

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

By Midhat Ajanović Ajan

In 1962, in Santa Monica, a European animated film won an Oscar for the first time. The film was *Ersatz* by Dušan Vukotić, one of the leading masters of the so-called Zagreb School of animated filmⁱ.

In 1979, the Oscar went to animated film noir *Special Delivery* made by Canadians John Weldon and Eunice Macaulay, much to the disappointment of many fans of film animationⁱⁱ who wished for the Oscar to go to the film *Satiemania*, a masterpiece by Zdenko Gašparović, which did not even get a nominationⁱⁱⁱ. From today's perspective, it is more than obvious that *Satiemania* belongs to the pantheon of supreme artworks made in the medium of animation as one of the most beautiful animated films ever made. *Special Delivery*, on the other hand, despite its unquestionable qualities, paled under the influence of time.

The two masterpieces, *Ersatz* and *Satiemania*, more or less marked the beginning and the end of the golden age of the Zagreb School of animated film. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Zagreb film studio produced dozens of extremely significant animated films, which, seen as a whole, constituted an important epoch in the development of film animation as an artistic form.

The phenomenon of the Zagreb school, although exclusively belonging to Croatian legacy, cannot be linked entirely and only to Croatia. Primarily because the development of the School was carried out by the artists from the whole Yugoslavia, but also because of the Yugoslav cultural context and generally accepted ideological values, and specific production circumstances. All these factors significantly influenced the School's formation.

1. Political and social surrounding

In the course of its 74 years long existence, Yugoslavia had a taste of rightist dictatorship by the Serbian royal dynasty from 1918 to 1941; leftist dictatorship by Tito from 1945 to 1980, and finally fascism and extreme nationalism from 1941 to 1945, and in the 1990s. In addition, the 1980s were a decade of instability and fighting between the federal states' bureaucracies started by Serbia's attempt to reclaim total hegemony it had lost under Tito's rule.

One thing Yugoslavia has never had was democracy.

Today, it is more than clear that the only period of economical and cultural prosperity of South Slavic peoples was the time of Tito's soft dictatorship, or liberal socialism that developed after 1948, when this skillful communist politician and indisputable hero of the antifascist war, refused to be one of Stalin's servants. During the years of crisis and pressure from Moscow, Yugoslavia managed to develop an original system, communism with elements of democracy, unofficially called 'something in between'. In political terms this meant a more influential role of working councils in factories and, more importantly, due to Soviet blockade, the economy turned to Western Europe and the United States.

Yugoslavia's cooperation with the West had far reaching consequences on the culture. Reformed communism and a high degree of political decentralization enabled

a quick and definite breakup with the theory and practice of social realism. This resulted, among other things, with a relatively high degree of freedom and independence of film companies, which could make deals with foreign companies unhindered by central state institutions, as was the case in other socialist countries. Yugoslav producers made successful contacts with foreign distributors and importers, so that Yugoslav film production participated in most important world film festivals. Each federal state developed its own film production, so that in some periods film production in Yugoslavia reached between thirty and forty feature films and more than a hundred short films. Production also expanded by the TV networks built in all republics' capitals.

Two international festivals played an important role in the presentation of Yugoslav cinematography to the world. First was the Belgrade FEST, the annual review of the international feature film production, and the international animated film biennale in Zagreb, which, soon after it was founded, became one of the most important festivals of that kind in the world.

In short, film authors from Yugoslavia had much better chances to present themselves at the international market and a far greater freedom than their colleagues from Eastern Europe.

The authors of animated films took full advantage of these circumstances.

2. Production circumstances

Contrary to their East European colleagues, Yugoslav animators were not regularly employed, but instead had the status of free artists and signed contracts with studios for each new film. In Zagreb film, only colorists, in-betweeners, copiers and other assistant staff had permanent jobs. This created a technical service able to offer production services for the whole studio production. On the other hand, directors, head animators, cartoonists, art directors, and other authors changed roles from film to film, for purely practical reasons.

If a person was an in-betweener in, for example, Sophia studio for animated film, or in Moscow Soyuzmultfilm, he could expect with absolute certainty to be retired as in-betweener. In Zagreb film, on the contrary, a young man who started off as in-betweener had real chances to rise on the hierarchy of professions linked with animated film. Many known animators, especially those that came in during the Studio's second phase, began their careers at the lowest level of the professional ladder and slowly worked their way up to become character designers, animators and even directors.

To earn for their living, many freelance animators were forced to run from one project to another, between theirs and the films of their colleagues. Direct consequences of such practice were close relations between the authors – they worked together, their roles constantly changed, once they were scriptwriters, on the other occasion directors, or even simple animators or art directors in their colleague's film. Authors exchanged ideas and experiences, learning the tricks of the trade and influencing each other.

Alongside animation, many animators worked on comic strips, caricature, illustrations, posters and similar things. These studio outings kept them in touch with other media, which expanded their insight into actual tendencies in other art forms. In consequence, Zagreb School's films often followed actual trends in graphic and visual art of the day.

3. Pioneers

The first cartoons in Croatia^{xi} and former Yugoslavia were made by Sergej Tagatz, a Pole born in the Soviet Union. Until 1920, he lived on Yalta and worked in Ermolev's Film studio, where he had his first encounter with film animation. Among other things, Tagatz made Studio's *trade-mark* in the form of a short cartoon. Like many of his countrymen, he emigrated to Yugoslavia in 1922. After having arrived in Zagreb, he did all kinds of odd jobs before eventually returning to his old trade. He produced several commercials the same year, while in 1923, he made opening credits for Bosnia Film and animated trailers for films with Jackie Coogan.

The School of National Health had its own photo-film laboratory and made film animations. Its founder was Milan Marjanović, a writer and prominent personality of Croatian public life in between the two world wars. Marjanović was the only educated film worker of the School and the first head of its film department. At his initiative, the School started producing short teaching films with animated inserts, with the goal of spreading important information about hygiene and ways of preventing epidemics. In 1929, Aleksandar Gerasimov, another emigrant from the Soviet Union, became head of the photo-film laboratory, and remained so until 1961. With the cooperation of cameraman Stanislav Noworyte and cartoonist Peter Papp (and later on Vilko Šeferov), the School of National Health produced several educational films during the 1920s. In 1929, the School realized an especially important achievement – 300 meters long film *Martin in the Sky*, *Martin from the Sky* (*Martin u nebo*, *Martin iz neba*). The School of National Health was evidently very much influenced by Walter Ruttmann and Lotte Reiniger^{xii}, since animation in the films was mostly combination of static drawings and moving silhouettes.

The third pioneering contribution to Croatian animation came from Berlin with brothers Zvonko, Ivo and Vlado Mondschein. As soon as they arrived in Zagreb, the brothers started their own company *Maar ton* – film commercials. Owing to a significant amount of capital invested in their firm, the brothers succeeded in creating a big, professional studio, which produced around a hundred commercials per year, from ten to hundred meters long. Sergij Tagatz was the company's first employee, from Berlin they brought a skilled animator Ilsa Polley, and hired many renowned Zagreb visual artists, like Gerty Gorjan or Pavle Gavranić. High production quality of *Maar* resulted in huge commercial success. They were receiving orders from all over, including the foreign countries. The number and quality of *Maar*'s products soon listed the company among the best European producers of animated commercials. Despite that, the production was terminated in 1936 for reasons unknown to the author of this study. From the foundation of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) in 1941 until the stabilization of the communist government in the second Yugoslavia, more or less all of *Maar*'s production was destroyed. Reasons for this loss were not evident from the sources the author of the study had researched.

Apart from the three already mentioned, there were also some other attempts to revitalize Croatian production of animated film. Hardworking film enthusiast Oktavijan Miletić also experimented with animation; photographer Viktor Rybak made a wholesome animated film eight meters long; professor Kamilo Tompa animated puppets, while Kosta Hlavaty, artist and member of Tito's liberation movement, made eight animated propaganda films during the war, working on the territory under partisan's control.

Within State Propaganda center founded by the NDH government following Nazi Germany's example, also existed the studio for animated film.

4. 'Preschool'

Immediately after World War II several enthusiasts continued developing animated film in Zagreb. On political directive, state film production houses were founded in all federal states' centres. In Zagreb, this was Dubrava Film, soon renamed Jadran Film. The company promptly constituted several production departments. One of them was the department of educational films, where several films were made in the technique of animation. Their cartoonist and animator was Leontije Bjelski, formerly known as comic strip author. However, the most interesting individual that worked with Jadran Film was Bogosav Patanjek, who returned to his homeland after many years in Argentina. In Buenos Aires he worked as animator in the Cristiani studio for animated film^{xiii} and gathered lots of experience. As a skillful animator he was given a chance to make films characterized by Disney's esthetic. Apart from making teaching films, Petanjek made one gag, *Blackman Miško* (Crnac Miško, 1949), and was studio's main animator until 1957.

However, true initiative for Croatian animated film production was born in the editorial board of the satirical magazine *Kerempuh*. When in 1948 Tito refused to obey directives from Moscow, he came into fierce conflict with Stalin. The consequences reflected as crisis in the whole area, enormous pressure and blockage of Yugoslavia on the part of the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia finally stepped out of the so-called socialist block, countries under Moscow's command, and got closer to the West. One of the outcomes of the Yugoslav politics and its international standing included a break up with the ideology of the so-called *socialist realism* in art and the development of a much more relaxed cultural model in respect of the dominant ideological dogmas, unlike in other countries of Eastern Europe.

As the only existing satirical magazine in Croatia, *Kerempuh* rounded up many known caricaturists and cartoonists. On the wave of sudden anti-Soviet atmosphere, their caricatures and comic strips in which they mocked Stalin became very popular. The sales of the magazine reached the unimaginable number of 170.000 copies. Instead of a small, state funded firm, *Kerempuh* magazine became a wealthy company. Strict Yugoslav economic regulations required all unexpected incomes to be paid to the government. Young editor Fadil Hadžić took a risk, and did not obey the directive. He decided to use the money for an unusual adventure with his collaborators – the making of an animated film.

Thus started the production of *The Big Meeting* (Veliki miting) in 1950, an extremely important film for the future development of Croatian animation. Namely, the project that basically was an anti-Soviet propaganda, gathered the people who later on formed the core of the Zagreb school.

The most gifted among them was Walter Neugebauer, naturalized Zagreb citizen who came to Zagreb from his native town of Tuzla. He started his career at the age of fourteen. As a young man already, Neugebauer had a phenomenal grasp on all the aspects of his trade. He drew dozens of comic strips and published them in his own weekly magazine. During the years of war, he earned his bread publishing a non-political comics magazine *Zabavnik*, in which he also published other authors' comics. Neugebauer followed the rules of the 'round aesthetics' created in Disney's studio: the base of each drawing was a circle, every character, be it human or animal, was constructed with circular, easily followed strokes, so that whatever we saw

looked nice. His line was soft and elastic, characters alive, caught in the movement, as if animated. We also observed the effort to use movement to achieve graphical and rhythmic continuity between the frames.

A logical outcome of this was the fact that the same Walter Neugebauer was the key figure in the group that, after World War II, founded Croatian and Yugoslav animated film.

Despite their inexperience, during one year of working on film, the group managed to master all technical tricks and practical details of one so complicated job, as was the making of an animated film. *The Big Meeting* was a success, both in theatres and political committees.

Fadil Hadžić, a twenty five-year-old writer from Bosnia who came to Zagreb to study, founded Duga film, a film company that specialized in animated and puppet films.

This was the beginning of what had in few short years become a phenomenon renowned all over the world. Before starting Duga film, Hadžić described his and his co-workers ambitions as the following:

'We shall try to depart from the usual schemes of foreign cartoons as much as possible and find new visual elements from our cultural legacy. (Munitić, 1978: 94).

Duga film assembled almost all important artists (Kostelac, Dvorniković, Marks, Kristl, Jutriša and Dušan Vukotić, at that time a young Montenegrin who came to Zagreb to study architecture), whose creative peak signalled the first of three most important phases of the evolution of the Zagreb school. During its short existence, from 1951 to 1952, Duga film produced five films meeting high professional standards. Animators completely mastered the assembly line production, in other words, working in an effective team where the roles were strictly divided between the head animator, cartoonist, in betweener, director, art director, colourist, copier, cameraman and other specialist jobs.

First film produced in the studio was *Happy Event* (*Veseli doživljaj*, 1951) by Walter Neugebauer, which was yet another perfect imitation of Disney's short films.

However, already the second film, Dušan Vukotić's *How Kićo Was Born* (*Kako se rodio Kićo*, 1951) came out with certain differences in respect of the Disney tradition. Instead of the usual anthropomorphic animal characters, Vukotić created a human character, a short man named Kićo, the antihero whose adventures took place in the ordinary routine. The drawing in film was very stylized and simplified, and he used the so-called *limited* animation, or in other words, animation was freer and more creative. These became the main traits of the Zagreb School in the years that followed.

While the animators of Duga film were preparing their first color film, *Little Red Riding Hood* (*Crvenkapica*) arrived an unexpected administrative directive: due to the general shortage caused by the Soviet blockage, and as a measure of cost cutting, Duga film was closed. Despite this heavy blow, the seed of Zagreb animation planted in *Kerempuh*, and transferred to Duga film, carried on growing and evolving, to finally reach unimaginable peaks.

In 1965, Zagreb film was founded, whose management, after a short period of fluctuation between documentary and feature film, made a reasonable decision to specialize in the production of animated films. Once again, young artists had a place they could turn to.

5. 'Elementary school'

Owing to the fact that they had mastered the craft, had fresh ideas, and were absolutely aware of their ambitions and ways to realize them in the chosen medium, young Zagreb animators won international acclaim shortly after the new studio was founded. Their first production was Vukotić's *Playful Robot* (*Nestašni robot*, 1956). The same day he finished this film, Vukotić started working on the next, *Cowboy Jimmy*. This time the animation was even more 'reduced', almost 'paralyzed', while characters, rhythm, and movement were synchronized with individual film ideas, instead of some dogmatic rules. His characters were two-dimensional geometrical symbols that, united with the background, resonated the most important aspirations of modern art. Furthermore, Vukotić was much influenced by Paul Klee. Dialogues were excluded, sound and music integrated with animation and the drawing, not being 'above' or 'outside' of film. It was obvious that Vukotić perceived animation as something absolutely dynamic. In one film he created rules, in the next one broke them. *Cowboy Jimmy* brought the author and the Studio first international award from the Berlin film festival. More important than the prize itself was the fact that one of the members of the jury was Norman McLaren. Vukotić's true successes were yet to come. *Concerto for Sub-machine Gun* (*Koncert za mašinsku pušku*, 1958), *Piccolo* (1959), and *Ersatz* (*Surogat*, 1961) collected awards at almost all important film festivals on the planet, while the author was celebrated as the new genius of animation. At the end of 1950s and the beginning of 1960, Vukotić and McLaren stood as the most important names of artistic animation in the world. While *Concerto for a Machinegun* was a humorous irony inspired by Hollywood, offering original animation and drawing solutions, *The Substitute* was a satirical allegory full of carefully studied visual gags on the subject of human existence in the abyss of consumer society.

However, from today's perspective, *Piccolo* is Vukotić's most interesting work. Evidently influenced by McLaren's *Neighbours* (1952), the film was an obvious metaphor on the subject of Serbs and Croats, two of Yugoslav biggest nations. Two neighbours lived in one house (Yugoslavia?) and their relations were quite good. They visited and helped each other (in an ingenious visual gag one neighbour even cut rain drops so they would not fall on his neighbour), until one of them bought a *piccolo*, small mouth organ, and started playing. The other neighbour was envious and bought a bigger instrument, and started playing louder. The first neighbour went for an even bigger instrument – and so on and so forth. Finally, a war broke out between the two families (tribes), and the house was destroyed. It is hard to speculate what Vukotić's intention was, but it would simply be impossible not to see *piccolo* as a symbol of nationalism.

The second prominent author of the Zagreb school was Nikola Kostelac, whose films also won numerous awards. His major film was *Opening Night* (*Premijera*, 1957), an excellently structured and skilfully directed story about snobbism. The film also owed much to the work of cartoonist Aleksandar Marks and animator Vladimir Jutriša. The first was a very capable and educated cartoonist and graphic artist with a fine sense for geometrical stylization, the second was an animator with an unusual sense of timing, and together they were a harmonious team of performance artists who helped many authors realize their ideas.

This particularly referred to Vatroslav Mimica, the Zagreb school's great exception. Namely, he did not draw or animate, but instead he was a born filmmaker^{xvi} with a modern perception of the medium. He considered animation an aspect of cinematography. The special quality of animation was that it was defined by

something called 'total editing'. This meant that editing did not consist only in cutting scenes; it meant editing every single frame. In a cartoon, director made 24 cuts in a second! His films like *Alone (Samac)* or *Happy End* (1958), or *At the Photographer's (Kod fotografa, 1959)*, mostly dealt with alienation of individuals in a modern society. The individual was lost, trapped in urban quarters, frustrated and terrified by the hyper mechanized surrounding. These were generally the subjects of many contemporary European films.

During this initial period, another artist made a meteoric career: Vladimir Kristl, who was probably the most gifted artist in the history of Zagreb school^{xvii}. If Mimica was a born filmmaker, Kristl was a born artist, interested in writing, film, theatre, painting, directing, acting, and almost any other artistic form. Film *Le Peau de Chagrin*^{xviii} made in 1960 was based on Balzac's famous story about a man obsessed with gambling to the extent that he was ready to sell his youth for money; this was definitely not a typical cartoon subject. In view of the graphics, direction and animation, the film was many years ahead of its time. Kristl shaped it in *art deco* manner, using newspaper clips, advertisements, containers, and other unusual objects, which created a collage background. His animation was much richer than Mimica's, characters were carefully studied, and animation had authentic rhythm and dynamics. *Le Peau de Chagrin* was one of the first animated films without humor or gags, which instead directly addressed viewer's emotions.

The following year he made *Don Quixote (Don Kihot, 1961)*, his life work. Young viewer, accustomed to electronically edited music videos or computer games, today would probably be very confused about what the point of Mimica's *Alone* was. He would have great difficulty to understand why the film was praised all over the world. Special features in *Alone*, among others, were intersected images, multiplied scenes seen from different angles, or Mimica's treatment of space as two dimensional surface that 'acted' three dimensional. Today, none of these things sounds special, much more complicated procedures can be found in any TV commercial.

Contrary to that, forty two year-old film *Don Quixote* still appears impressive! In this masterpiece, Kristl managed to accomplish his old avant-garde desire to create film as visual music. The film was entirely abstract, with no figurative elements.

Nevertheless, squary heroes expressed drama and poetry through rhythm and animation; telling a 'story' that any of us could 'read' as he pleased.

The 1958 Cannes film festival marked the international ascent of the Zagreb studio. Screenings of Vukotić's, Kostelac's and Mimica's films took place as part of the program *Journes du Cinema*, and they were received with equal enthusiasm by the viewers and the critics. On that occasion, critics Georges Sadoul and Andre Martin first wrote about a 'school' of animation founded in Zagreb. The school was characterized by an authentic vision of reality and the original use of the medium. Cannes success was followed by successes at almost all-important festivals on the planet: Venice, Melbourne, San Francisco, Moscow, Montreal, Buenos Aires, and London. Finally, in 1962, *The Substitute* won an Oscar.

Zagreb School became known all over the world^{xix}.

6. 'High school'

Next phase in the development of the Zagreb School began with a short crisis. After creating another masterpiece, *The Game (Igra, 1962)*, a combination of animated children's drawings and live action footage, which also won an Oscar nomination,

thirty seven year old Dušan Vukotić decided to turn to feature film. As the only Yugoslav author who had won an Oscar and a politically very active person, he never had problems with funding for his feature films^{xx}. Vatroslav Mimica followed Vukotić's example, Kostelac turned to commercials, while Kristl left for Germany.

The gap left after the departure of four great authors soon began to fill former assistants and helpers, who got a chance to make their films. Introducing fresh ideas and innovations into the auteur procedures, new authors made a step forward in expanding authors' freedom and further individualize the process of filmmaking. In time, Zagreb film completely abandoned assembly line production, transferring the responsibility to the author, who was coordinating all important elements of his film: drawing, rhythm, animation, direction, and often screenplay and editing.

The first to take advantage of the opportunity offered was the pair Marks and Jutriša, which introduced elements of horror in their animations. Their main feature *The Fly* (*Muha*, 1966), had anecdotal structure, and related sensations of discomfort, anxiety and impotence. The pair managed to conjure up nightmarish atmosphere with the help of drawings, colour, sound, editing and minimal use of animation. The film featured unusually long frozen shots of a human character blinking. However, even this barely visible movement allowed the viewer to see the character's inside and to recognize his fear as his own.

Borivoj Dovniković, a popular caricaturist and experienced animator, working in the School from its beginnings, was finally given a chance to make his own films after having cooperated on others for so many years. After several short gag-films, such as *No Title* (*Bez naslova*, 1964) and some less appreciated, works such as *Costumed rendez-vous* (*Kostimirani rendez vous*, 1965), in 1966, he made *Curiosity* (*Znatiželja*), his most important work, which definitely established him as one of the central figures in the history of the Zagreb School.

On a bench in a park, sat a sleepy little man, with a bag at his side. Every person that passed him wanted to peek into the bag, including the viewers. This was the first time 'living white' was used in a Zagreb School film. This was another of the School's inventions; white background serving as an active participant of film action. The whiteness released all kinds of things: figures and details that were inseparable parts of the story, fire brigades, military units on practice, even a ship with passengers peeked into the bag, only to get lost again in the white all/nothing space.

The same procedure Dovniković used in his next works, *Passenger in Second Class* (*Putnik drugog razreda*, 1972), *Learning to Walk* (*Škola hodanja* 1978), and *One Day of Life* (*Jedan dan života*, 1982). In all these films, we would see something only if it was serving some aspect of the story. The moment its function was fulfilled, the character or detail would drown in white (un)reality. Dovniković's heroes stood as symbols of the Zagreb School of Animation. They were anti heroes, little people whose only wish was to be left alone in their simple everyday routine. However, for some unexplainable reason or event, their peaceful lives were always messed up by the cruel surrounding.

Several other authors of Zagreb film appeared in this period.

Zlatko Bourek, a top graphic artist, began in 1964 with *Far Away I Saw Mist and Mud* (*I videl sam daljine maglene i kalne*), artistically impressive poetry adaptation of the great Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža. His next film was *Folk dance* (*Bećarac*, 1966) which visualized folk song and was, at the same time, one of the few successful films made in the technique of collage. Equally successful was his next film *The Cat* (*Mačka*, 1971), in which he flirted with pop-art under the influence of George

Dunning's great success with long feature pop-art animated film *Yellow Submarine* (1967).

Another extremely important name in the history of Zagreb School was Zlatko Grgić, undoubtedly one of the best gagmen that ever worked in the studio. His films *Little and Big* (*Mali i veliki*, 1966), series *Maxi Cat* produced from 1971 to 1976, and his major work *Dream doll* (*Lutka snova*, made in cooperation with Bob Godfrey) from 1979, besides the features characteristic of the Zagreb School, also had much in common with films made in the Warner Bros studio for animated film. It was no wonder that Grgić ended his career on the North American continent. In addition, he was the main author of the internationally acclaimed series *Professor Baltazar* (dating from 1967), while his auteur film *The Musical pig* (*Muzikalno prase*, 1965) can still be interpreted as an actual metaphor for human prejudices. Little piglet sang beautifully. Roaming around it encountered people fighting, at war, with various problems. Owing to the piglet's beautiful song, people put their differences behind and decided to celebrate – by eating the piglet.

The Fifth (*Peti*, 1964), was a small musical metaphor about loneliness related through the anecdote about a stubborn musician who wanted to become the fifth member of a quartet. Here, Grgić cooperated with Pavao Štalter, another original and prominent animator of the School. Štalter reached his creative peak with *Mask of Red Death* (*Maska crvene smrti*, 1969), produced in the very successful technique of collage. Štalter took over the production from Zdenko Gašparović, author of the screenplay, who, after having started drawing for the film, immigrated to Canada. Made in the old technique used before cel-animation was invented (each drawing was cut out of paper and glued to the background), the film remained until today the best interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe in the medium of animation.

In 1964, young Boris Kolar made *Wow-Wow* (*Vau-vau*), a boldly and originally stylized piece, characterized by nonchalant line, meaningless when static, but when animated it assumed unexpected shapes and meanings.

Another good gagman was Ante Zaninović. Two of his funniest films date from the same period; *The Wall* (*Zid*, 1965) and *On Holes and Corks* (*O rupama i čepovima*, 1967).

Despite many great authors working in the Zagreb School during the 1960s, one author stood out – Nedjeljko Dragić. He was probably the only animator whose contribution could be compared to that of Dušan Vukotić. Dragić, formerly known as caricaturist, began his career as assistant animator in 1965. His debut came with *Elegy* (*Elegija*), an average black-humor gag film. His next work already, *Tamer of Wild Horses* (*Krotitelj divljih konja*, 1966), won a Grand Prix at the most important festival of animated film in the French city of Annecy, in 1967. The film was technically consistent and a credible visualization of Vatroslav Mimica's scenario. It was no surprise that his funny anecdote about a highly technological society and the growing sense of alienation won sympathies of the jurors. The award meant a great opportunity for Dragić, and he capitalized on it. His next two films *Diogenes Perhaps* (*Možda Diogen*, 1967) and particularly *Passing Days* (*Idu dani*, 1968), were characteristically individual, of temperament style of animation, carrying a pessimist vision of reality spiced up with bitter humor.

Dragić managed to incorporate all the elements characteristic of the Zagreb School of animation into a single film.

In the film *Passing Days*, probably the most important film that came out of Zagreb studio in that period, once again we meet a small, ordinary man whose only ambition

is to live his simple lifestyle. Obviously, he does not succeed in doing so because his whole surrounding conspired against him. As soon as he opens the door, policemen barge in, and beat him up. A thief breaks in through the window, demonstrators run him over, soldiers shell his wall, his wife is hidden in the closet holding a man for his phallus shaped nose, and so on and so forth – bitter days go by. Everything and everyone joined in against the man.

Dragić's animation was fast, full of energy, tempo was fierce, drawings created with live, free line, and characters reduced to the essential. He also used the feature of functional whiteness. White background, at the same time the surface and space, spat out particular details only when they were needed: a chair appeared when the man wished to sit down, as soon as he stood up, the chair vanished; window, door, soldiers, wife, angel, and everything else began its existence only when it came in active contact with the man. Otherwise, they were integrated in white (un)reality. Filmic space materialized through movement. This implied that even set design was movable and changeable. Literally everything moved in Dragić's films, and literally nothing was stable. The consequence of this procedure was a lack of 'classical' editing; whole film was made in one 'shot'. A scene was born out of the whiteness and died in the moment when another appeared. Interwoven scenes would come and go without any chronological order, precisely as we remember past days; as mixed and fused images with no beginning, and no ending.

Passing Days may not only be the most typical film of the Zagreb School of Animation, but also a representative example of what in the world was known as the *Yugoslav Style of Animation*.

At the time of *Passing Days* and other previously mentioned films, Zagreb film reached its peak. The awards were coming from all parts of the world, many leading critics praised Zagreb artists, while at the same time, production was well organized and most creators were in their best years.

At the beginning of 1968, The Museum of Modern Art in New York organized a grand retrospective of the Zagreb School's films. Cartoon masterpieces made in the small Zagreb Studio had definitely conquered the world.

7. 'Unfinished college'

The third and last phase of the golden era of the Zagreb school was marked by creators who reached their creative peaks in the 1970s. Unfortunately, the studio did not renew its creative capacities and at the beginning of the 1980s it became quite obvious that the phenomenon of the Zagreb School of Animation wore down. Owing to film *Tup-Tup* (1972), which won an Oscar nomination, Dragić got the opportunity to get to know the New World. He collected impressions from his travels across America in a fascinating animated travelbook *Diary (Dnevnik, 1974)*. Dragić blended the scenes one into another, and featured drawings of great American cities in Saul Steinberg's manner. The film was constructed as a visual essay full of allusive commentaries about the States – the empire of our times. *Diary* was an important event in the world of animation, won countless awards, and was celebrated by many respected animators as one of the highest accomplishments in the history of the medium.

After *Diary* it was hard to imagine that two dimensional cartoons could go any further. Namely, beginning with the '70s it was obvious that new technique, three dimensional model animation aided by computer graphics, was gaining on the old methods.

Nevertheless, four years after *Diary*, a new creation came from Zagreb, made in the old cel-technique, which surpassed not only Dragić's film, but all its contemporaries regardless of the technique they were made in. Zdenko Gašparović's *Satiemania* was probably the best film ever made in Zagreb film, and also the School's swan song. Before *Satiemania*, Gašparović's name was known only in narrow professional circles. He participated in some important creations; he was one of Grgić's few collaborators working on Professor Baltazar. He also worked in some of the world's greatest studios of commercial animation where he acquired impressive experience. His love of avant-garde composer Eric Satie's music, that he listened to for years while he worked, turned out to be an exceptional source of inspiration. Visualizing the beloved music imprinted in his memories, Gašparović created an impressive work. *Satiemania* was not only '*the best film ever to come out of the studio on the Sava river*' (Bendazzi, 1994: 338), but remained an unrivalled visual composition bursting with life, charged with eroticism and love, full of nostalgia and a certain intimate element that eluded explanation, but which every viewer felt as soon as he saw this masterpiece: *Satiemania* awoke memories of short moments of love and beauty worth living for. Technically, it was a work that subtly used the possibilities of double exposition, giving the author free hands to present all of his luxuriant artistic talent. Soft transitions between the images and scenes presented a visual experience of irresistible charm, strength and beauty. The shot of female face reflected in restless waters is still one of the most beautiful and most exciting things seen in animation.

This work of unparalleled beauty marked the highest peak of Zagreb film, after which came sudden downfall, both on organizational and creative level. True, even after *Satiemania* several important films were made by two representatives of the younger generation. Joško Marušić in *The Fish Eye (Riblje oko, 1980)* created a modern horror in the animated medium, while in the *Skyscraper (Neboder, 1981)*, he recreated the atmosphere of his excellent urban caricatures and produced a funny voyeuristic film with dozens of gags appearing at the same time. Prominent member of the unforgettable comic group *New Square (Novi kvadrat)*, Krešimir Zimonić, in his film *Album (1983)* introduced visual tendencies of contemporary comic books in the Zagreb School's house style. The old masters had not given up either. Pavao Štalter made *House 42 (Kuća 42, 1984)*, in a bold, risky, and not too successful attempt to make a film in the complicated technique of oil on celluloid, while Nedjeljko Dragić recalled the best days with his last film *Pictures from Memory (Slike iz sjećanja, 1987)*.

Still, this was only a shadow of former successes. Several individual titles could not substitute for the past continual production of top films. Nobody experimented with new techniques, young animators mostly repeated already seen and achieved instead of making new breakthroughs in content and form. On the other hand, in some other countries, animation was gaining in speed. New techniques and a new culture introduced with electronic media started to dominate and Zagreb film slowly began to lose the title of internationally important centre of animation.

Zagreb film still remained a good school, but the University of Animation was built in another place on the planet – the Canadian National Film Board among others.

8. Idea of 'the third road' as ideological foundation

Art deals with man and the big secret of life. Social circumstances in given time and space, and a particular situation a person finds itself in, defines each individual in a particular society and the art that develops in that society. Reality of the human existence from the perspective of Zagreb authors was strongly marked by the value system formed in the political atmosphere they worked and lived in.

Democracy and dictatorship were not the only two systems existing in the world, just as there were more colours than just black and white. Between these two distinct poles lied a whole multi-coloured world, a spectre of countless colours and nuances. One of the ornaments in this vast mosaic of political history was *titoism*, a strange combination of dictatorship and democracy, which will probably be forgotten as soon as the last generation born in that system eventually passes away. Tito maintained his power skilfully balancing between federal and republic institutions on the home turf, and East and West abroad. Yugoslavia introduced the idea of the so-called 'third road' in foreign politics. Geographically, and ideologically, Yugoslavia stood on the border between two confronted blocks, but belonged to neither. In Belgrade, in 1961, the Non-aligned movement was founded, in which Tito was the central political figure. Even if they disliked communist ideology, most Yugoslav people respected the political stability of the country, and a relatively good economic development. The idea of 'the third road' was extremely popular; people really saw their country as an alternative to imperialist West and bureaucratic East. Many, including artists, believed that Yugoslavia presented the best combination of the two worlds. Although Yugoslavia had its share of political engaged films, especially at the time of the so-called 'black wave'^{xxii}, Yugoslav authors never confronted the system as fiercely as did Kadar, Menzel, Passer or Forman in Czechoslovakia, Wajda and Zanussi in Poland, Jancso), Makk, Fabrio or Szabo in Hungary.

Yugoslav regime was rarely criticized for lack of democracy; it was more fiercely attacked by the nationalist right wing, which sheds much light on the catastrophe that happened after Tito's death. Like most of the people, Yugoslav filmmakers rarely confronted the system; they were mostly its ardent propagators. This was also true of the 'third road' idea that was unusually popular even among the creators of Yugoslav's best films – members of the Zagreb School of Animated film. With the exception of Vladimir Kristl, Zagreb authors were mostly opportunistic towards the regime. Besides active participation in politics, Vukotić also made several regime films, *Mimica*, and later on *Dragić*, were members of the republic Central Committee of the Communist Union. Other leading animators were also loyal citizens of the Federal Yugoslavia.

Still, satire was an important element of Zagreb films, but the satirical razor was directed towards actual global problems, racism, colonialism, pollution, hunger, poverty, fear of the A-bomb, war, etc. Criticism was present, but it did not include social criticism. Yugoslav system was not only spared of criticism, it was, indirectly but indisputably, celebrated. The idea of a small, spiteful country existing on the borderline between two gigantic and hostile worlds was interwoven in many films made in the Zagreb studio. A small freedom oasis, surrounded by pressures, terror and danger, was an all-present motif in animated anecdotes of the leading school's masters. A small man abused by his surrounding, who, despite the troubles, kept fighting for his way of life, his independence and neutrality was a common denominator of all the authors of the Zagreb school, regardless of their artistic profile and their filmic and visual expression.

Probably the most representative example of this trend was *Learning to Walk* (1978) by Borivoj Dovniković. At the beginning we see a small happy, man walking across the screen, hopping, bouncing, whistling and smiling. However, soon he meets other figures, much bigger and stronger, which are marching, limping, dragging their feet, twitching their elbow or waving their head back and front while walking. Each of them tries to teach the small man 'the right way' of walking. Trying to follow their advices, he starts limping, marching, twitching, and waving... all at the same time. But he is no longer happy. His attempt to please everyone turned out ridiculous. In a virtuously animated finale we see the small man physically and mentally handicapped. Exhausted by other people's advices, he finally returns to his bouncy walk. Again he is hopping, bouncing, whistling and smiling, now a master of his own destiny.

A similar metaphor about the small man defying the big world can be found in a whole range of films of the Zagreb School. In Dovniković's film, *Passenger of Second Class* (1972), the small man's universe was his compartment. In *Curiosity* (1966), it was a park bench. Even in these miniature places hostile surrounding will not let them be. The small man, this time a tramp, was a hero of Dragić's *Diogenes Perhaps* (1976), and *Passing Days* (1968), where he was a simple taxpayer sitting in his living room. In Vukotić's *Ars Gratia Artist* (1970), he was an artist, in Štalter/Grgić's film *The Fifth* (1964), the small man was a musician rejected by the quartet. In Dovniković's *N.N.* (1979) and Dragić's *The Day I Stopped Smoking* (1982) we saw nothing but the small man, everything else was white, at the same time everything and nothing, the place out of which lurked invisible dangers. In Zaninović's film *On Holes and Corks* (1967), the small man was living in a strange fortress when somebody or something started drilling his living space. In Marks/Jutriša's *Sizif* (1967), the small man was attacked by chairs, drawers, and other bits of furniture in his apartment. And so on, and so forth. Dozens more films featured this basic metaphor based on the small, bold, and optimistic man and his self-confident slalom between hostility, malice, and injustice in his surrounding.

The small man, often wearing his hat, was one of rare Croatian national traits that could be seen in animated films, and it became a symbol of the Zagreb School and more generally, for the idea of neutrality, independence, and a big NO to the block politics. A small defiant fellow coming from the border between the worlds in conflict won many sympathies at international festivals. It was no surprise since his philosophy was interpreted as resistance to the arms race, prospect of nuclear war, and other fears and anxieties that have marked the time we usually refer to as the 'cold war era'.

The Zagreb School films were not always received with equal enthusiasm in the world of animation. Joe Adamson in his book *Tex Avery: King of Cartoon* mocked Zagreb animation, claiming that the authors of Zagreb School would imitate Avery 'if only they had sufficient funding' (Adamson, 1975: 13). William Moritz, editor of the animation chapter of the Oxford History of World Cinema, mentioned the whole phenomenon as a marginal group of caricaturists 'gathered around Dušan Vukotić'.^{xxiv}

However, they were only exceptions. The greatest world authorities in the domain of animation, such as Bendazzi, Wells, Cotte, or Horn, writing in their capital books (whose covers frequently included shots from some Zagreb School film), treated the Zagreb School precisely as this phenomenon deserved it – as an extremely important chapter in the history of animation.

9. The crisis and the end of school during the 1980s

Soon after Tito's death in 1980, the idea of the 'third road' turned out to be completely 'unrealistic reality', just like *La Grande Illusion*. After Gorbachov, perestroika, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the end of the cold war, the idea of the 'third road' and a country in between lost its initial meaning. Yugoslavia lost its international position, and moreover, dissolved in a bloody war.

Political chaos that extended over the country at the beginning of 1980s caused economic crisis, whose first victim was culture. Zagreb film was one of the institutions whose funding was radically cut. Small studio place in the Old Town of Zagreb found itself in the worse crisis ever. Number of productions was constantly decreasing until it fell down to only several films a year, whose quality was far below the Zagreb School's reputation. Times like year 1962, when, besides all the commercial work, the School produced 23 animated films, seemed out of reach in the '80s. Many great names left Zagreb film; they kept changing the management, while one humble attempt to rejuvenate the studio and production succeeded only partially.

International awards stopped coming to Zagreb.

Yugoslav political crisis, however, was only one of the causes for the downfall of the Zagreb School of Animated film. Even without the catastrophe, it is highly probable that Zagreb film would not have been able to hold the position in world animation competing with the National Film Board of Canada, or British studios in full swing. The main reason for Zagreb Film's stagnation was the absence of any other technique apart from classic cel-animation. In the studio's history, only several films were made in the collage technique, everything else was done as classical cartoon film.

From its beginnings, the studio recruited newspaper cartoonists for animators, which always remained caricaturists, cartoonists, or illustrators, even after becoming directors. Leading authors of the Zagreb School showed no interest in puppet-film, claymation or other forms of model animation. The possibilities of Zagreb style, based on two dimensional drawing and anecdote, began to wear out already in the 1970s, when most of Zagreb film production seemed like *déjà vu*.

At the same time, their strongest competitors, Canadian National Film Board and CBC, invested greatly in the development of new techniques. Countless animators from all around the world come to Canada, where they had excellent working conditions, and created with the home artists the 'Canadian phenomenon' in animation, making films that filled some of the most brilliant pages of the history of film.

Other countries also produced successful animated films: the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, or Japan. Each of them started researching different materials as early as the mid 1960s; they were making significant steps into the third dimension; experimenting with camera movement, and the use of computers, etc. World animation was gradually abandoning two-dimensional surface of the film image and diving into the depth of film space. With several exceptions, *Satiemanía* for example, two-dimensional Zagreb 'cartoons' were rapidly losing their breath in the race with their competition.

New techniques, primarily computers, quickly changed the face of animation. During the 1960s began the research whose goal was to adapt computers to visual media. The 1970s marked an extremely fast development of computers in the USA, Japan and Western Europe. The first renowned author that made a computer animated film was John Hallas, and the film was *Dilemma* (1981). Only eight years later, John

Lasseter won an Oscar for his computer animation *Tin Toy* (1989), produced in his studio Pixar, specialized for computer animation.

Technical progress made animation since the 1990s all-present in our ordinary lives; electronic commercials, music videos, computer animated introductory credits, the so-called special effects, etc.

Zagreb film still exists and produces animated films, today as a cultural institution of the independent republic of Croatia. New generation of animators are trying to terminate the period of stagnation, and some of them have already made noticed films.

The term *Zagreb School of Animation* has been a part of history for a long time. Just like the country and the ideological system this phenomenon sprang from.

Sources:

- Draginčić Slavko & Zupan Zdravko: *Istorija jugoslovenskog stripa*, Forum, Novi Sad 1986
- Holloway, Ronald: *Z is for Zagreb, A guide to the films of one of the world's major cartoon studios*, The Tantivy Press, New York 1972
- Horn, Maurice: *The World Encyclopedia of Comics*, Chelsea House Publishers, New York 1976
- Klein, Norman M.: *Seven Minutes. The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, Verso, New York, 1993
- Leslie, Esther: *Hollywood Flatlands. Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-garde*, Verso, New York, London 2001
- Muničić, Ranko: *Uvod u estetiku kinematografske animacije*, Filmoteka 16, Zagreb 1982
- Muničić, Ranko & Sudović, Zlatko (red.): *Zagrebački krug crtalog filma, knjiga prva*, Ex Libris, Zagreb 1978
- Muničić, Ranko & Sudović, Zlatko (red.): *Zagrebački krug crtalog filma, knjiga druga*, Ex Libris, Zagreb 1978
- Muničić, Ranko & Sudović, Zlatko (red.): *Zagrebački krug crtalog filma, knjiga treća*, Ex Libris, Zagreb 1978
- Muničić, Ranko & Sudović, Zlatko (red.): *Zagrebački krug crtalog filma, knjiga četvrta*, Ex Libris, Zagreb 1986
- Stephenson, Ralph: *Animation in the Cinema*, International Film Guide, New York 1967
- Sorlin, Pierre: *European Cinemas, European Societies 1939–1990*, Routledge, London 1991
- Turković, Hrvoje: "Dušan Vukotić – izbor iz crtalog filmskog stvaralaštva", "Zapis" 57/2007, Zagreb

ⁱ The notion was coined by French film historian Georges Sadoul. However, he did not have in mind any particular school, but a group of filmmakers working in the same studio, who had similar style and understanding of the medium.

ⁱⁱ I am using the term 'film animation' being more precise than 'animation'. Animation is spatially and temporally much wider term than 'film' and includes animated theatre (Chinese theatre, kaleidoscope, Emile Reynaud's optical theatre, all the way to plain puppet theatre), mechanically obtained movement without film (for example, going fast through the pages of a notebook with drawings), or contemporary computer animation, video games, which are animation, but could hardly be called film. This is to say that here I am referring to animation made with the help of filmic technique.

ⁱⁱⁱ I owe my thanks to Joško Marušić, who has pointed out to some factual mistakes in the first publication of this study in the Croatian Film Chronicle, among others that *Satiemania* was nominated.

^{xi} I am very thankful to late professor Vjekoslav Majcen, who gave me useful information and suggestions, and cautioned me about some incorrect data I had, while still working on the manuscript.

^{xii} They were two great German animators from the 1920s. Lotter Reiniger was known after her long animated film *Adventure of Prince Ahmed* (*Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*, 1926) Her collaborator on the film was Walther Ruttmann, who later on became famous film avant-garde author.

^{xiii} Studio's owner was Quirino Cristiani (Santa Giuletta, Italija 1896 - Buenos Aires 1960), known in film history as author of *El Apostol*, the first long animated film ever. *El Apostol* had its first public screening in November 1917.

^{xvi} Both Mimica and Vukotić continued their careers as feature film directors. However, Vukotić, who was undoubtedly one of the most important animators in the history of animation, realized several feature films which were far behind his animated works, while Mimica became one of leading feature film directors of Yugoslav film during the 1960s, with films like *Kaya, I'll Kill You! (Kaja, ubit ću te!)*, *Monday or Tuesday (Ponedjeljak ili utorak)*, *The Event (Događaj)*...

^{xvii} Vlado Kristl had a magnificent biography. He contributed his caricatures to *Kerempuh*, and worked as cartoonist on *The Big Meeting*. He founded visual art group Exat 51, which dealt a hard blow to social realism. As a staunch anticommunist, he then ran to South America. There he read in the newspapers about former colleagues success at the Cannes film festival, and returned to Zagreb. He immediately created his two masterpieces. In 1962, he made his first feature film *General*. Strong and bold satire used in the film was labeled as an insult to Tito and film was banned. He ran again, this time to Germany. The fact that Zagreb film heads had no understanding for his *Don Quixote* sped up his departure. At the end of this film, somebody glued a scene with a windmill and a voice over 'explaining' what the film was all about. Kristl was infuriated. In Germany he shot two feature films *The Dam (Der Damm)* and *The Letter (Der Brief, 1965)*, in which he also acted. Critics who saw the films described them as 'definitely the most tiresome films in the history of film'. He returned shortly to animation, but with not much success.

^{xviii} Co directed by Ivo Vrbanić, an employee of Zagreb film. However, Kristl did everything else by himself (background, drawing, animation...), so that it was not hard to decide who was real author of the film.

^{xix} The artistic success was accompanied by commercial gain. Coproduction with the American Phil Davis resulted in thirteen episodes of *The Cases*, while famous American animator Gene Deitch realized two episodes of Popeye in co production with Zagreb film and Schneider Production.

^{xx} Some of the feature films he made were childrens' film *The Seventh Continent* (1966), and science-fiction film *Guests from the Galaxy* (1981). He occasionally returned to animation making *Opera Cordis* (1968) and *Ars Gratia Artis* (1970), but these were far below what he had achieved with his 1960s animations.

^{xxii} Authors such as Makavejev, Petrović, Pavlović, Papić, Čengić, and others.

^{xxiv} *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, page 554.