension of the body, the Zagreb school was an extension of the mind. John English has claimed that Zagreb animation has been greatly valued within the industry because it “takes a candid view of human frailties, in sharp contrast to Disney saccharin.”<sup>xv</sup> In fact, Jordanova remarks that the Zagreb animation festival (Animafest founded in 1972) remains one of the top two animation expos worldwide (alongside Annecy International founded in 1960).<sup>xvi</sup> The first line of the Zagreb school’s written statement, or credo, states that “animation is a protest against the stationary condition,” and it is clear that through continuous innovation, ingenious design and provoking experimentations in abstraction that they have followed through with their mission from the onset.

The Zagreb Film Studio took shape between 1955-1958 and Vukotic was able to head one of the four production units. Holloway has commented that the Zagreb ‘school’ was more of a “family” than a school because of the pride and emphasis on individuality.<sup>xvii</sup> Vatroslav Mimica and Vladislav Kristl each headed units and their staff “crossed-over” on a lot on projects, which Vukotic did not allow as liberally for his own unit as he emphasized not only individuality, but also, independence.<sup>xviii</sup> The Zagreb school has often been characterized by its innovative visual experimentation and given the failure of Duga Film, it was imperative that the new studio become practical and utilize its resources wisely. Goulding has claimed that the Zagreb school was the most significant modernist film experimentation in Yugoslavia in the late

1950s and early 1960s.<sup>xix</sup> Two critical developments for the Zagreb studio were, one, the unified nature of production, where filmmakers were able to write, design and direct their own films while also being able to collaborate between units and within their own production units (Vukotic wrote the script for Krec's Last Waltz in the Old Mill and Mimica co-wrote Marks and Jutrisa's Muha, to provide a couple examples of a prolific ongoing trend in the studio). The second development was more of a technical innovation related to the insolvency of Duga Film. The animators of the Zagreb studio developed a new form of animation, appropriately called 'reduced animation'. John English has described the form as being a graphic transformation of characters and progress from pure form to symbols with an endeavor to frame reality from the imagination.<sup>xx</sup> Holloway posits that reduced animation involved a reduction of approximately 65% of the drawings required for a cartoon while not impeding the overall visual effect and instead giving rise to a new form of movement and abstraction that "breathed a new life, or soul," into the drawings altogether.<sup>xxi</sup> Reduced animation was a necessity for several reasons, ranging from the need to innovate beyond Disney imitations to the simple fact that the studio had a lack of resources (cels) available, finally to the fiscal constraints imposed on the studio in order to secure contracts with business firms.<sup>xxii</sup> The innovation of reduced animation had all of the practical perks of a solid transitional model and some ideological advantages, as well. The satirists who had started animating at Duga Film (originally from *Kerumpah* magazine) and then founded the Zagreb Film studio discovered that reduced animation was very conducive to expressions inherent within the intellectual cartoon. Perhaps in this regard, reduced animation parallels documentary montage that was liberally employed in the narrative films of the Black Wave (Makavejev's Love Affair or WR) with both techniques having the effect of synthesizing the situational struggles and real life limitations to the filmmaker with provocative novel modes

of visual expression. Reduced animation techniques were appropriated by individual artists as a means of forming their 'message' within the cartoons they produced. Vukotic maintained his optimism and lively satire while other animators of the Zagreb school were using the technique to further popular politically-inclined movements in art (ie. the work of Nedeljko Dragic).

Dusan Vukotic directed almost twenty animated short films in his career. His production slowed considerably in the 1980s as he shifted from animation to nationalist documentaries and feature length live-action film. His first animated cartoon was Kako Se Rodio Kico (1951) produced while at Duga Film and endeavoring to introduce a national cartoon character (Kico) in the same vein as the United States's Mickey Mouse. The film is extremely self-reflexive with an opening sequence that introduces Kico as we see him drawn for the first time by an uncanny animated artist's human hand. This has the effect of directly answering the title of the film itself while overtly reminding the spectator of the direct connection between real people and their animated 2-dimensional avatars. Blending reality and the imagination in a self-reflexive way was a theme that Vukotic would return to in his films, especially in the animated shorts that incorporated live-action sequences (ie. Igra and Ars Gratia Artis). The first Kico short was filmed in black-and-white and renderings had a definite 3-dimensional Disney style. Although the cartoon is full of light humour (including the recurring motif of nudity being shameful that was inserted into many of the early Zagreb animated short films) there is also pointed social critique (indifferent and unhelpful police, inefficient transportation systems, redundant ineffectual bureaucrats). The theme of the cartoon regards marriage licenses and I would like to suggest that with the overall self-reflexive and self-conscious feel of the film, that Vukotic is acknowledging his own binding to Yugoslavia, for better or for worse.

Vukotic worked with Kostelac on thirteen short animated advertisements between

1954-55. Vukotic's influence can be felt later in Kostelac's acclaimed animated short, Premijera (1957). Although the advertisements were produced for commercial purposes, they maintained some of the lively satire characteristic of Vukotic's work. In Posjet iz Svemira (1955) a prototypical cartoon Martian lands on Earth in his shiny new UFO and waves to the adoring crowd while being photographed and questioned by the media and reporters. A montage of Hollywood star headshots cascades into the frame announcing the arrival of a tabloid magazine to Yugoslavia. It is difficult to deny the connection being allegorized between the mutual 'alien' relationship of East and West. The one-minute long advertisement is a prime example of reduced animation with its prolonged frozen frames and obvious jump cuts to denote movement as well as its minimalist background detailing and chromatic palettes.

From 1956-1958, Vukotic produced a series of animated short parodies themed in the vein of staple Hollywood genres. Cowboy Jimmy (1957) spoofs the Western with a biting jab. All the familiar tropes are present from villainous gunslingers, drunken saloon whores and poker card cheats to the magnanimous larger-than-life hero, Cowboy Jimmy. The cartoon is clever and innovative, evident from the opening sequence where Cowboy Jimmy uses his six-shooter to blow out holes in a nearby unmarked wooden sign posting providing the spectator with the title of the film. At the same time, it has to be questioned as to whether Cowboy Jimmy is simply putting his 'mark' on the world in this act of crude self-reverence? The film becomes allegorical and self-reflexive when it turns out that Cowboy Jimmy is merely an actor on the silver screen for a crowd of animated Yugoslavian cinema-goers. One young boy emulates his timeless hero, cheers for Cowboy Jimmy to defeat the sinister adversary. The arch-villain manages to "oust" Cowboy Jimmy from the movie screen itself. As the boy "adopts" Jimmy and introduces the bewildered cowboy to his club house of neighbours and buddies, the great hero appears to have

been a calculated ruse on the part of entertainment producers. Another boy who plays 'the villain' in their club house reenactments makes a complete fool of Cowboy Jimmy in a witty reversal of fortune. Cowboy Jimmy is literally "deflated" (a recurring motif in Vukotic's films and especially in his Oscar winning short, Surogat). Jimmy was a fraud and the children return the tied-up 'phony' to the "kino" tossing him emphatically back to the world of seemingly total fiction from whence he came. The children have their *coup de grace* when they assemble letters to spell out "kraj" in lieu of the anglicized "the end" that accompanied the ejection of Jimmy into their 'world'. Vukotic is overt in his satire that presents Hollywood heroes as cardboard-like false prophets of order and justice. At the same time, the cartoon is playful, clever and funny with many of the minimalist techniques of reduced animation (repeated movements, simple background detailing and color palettes).

Some other parodies from the series were Koncert za Masinsku Pusku (1958) Veliki Strah (1958), Abra Kadabra (1958) and Nestasni Robot (1956). The latter was perhaps a precursor to the series, yet was a delightful science fiction tale, either way. A scientist works feverishly in his laboratory with the aid of his assistant (two mechanical extendable hands, reminiscent of Trnka's The Hand). An anthropomorphic robot is brought to life and appears to be missing a heart like the Wizard of Oz's Tinman. The robot with seemingly no real assignment in life decides to mix together leftovers from the slab where he was created only moments before. Out of the junk, two smaller 'kid' robots are created (reminiscent of Svankmajer's Dimensions of Dialogue). The mischievous offspring take control of the lab in what is perhaps a warning that the computer scientist, Bill Joy has forwarded about the self-replicating nature of technology. The benevolent scientist accepts the twins but provides an 'assignment' to them - a gender assignment as he places a cute bow on the antenna of one of the two kid robots. The final shot is



of the parent robot attempting to file down the antenna of the other kid robot. Although the cartoon is light and amusing it carries some subversive satirical social critique. Castration anxiety is explored as well as fear of technology (also explored in Igra). Over the following five years, Vukotic incorporated more and more of the elements characteristic of reduced animation. By 1958, in Koncert za Masinsku Pusku, Vukotic was creating a distinct aesthetic for his animated films. Koncert is rife with static frames, repeated frames and jump cuts. He compensates the lack of movement with unique obtuse angles and canted perspectives. I believe that these techniques lend to satire by rendering a direct reading of the narrative oblique by virtue of the 'slanted' and 'choppy' visual images and edits. Vukotic may have been an optimist, however, reduced animation seems particularly conducive to sharply satirical themes and narratives.

The height of artistic achievement with reduced animation came for Vukotic in 1959 with the animated short, Piccolo. Two neighbors who cannot share a space peacefully begin a war of sounds. The two neighbours self-replicate greater and greater cacophonous choral armies in the ultimate one-upmanship. The disagreement reaches its height of fervor with both neighbors goose-stepping toward each other threatening mutual oblivion. The war chants are superimposed over Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture and thus creating an overt allegory to imperial warfare. The satire is obvious and the peaceful optimist, Vukotic, returns to his potent warning against war and aggression. Reduced animation abound with copied cels, looped sequences, plain backgrounds and limited chromatic palettes. Piccolo was a testament to what could be achieved using the technique of reduced animation. In the same year, Vukotic directed another animated short that addressed more domestic and national concerns (Krava na Mjesecu) while the following year, Vukotic and the Zagreb school of animators were the subject of a didactic and

quasi-propagandist documentary entitled, 1001 Crtez.

Surogat (1961) was a swan song for Vukotic. He claimed the coveted Oscar for best animated short film and became recognized internationally. The film was also his last animated film that showcased and promoted the simple aesthetic of reduced animation. Vukotic then began to produce animated shorts that mixed live-action and animated sequences while also embarking on the production of nationalist documentaries and live-action feature films. Surogat is not his most clever piece, however, it is easy to follow and the subject matter was extremely relevant at the time of its release. An amusing little character inflates the world around him until it provides for his undoing and personal deflation when casually attempting to walk away from what he created. The character loses interest in the world he inflated when a bronzed beefcake takes the inflated 'beach bunny' off to a private island. Is the satire pointing toward Tito and his own private island? The subject matter is certainly akin to state-endorsed cult of personality machinations affecting the public perception. The animation is crudely two-dimensional but otherwise Vukotic produced many other films that incorporated more novel reduced animation techniques. Perhaps this explains the ability to have the film internationally acclaimed as the animation was more in the vein of UPA animated films being produced in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s.

In 1962, Vukotic directed his first film that blended animation and live-action. Two children draw pictures on colored construction paper. The drawings come to life and 'jump' off the page, attacking each other in a battle reminiscent of Piccolo. Truck runs over flower, truck wheels are deflated, beast attacks girl, girl escapes to house - as the sequence gets carried away. The two children of the live-action sequences have their own voices replaced by non-diegetic 'cartoony' sounds. The battle of pencil tips ends when a nuclear missile is drawn and a kinetic

montage of all the work that has been done up to that point cannot stop the inevitable destruction of all the drawings and materials that lie in front of the children. The children begin wailing while black ink spills over the construction paper dripping down to cover the frame in an extremely unique and innovative wipe. In 1970, Vukotic filmed Ars Gratia Artis returning to his intermingling of animation and live-action. His aesthetic remained minimalist throughout these experiments but were darker in tone than his earlier lively satirical cartoons. Was Vukotic being affected by the Black Wave or was he simply becoming disillusioned for the same reasons that were frustrating the novi film auteurs? In Ars, the controlling hand of Robot returns and the film ends with a suicidal act of cannibalism. Bleak demises were finally reversed in Vukotic's first science fiction feature film.

The mood had blackened and Vukotic moved on to other film forms. One of the highlights of this period was the campy self-parodic science-fiction live-action feature film, Gosti iz Galaksije (1981). The story involves a writer who discovers that he can render his thoughts material. He brings aliens to Earth in a bizarre inversion of The Day the Earth Stood Still where instead of Klaatu having his controlled 'id' Gort, we now are presented with Gort's out-of-control 'id' Mumu. The Mumu design and special effects were courtesy the great, Jan Svankmajer. Vukotic was a great collaborator despite valuing artistic independence and individualized expression. Was Vukotic influenced or did influence other animators of the Zagreb school? His close colleague Kostelac shared a style with him, emphasizing reduced animation techniques while assembling clever narratives and sight gags. Vatroslav Mimica was also a minimalist who favored the dimensionality resultant of canted angles in lieu of three-dimensional characters. However, Mimica was also incorporating real photographs into his frames adding to the sense of impossible spaces and focusing many of his themes on the

disintegration of the corporeal. Grgic shared an optimism and lively satirical themes with Vukotic, while others like Stalter were more based in the movements of surrealism. Marks and Jutrisa produced films with the somber moods and rich textures seen in Mimica's directed works.

Zaninovic's The Wall (1966) marks an influential trend in animation with Novi film movements in the late 1960s. Unlike Vukotic's characters, Zaninovic portrays the antics of a shameless 'madman'. His attempts at escaping the land are futile, juxtaposing a popular idea in the Black Wave narratives that viewed Yugoslavia as a kind of senseless dead-end and labyrinthine 'madhouse'. Marusic and Dovnikovic had their origins in comic art and cartoon strips (like the Slovaks, Popovic and Havettova). The aesthetic took reduced animation to the next level as this 'new' Zagreb school of animators portrayed crude senselessness of the individual and cruel worlds bordering on the surreal. Simple textured backgrounds and chromatic palettes became plain white backgrounds. Genital shame became obscene depictions of female sexual exploitation. The foremost animator in this new movement was Dragic whose main theme of "alienation in the mechanical world" was a very fashionable trope of the 1960s. His one-minute animation of a man sinking into a public outhouse is reminiscent of the fate of Jimmy Barka in Pavlovic's When I am Dead and Pale (a seminal film of the Black Wave).

Goulding asserts that Zagreb animation was one of the most important centers for Novi film experimentation and creation although he also recognizes that they were less radically political than the Belgrade nexus.<sup>xxiii</sup> Stojanovic agrees with Goulding about the degree of polemical discourse in the Zagreb school while asserting that Novi film permeates all of Yugoslavia from its inherent initiative to assert freedom of individual expression from within a 'captive' nation.<sup>xxiv</sup> Dusan Vukotic belonged to a different generation than Novi film. He was of the 'school' that followed Holloway's observation that "you have to be able to laugh at the

foibles of the super powers around you,” - which gave rise to lively satire, parodies and spoofs.<sup>xxv</sup> Wells has distinguished Black Wave animation as being more concerned with trying to find the humour in paranoia, oppression, loss, alienation and escape.<sup>xxvi</sup> The motif of inflation/deflation is at the core of Vukotic’s lively satire which marks a distinction from the crude exploitation that defined the aesthetic of the Dragic-led animators of the Zagreb school of the late 1960s. Vukotic was an optimist, who supported all film movements in animation throughout his life and only his own words could express it to the point -

- “Animation is the art of young people. Animation is an eternally young art, which is permanently regenerating and which is permanently offering possibilities to explore something new in it - to say something new in a specific and original way.”

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<sup>i</sup> John W. English, ““Z” Stands for Zagreb: Also for Animation,” Journal of the University Film Association 24, no.3 (1972): 48-51

<sup>ii</sup> Ralph Stephenson, “Animation in the Cinema,” New York: Barnes, 1967. p.7

<sup>iii</sup> Chris Robinson, “Animators Unearthed: A Guide to the Best of Contemporary Animation,” London: Continuum, 2010. p.4

<sup>iv</sup> Ralph Stephenson, “Animation in the Cinema,” New York: Barnes, 1967. p.15

<sup>v</sup> Paul Wells, “From Animation Genre and Authority,” New York: Wallflower, 2002. p.1

<sup>vi</sup> John W. English, ““Z” Stands for Zagreb: Also for Animation,” Journal of the University Film Association 24, no.3 (1972): 48-51

<sup>vii</sup> Paul Wells, “From Animation Genre and Authority,” New York: Wallflower, 2002. p.5

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- viii Christian Rattemeyer, "Surogat Stvarnosti," Artforum 50, no.2 (2011): 333
- ix John W. English, "'Z' Stands for Zagreb: Also for Animation," Journal of the University Film Association 24, no.3 (1972): 48-51
- x Ronald Holloway, "'Z' is for Zagreb," London: Tantivy Press, 1972. p.10
- xi Ibid, p.10
- xii Ibid, p.10
- xiii Christian Rattemeyer, "Surogat Stvarnosti," Artforum 50, no.2 (2011): 333
- xiv Christian Rattemeyer, "Surogat Stvarnosti," Artforum 50, no.2 (2011): 333
- xv John W. English, "'Z' Stands for Zagreb: Also for Animation," Journal of the University Film Association 24, no.3 (1972): 48-51
- xvi Dina Iordanova, "Eastern European Cinema," Journal of Film and Video 51, no.1 (1999) 73-75
- xvii Ronald Holloway, "'Z' is for Zagreb," London: Tantivy Press, 1972. pp.15-19
- xviii Ronald Holloway, "'Z' is for Zagreb," London: Tantivy Press, 1972. pp.19-21
- xix Daniel J. Goulding, "Liberated Cinema: the Yugoslav Experience, 1945-2001," Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. p.59
- xx John W. English, "'Z' Stands for Zagreb: Also for Animation," Journal of the University Film Association 24, no.3 (1972): 48-51
- xxi Ronald Holloway, "The Short Film in Eastern Europe: Art & Politics of Cartoons and Puppets," in David Pail, ed., Politics, Art and Commitment in East European Cinema (New York: St. Martin's, 1983), pp.225-51
- xxii Ibid, pp.225-51
- xxiii Daniel J. Goulding, "Liberated Cinema: the Yugoslav Experience, 1945-2001," Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. pp.75-76
- xxiv Pavle Levi, "Disintegration in Frames: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Cinema," Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. p.13
- xxv Ronald Holloway, "'Z' is for Zagreb," London: Tantivy Press, 1972. p.37
- xxvi Paul Wells, "From Animation Genre and Authority," New York: Wallflower, 2002. p.1