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Croatian Animation, Then and Now: Creating Sparks or Just a Little Bit of Smoke?

By Sanja Bahun

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In one of their collective statements, the members of the Zagreb School of Animation Borivoj Dovniković, Ante Zaninović, Zlatko Grgić, Vladimir Jutriša, Aleksandar Marks, Dušan Vukotić and Nedeljko Dragić defined animated film as a protest against rigidity. Animation breathes life into a drawing, they argued, and thus there is a particular continuity between what we call life and the making of animated films:

“Life is warmth. Warmth is movement. Movement is life. Animation can be lukewarm or boiling. Cold animation isn’t animation; it is like a stillborn child. To make animated cartoons means to rub tree trunks against each other until there is a spark perhaps or just a little bit of smoke. Take a kilogram of ideas (if possible not too confused), fifty kilograms of talent, and a few thousands of drawings. Stir it well and then with a bit of luck you won't get the right answer to your question.” (quoted in Petzke 1996: 53)

For the Zagreb School of Animation, one of the arguably most significant phenomena in both Croatian and Yugoslav cinematography, to animate never meant to imitate reality, but rather to give it a design, or, better still, an “interpretation” (Vukotić 1978: 15). This vigorous challenge to the simplistic perception of the relationship between art and reality (including historical reality) is a particularly adequate overture to the present article for a number of reasons. First, to assess Croatian animation, in terms of either historical or contemporary practice, would be inconceivable without serious reflection on the production of the Zagreb School (so termed by the French critic Georges Sadoul) and the subsequent filmmakers’ negotiation of this legacy. The symbolic capital and energy generated by the Zagreb School provided not only a creative impetus, but also the infrastructural developments enabling the growth and international recognition of Croatian animation: the founding and activity of the Zagreb Film

production studio, the establishment of the Zagreb World Festival of Animated Film —Animafest (the second oldest festival of animated film in Europe), and the introduction of animation in the national curriculum in higher education. Most importantly, perhaps, to understand the particular artistic and ideological context of the practices within which Croatian animation has developed and is developing, one needs to address precisely the issue that vitally informed the production of the Zagreb School: that of the essential yet volatile relationship between reality and an interpretation thereof. In what follows I shall therefore first survey the history of Croatian animation, with a detailed excursion into the years 1958-1980, the so-called “Golden Age” of the Zagreb School of Animation, then probe the artistic, commercial, and political vicissitudes of the relative interregnum in the late 1980s and during the 1990s, and finally examine the paths open to the old and new animators active in Croatia today.

Scholars tend to trace Croatian animation (then, Yugoslav animation) to the period between the two world wars and the activities of a series of immigrants: the cartoonist Sergej Tagatz, a Pole who emigrated from the Soviet Union to Yugoslavia in 1922, and his collaboration with Aleksandar Gerasimov, another emigré from the USSR, on a series of educational silhouette-animated films for the School of National Health, and the Jewish-Croatian-German brothers Zvonko, Ivo and Vlado Mondschein, who ran a successful film commercial production company called Maar Ton. Properly speaking, however, Croatian animation was “born” in the late 1940s with two rather different authors: Bogoslav Petanjek, an apprentice in Quirino Cristiani’s animation studio in Buenos Aires, who returned to Yugoslavia to a career in the production of educational films for Jadran Film (and, in addition to them, a successful gag film called *Blackman Miško* [*Crnac Miško*, 1949]), and Fadil Hadžić, the editor of the satirical magazine *Kerempuh*, who had no previous animation experience but had a work force of enthusiastic cartoonists and caricaturists employed at the magazine. In the wake of Yugoslav split with the Soviet Union, Hadžić and his crew decided to make an animated anti-Soviet satire. The result was *The Great Rally* (*Veliki miting*, 1950, dir. Hadžić, anim. Walter and Norbert Neugebauer), a 20-minute long film that scored well with both the political committees and the cinema audience. Its success allowed Hadžić to found a film production company dedicated exclusively to animated film, Duga Film, and assemble around himself the most distinguished animators of the day: Walter Neugebauer and the authors whose names will soon become synonymous with Yugoslav animation—Dovniković, Jutriša, Marks, Vukotić, and others. In the five years of its existence Duga Film produced a number of short films, notable of which are Neugebauer’s take on the Disney short, entitled *A Cheerful Event* (*Veseli doživljaj*, 1951), and Vukotić’s first probing of the stylized, “limited” animation, titled *How Kićo Was Born* (*Kako se rodio Kićo*, 1951).

After the dismantling of Duga Film, the center of animation activities transferred to the newly formed [Zagreb Film](#) (est. 1953). It is there that the Zagreb School of Animation came into being, against the backdrop of a developing film industry that focused its creative efforts on the realistic-sentimentalist representation of the Second World War and the resistance struggle. The Zagreb School offered new thematics—modern, everyday, universal—and a new type of expression, a stylized, minimalistic, cross-over between art and cinema (Prouse 1959: 136).

The “Golden Age” of this school (1957-1980) spanned three waves, each characterized by the artistic dominance of a different group of authors-animators: Dušan Vukotić, Vlado Kristl, Nikola Kostelac, Vatroslav Mimica (the first wave, app. 1957-1962); Zlatko Bourek, Borivoj Dovniković, Nedeljko Dragić, Zlatko Grgić, Aleksandar Marks and Vladimir Jutriša, and Pavao Štalter (the second wave, app. 1965-1969); and Nedeljko Dragić (again), Zdenko Gašparović, and, towards the end of this period, Joško Marušić (the third wave, 1972-1980; see the interview with Joško Marušić in this issue of *KinoKultura*). During these years the Zagreb animators garnered an unprecedented amount of national and international attention, and its authors won awards at all major animation and film festivals—from Annecy to Teheran—including the 1961 Academy Award for the Best Animated Short Film, the second ever given to a film created outside the US and the first given to a film produced by a non-US film company (for Vukotić’s *Ersatz*), as well as two further nominations for the same award (Dragić’s *Tup-Tup*, 1972, and Zlatko Grgić and Bob Godfrey’s *Dream Doll*, 1979). By the end of 1970s the New York Museum of Modern Arts had already organized two retrospectives of the Zagreb School (1968; 1978).



Ersatz To call the Zagreb group a “school” means to employ a misnomer, though. The “School” had no overarching spokesperson or “house style”: while they were all committed to “cel animation,” the Zagreb authors deployed a surprising variety of styles—from the Paul Klee-inspired shapes and palette of Vukotić’s *Ersatz* to the reduced stick drawings of Dragić’s *Tup-Tup*—and from the graphic austerity of Jutriša and Marks’s *The Fly* (*Muha*, 1966) to the almost impenetrable abstraction of Gašparović’s *Satiemania* (1978). Yet insofar as being a “school” presupposes collaboration, sharing of a more or less unified worldview, and generation of particular narrative models and aesthetic choices, the Zagreb group could indeed be called a school. The Zagreb authors worked as a shapeshifting team, where the director of one film was often the screenwriter, or the main animator, or the editor, for another. The Zagreb school scripts of the 1950s and 1960s are dominantly based on visual gags, with an anecdotal focus on the “small man” defying (but most often succumbing to) an alienating “big world” (Munitić 1975: 3). Vukotić’s famed *Ersatz* is a case in point. Here, a semi-abstract humanoid figure, caught in consumerist fantasies and all-too-human desires, creates and destroys his little world (a “perfect holiday”) in a series of visual gags—until he, too, incidentally steps on a nail and deflates.

The “warm” small man vs. the “cold” big world gag-template soon became recognized as the thematic trademark of the School, one that Midhad Ajanović

correctly identifies with the ideology of the “third way,” or the non-aligned cultural-political reality, of Yugoslavia (2004, pp. 95-6). The narratives of the Zagreb School involve a tone of satire but the latter rarely concerns the immediate political reality of the 1950s-1970s (unlike, for instance, Czechoslovakian animated films of the same period). Rather, the Zagreb animators of the 1950s and 1960s targeted global problems—the two contrasted worlds intent on annihilating each other, the issues of colonialism, racism, dignity-challenging poverty—in short, the problems against which the “small man,” or a “small,” non-aligned nation, can struggle by highlighting their absurdity. Due to the changes in the global political landscape and structure of experience in the 1970s, the “small person” narrative gave ground to a loosely testimonial narrative structure, where the subject’s interior landscape interacts with the objective world in a string of visually or auditorily commanding phantasmagorias (Dragić’s *Diary* [*Dnevnik*, 1974] and Gašparović’s *Satiemania*). Finally, the horror-based, or anxiety-inducing, narratives took hold in the work of the School in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, and are identifiable in the masterpieces of the uncanny such as Marks and Jutriša’s *The Fly* and Marušić’s [*Fisheye*](#) (*Riblje oko*, 1980).



But these disparate script-models can be hardly said to constitute a “school” of narration. The most important common denominator to the various artistic practices of the Zagreb School, however, was an intention to probe the limits of animation art by challenging the naturalistic representation. Committed to two-dimensional drawing-based animation (animation not involving tri-dimensional objects such as puppets or clay, or the effort to achieve tri-dimensional effects through computer manipulation), the Zagreb School was specifically engaged in the technical and stylistic practice of so-called “limited animation.” In full animation, every drawing in a production is used only once, and quick editing assures the constant movement and metamorphosis of shapes (the ideal of such animation is the creation of 24 different images for each second of the 24 frames-per-second running time of a motion picture film). Limited animation is more economical: it cycles or re-uses the same drawings, thereby reducing the number of drawings needed to tell the story, and its appropriation as an artistic strategy is oftentimes caused by some material necessity like a scarcity of drawing foil (Furniss 2007: 134). The movement necessary for the unfolding of the story is oftentimes generated by the camera: limited animation tends to involve long takes and extensive camera

movements (panning, zooming in and out), or even, with particular effects, long static frames (see, for an excellent example, *The Fly*). As a consequence, limited animation abrogates the medium's aspirations to verisimilitude: it "limits," or reduces, the details of representation in a fashion reminiscent of abstract art. Insofar as the Zagreb animators' decision to use limited animation was premised upon the belief that the paucity of material resources creates the preconditions for innovation, and the conviction that art should interpret, rather than mimetically represent, reality, the Zagreb School could be best contextualized in relation to a signature cinematic movement the rise of which coincided closely with that of the Zagreb School of Animation—the French *Nouvelle Vague*.

Drawing specific parallels between the Zagreb School and the French New Wave aesthetics would be well beyond the scope of the present article, but it merits a note that the Zagreb animators used limited animation in comparably creative ways, exploiting the specific potentials of animation to be unconstrained by physical laws (Vukotić 1978: 15) and to incorporate and re-semanticize other art forms such as painting and music. The most notable of their innovative strategies was the examination of the fluid boundaries between the foreground and the background and the consequential emancipation of the "white space." In Dovniković's *Curiosity (Znatizelja, 1967)* the white background actively interacts with the foreground where we observe a constrainedly sketched bench, a sleepy "small man," and a bag. As objects and people emerge from various angles of this whiteness (a ship with passengers, a fire brigade, a military unit), all intent on seeing what is "hidden" in the bag, the foreground and the background become indistinguishable; and they project forward beyond the screen boundary, since viewers, too, are swept by a desire to see what is in the small man's bag. Wittily exploiting what Christian McCrea has called "the dimensional excess of animated bodies" (9), the Zagreb School animators also let their humans and other objects expand, shrink, transmogrify, merge with and emerge from this white background, as a result of their desires (*Ersatz*) and constellation in a multi-media aesthetic world (*Satiemania*). Such representation can pose a profound challenge to the figurative nature of film art.

The abstract painter and filmmaker Vladimir Kristl had the ambition to create an animated film that would be structured not by the demands of cause and effect, or any requirements of visual probability, but by its own artistic rhythm. The result was *Don Quixote (Don Kihot, 1961)*, a film that could be interpreted variably as an ode to the non-figurative "essence" of the world and as a visualization of its own music score—a practice subsequent Croatian animators were keen on advancing. To make an entirely abstract film such as *Don Quixote*, however, means to produce an extreme of what Umberto Eco called "the open work of art" (*opera aperta*) and to unlock the cinematic text to the viewer's free associations, personal and political. Writing in 1967, Ralph Stephenson, for instance, had no doubts that the proliferation of "dots, shapes, creatures, trailers, wheels [...] forward lines [...] and projectiles" in Kristl's film signaled "radars, cannons, tanks, aircraft, patrols, and armies [...] a vision of chaos, at the same time eccentric and terrifying" (Stephenson, quoted in Ajanović 2004: 88).



In fact, limited animation commonly relies on the music score and rhythmic patterning to generate meaningful connections between the frames. The Zagreb School animators were consistent in their avoidance of dialogue, or even voice-over, but they intensely used the music score as an actively operative interlocutor and creator of meanings. In films such as Vukotić's *Ersatz* the score, strongly based on leitmotif-development and/or featuring refrains, provides a controlled chronotope for the anti-hero's activities. Music is also used diegetically to bridge the storyline and the form, as in Zlatko Grgić and Pavao Štalter's *The Fifth One* (*Peti*, 1964), a short that follows the ordeals of an endearingly persistent musician to become the fifth member of a quartet. At its most innovative, the Zagreb School would radically exploit the property of music for both expansive meaning-giving and fundamental shape-shifting. The case in point is Gašparović's fantasy *Satiemania*, where the animated world—scenes of a woman getting bored, of bars, butchers, steaks, shopping malls, steaks, ships in the rain, of Grand Canyon and Montparnasse—is continuously reshaped through Eric Satie's music. It is probably for the reasons of this interpenetration of art forms that Giannalberto Bendazzi praised this highly intertextual and remarkably stylistically diverse film as "the best film ever to come out of the studio on the Sava river" (1994: 338).



While well-supported by government endowments, Zagreb Film was also one of the rare Yugoslav film studios that, from the very start, profiled itself as a commercial institution. In addition to producing short art films aimed at the festival circuit or connoisseurs' enjoyment, Zagreb Film rented out its services and expert author-animators to various companies advertising their products and it achieved particular success with made-for-television series such as Zlatko Grgić's *Professor Balthazar* (57 episodes produced between 1967 and 1978), a children's animated film series

that was remarkably popular not only in Yugoslavia, but also in Denmark, Finland, Italy, Iran, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden.

Despite these commercial injections, however, Zagreb Film became collateral damage of the general economic crisis of the mid-1980s; its funding was cut drastically, and animation activity was reduced and relegated to other Croatian and Yugoslav film production houses. But it may be more accurate to say that the 1980s saw not so much an economy-driven “death” as artistic dissipation of the “Zagreb School.” What made the Zagreb group of animators a “school,” that is, a shared artistic and ideological premise, diversified into a number of production and distribution practices that could no longer be easily understood within the same cinematic and distributive framework, and no longer spoke to the same audience.



Ajanović has suggested another major reason for Zagreb Film’s stagnation: the studio’s imperviousness to new techniques in the very period when animation globally underwent one of its silent revolutions (2004, p. 99). From the very beginning, Zagreb Film recruited artists, architects, and newspaper cartoonists for animators and thus based its aesthetic profile on the 2D drawing template. In the 1980s, at a time when international animation was rapidly exploring new techniques—in particular those that engaged the third dimension (stop-motion techniques and computer-based animation)—Zagreb animators showed little interest in any alternative practices. Zagreb Film, however, continued to produce internationally recognized animated films during the 1980s, mainly developing the Zagreb School stylistic and narrative templates I noted above. In *The Skyscraper* (*Neboder*, 1981) Marušić used gag, caricature, and multiplication of focal points to convey a subtly politicized fable on contemporary living. In his coming of age fantasies *Album* (1983) and *Butterflies* (*Leptiri*, 1988) Krešimir Zimonić expanded on the intimistic storyline, dream-sequence structure, and phantasmagoric tenor of Dragić’s *Diary* and Gašparović’s *Satiemania*. And Milan Trenc’s witty and poignant *The Big Time* (*Veliki provod*, 1990) closed the decade with a sudden success at London Film Festival. But the film also announced the beginning of an end—or the beginning of new beginnings: the young animator emigrated to the USA in 1991, like a number of other filmmakers.

It is a matter of historical paradox that the first Yugoslav animated feature film, Milan Blažeković’s *The Elm-Chanted Forest* (*Čudesna šuma*, 1986), was released precisely in the 1980s. Produced jointly by Croatia Film and the US-

based production company Fantasy Forest, and released in two versions (with the US and Yugoslav audio casts, respectively), the film is based on a children's tale by Sunčana Škrinjarić, relating a painter's visit to an enchanted forest. The film was animated in the Disney-style yet it incorporated certain components of the Zagreb School aesthetics, in tune with Blažeković's earlier film-work like the short *Largo* (co-directed with Branko Ilić, 1970). The latter aspect is mainly visible in the use of relatively shallow space and an easel-like 2D background, a practice which might be alternatively interpreted as purposeful (gesturing the painter's own profession, its tools, and its products) or lacking cinematic ambition. Although *The Elm-Charnted Forest* swiftly became the most commercially successful animated film in former Yugoslavia, the film's simple, under-developed storyline and ambivalent animation did not score well at the US box office. The mixture of styles, presumably a consequence of an uncomfortable concoction of artistic and commercial intentions, sent contradictory messages to the international audience, uncertain whether this film aspired to full animation (i.e., competing on the children's animation market with Disney production films) or to limited animation (i.e., affiliating itself with UPA's televised series or the Japanese manga films)? Unsurprisingly, the sequel, *The Magician's Hat* (*Čarobnjakov šešir*, 1989, dir. Milan Blažeković), was released in the original language only. But *The Magician's Hat* was markedly less successful even in the country of its production. The time for magic and appreciation of the plots in which human goodness always prevails seems to have passed in Yugoslavia.

Animation, Paul Wells notes, "has the possibility to tell social 'truths' in a fashion unavailable elsewhere" (1997, p. 43). Thanks to its capacity to equilibrate on the fine line between the realistic and the fantastic, animation challenges the accustomed modes of thought and queries the ideological certainties, suggesting a possible extension of what we perceive as fixed into unpredictable, sometimes ungovernable, realms. In its encounter with socio-political reality animation activates not only the field of the analogically metaphoric (as observable in satire-based animation) but also the semantic scope of surreality, or visual trickery. Therefore the oblique relationship between political reality and animation is most frequently reliant on the genre's inherent surplus of associative power. When, in 1996, Goce Vaskov structured his animated short *Mass in A Minor* (*Misa u A-molu*) around a computer-manipulated, "stained glass" representation of terrestrial and extra-terrestrial landscapes, a simplified background suffused with Christian symbolism, and reiteration of the images of lit matches, or candles, it was difficult to see in the film only a universal parable about the forces of nature. Far more poignantly, the film—which concludes with a shot of Zippo pocket lighters, traditionally used by soldiers—evoked *human* activity, the recent and ongoing wars, the innumerable funerals, and the painfully visible presence of military and paramilitary forces in the region.

By contrast, Blažeković's 1997 feature film for children *Lapitch, The Little Shoemaker* (*Čudnovate zgođe šegrta Hlapića*), in production at Croatia Film from 1991 to 1997, strikes one as remarkably dissociated from the immediate historical context of production, even for a children's film. *Lapitch, The Little Shoemaker* follows, now more confidently, the model set by *The Elm-Charnted Forest*: a simple script based on a well-known children's tale (Ivana Brlić-

Mažuranić's novel *The Marvelous Adventures of Hlapić the Apprentice*, 1913), a charming set of anthropomorphized animal characters, and a fusion of the traditional Disney-style cel animation of the foreground and limited animation/abstraction of the background. To an audience made up of children who grew up exposed to gory television footage, curfews, and air raid sirens, and adults exhausted by the seemingly perpetual cycles of violence, *Lapitch, The Little Shoemaker* was a welcome escape: it soon became the highest-grossing Croatian animated film ever. The film was seen by at least 355,000 cinema-goers in Croatia, and it spawned a spin-off television series, currently being aired on the UK Tiny Pop television channel; and the dubbed German (1999), French (1999), and US (2000) releases all sold very well globally. The film's humane and uncomplicated script had a certain appeal to international audiences, but the marked traditionalism of animation often surprised viewers accustomed to manga, or 3D animation. Taken in tandem, Vaskov's *Mass in A Minor* and Blažeković's *Lapitch, The Little Shoemaker*, provide an evocative picture of the state of Croatian animation, not only in the war-ridden 1990s, but also the early 2000s. Vaskov's short film ushered regional animated art into the world of computer animation, but did so somewhat belatedly and timidly. Blažeković's feature film confirmed that cel, 2D drawing-based animation is the choice style/technique of not only Croatian animators but also their domestic audience. The two films projected the message that the technological aspirations of Croatian animation, as well as the strategies of its production and distribution, are comparatively modest.

A rather different approach to the artistic negotiation of the 1990s was, however, entertained by Nicole Hewitt, a British—and, at times, adopted Croatian—artist and animator. Hewitt's relentless examination of styles and techniques (stop-motion, cut-out animation, drawn animation, object animation, etc.) in her Croatian films such as *Herman's Burden (Breme)*, 1989), *Notes on Continuity (Dnevnik trajanja)*, 1991), *Single Viable Fetus* (1995), and *In/Dividu* (1999) exposed Croatian audiences to the potential of abstract animation in confronting political reality through the manipulation of extracts of real life, and posed important questions about identity, temporal change and multiplicity, cultural and media translation, and the role of art in society. While markedly non-commercial, and much indebted to her education in the UK art context, Hewitt's Croatian films nevertheless served as a guide to the forthcoming generation of Croatian animators; her films suggested that it is possible, even beneficial, to produce innovative animation outside big studios and without reliance on state funding.

In their discussion of contemporary Czech animation, Lucie Joschko and Michael Morgan identify a few major factors contributing to the decline of the animated art form in the Czech Republic: the privatization of animation studios, the gradual withdrawal of government funding, and the heightened economic pressure on filmmakers, as well as a change of themes contingent on the transformed political landscape and the fragmentation of domestic audience due to the increased import of international animated films (Joschko and Morgan, 2008, pp. 75-80). With some modifications, and taking into account the context of conflict/post-conflict society (as well as a certain cultural lethargy that appears invariably to accompany the prolonged scarcity of resources), the same could be said of Croatian animation. In a 2006 interview young author Ana Hušman

rightfully complained about the state of Croatian animation: the paucity of films, restricted scope of topics, limited funding (Hušman, 2006). But it is precisely the mid-2000s that presented us with a veritable turn of events, a turn in which, as we shall see, Hušman herself played an important role. Pragmatically speaking, the most important change that the mid-2000s brought was the reconstellation and consolidation of the financial sector that supports cinematic production, including low-profit genres such as animation. Private production houses, non-governmental organizations, and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Croatia, all began showing heightened interest in animation in the early 2000s, both in terms of the preservation of the national animation heritage and the financing of future productions. More significantly, perhaps, these previously irreconcilable financing agents realized that they could work together.



Hušman's animated film [The Market](#) (*Plac*, 2006) is an exemplary case-study in this respect. The film, which announced a new vibrancy in Croatian animation, was produced by Studio Pangolin (an independent production house she set up with Nicole Hewitt) and was financially supported by the Ministry of Culture. To address both the financial constraints and the fragmentation of audience, the film was published and distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 license and is readily available in good resolution on the Internet. And while *The Market* springs from, and is rooted in, the local context—its framework narrative records a typical day at Dolac, the Zagreb main market place, and the regionally recognizable methods of conserving food at home—the film in fact addresses issues that are universal and exigent: the economic undervalue of local produce, an obsession with cleanliness, xenophobia, and class tensions audible in the documentary, heteroglot voice-over. But the film's key contribution to the reinvigoration of Croatian animation lies in the challenge it poses to our habituation to drawing-based animation. Through its crafty use of stop-motion animation—in the form of “model animation,” here, a stilted re-animation of live action footage of the market, combined with pixilation and stop-frame object manipulation (the maneuvering of inanimate objects such as vegetables, kitchen utensils, etc.)—Hušman's film stimulates our visual (and general) appetite. Viewers turn into gluttonous consumers of some haptically accentuated images/objects: carrots, beans, corns. One finds a similar visual language in the author's other stop-motion/live action animated films *Meršpajz* (*Meršpajz*, 2006) and *Lunch* (*Ručak*, 2008)—for food, food preparation, and food intake, and the issues of domesticity and foreignness figure prominently in Hušman's artistic vision.

I am singling out Hušman's animation art because it epitomizes what I believe to be a viable response to the crucial dilemmas of production and distribution sourcing the late 1980s and 1990s decline of Croatian animation. It is fair to emphasize, however, that many other, young and already established, authors have contributed to the rejuvenation of the genre in the 2000s. Nicole Hewitt has continued probing the boundary between the documentary, installation, and animation in a variety of techniques (see, for example, her film *Waltz* [*Valcer*, 2004]), under the auspices of Studio Pangolin. Goce Vaskov made further advances into 3D computer animation, with, in particular, his sardonic computer-assisted clay animation *Bombs* (*Bombe*, 2005). As a vivid evidence of continuity, the Zagreb School émigrés Nedeljko Dragić and Milan Trenc returned to the Croatian animation scene with *Rudi's Lexicon* (*Rudijev leksikon*, 2009; a series of 365 90-second films) and *Loneliness* (*Samoća*, 2010; a short animation), respectively; Borivoj Dovniković and Pavao Štalter teamed to produce the short film *Silence* (*Tišina*, 2009); and Joško Marušić released the feature film *Rainbow*, screened in the official selection of the 2010 Hiroshima International Festival of Animated Films. Judging by the 2009-2010 Croatian Animation catalogue, however, drawing/painting-based animation, either in the form of traditional 2D or computer-assisted 3D films, still dominates the production of animated films in Croatia. This is due both to the heritage of the Zagreb School and to the fact that Croatian animators are still mainly recruited from a cohort of successful illustrators, traditional and computer graphics designers, comic-book writers and painters such as Goran Trbuljak, Simon Bogojević Narath, or, indeed the latter's protégé, young 3D animator Veljko Popović. A compelling postmodern updating of Vukotić's *Ersatz*, Popović's 6-minute long *She Who Measures* (*Ona koja mjeri*, 2008) won the FIPRESCI Award at Annecy 2008, an event that forcefully signaled the return of Croatian animation to the international art animation stage. The film attacks consumerism through a fable about a group of humanoid customers who, armed with "smiley" masks, engage in an eternal shopping spree; they are led by a clownish figure who excretes objects for further consumption. Popović has learnt his Zagreb-School lessons well, so he uses the abstracted background (here, corrugated cardboard, painted and then scratched and 3D manipulated) productively to suggest an infinite wasteland of shopping malls in a dehumanized world. *She Who Measures*, produced by private production house Kenges, is yet another example of a successful diversification of funding: the film was financed by sources that range from private trustees to the Office for Culture of the City of Split, Popović's hometown.



With the belated but convincing rise of computer animation, such mixtures of 2D and 3D (computer-based) techniques have become common in Croatia, but they now also include a self-reflective incorporation of an array of other techniques. The directing-animating pair Davor

Međurečan and Marko Meštrović have produced two films that combine 3D, 2D, live action and puppet animation, *In the Gypsy Style (Ciganjska, 2004)* and *Silencium (Silencium, 2006)*; both films are based on, or inspired by, Miroslav Krleža's *The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh*. In a different fashion, Međurečan and Meštrović (who have in the meantime switched to independent projects) are also good heirs to the Zagreb-School legacy. Subtly political, their films repeatedly return to the issues of personal freedom and the interior and external repression as these get reflected in the life of an ordinary person. They use soundtrack as an agile interlocutor with images, indeed a structuring crux of the film. But the visuality of their films is influenced by an art alien to the traditional Zagreb-School film production (if close to their chosen writer's aesthetic habitat): German expressionism and, in particular, the expressionists' project to exteriorize mental states on screen. All these qualities are easily identifiable in Marko Meštrović's most recent animated short, *No Sleep Won't Kill You (Nespavanje ne ubija, 2010)*; produced by Kreativni sindikat and Zagreb Film, co-financed by Croatian Audiovisual Centre). *No Sleep Won't Kill You* takes the form of a testimonial narrative: it follows a contemporary insomniac as he explores the features of a recurrent dream by inscribing it on Zagreb public spaces. Yet the dynamic combination of live action and drawing, complex editing, and the experimental jazz music score provided by US artists Jessica Lourie and Abraham Gomez-Delgado defamiliarize this testimony. Described by its meta-cinematic narrator as "arrhythmics with variation," this phantasmagoria transforms the Zagreb city streets into the setting and the material base for animation.

The combination of 2D/3D animation and live action, or animated real-life footage (pixilation), as we find it in Meštrović's film, seems to have gained particular popularity in recent Croatian production. Darko Bakliža's films such as *A Date (Spoj, 2004)*, *Homo Volans (2008)*, and *Format (2010)* compellingly probe the uncanny boundary between the naturalistically plausible and its fantastic, or artistic, extension, through the interface of live and variously animated action. Other techniques start to appear more timidly. Mainly working in Austria, Danijel Šuljić has been experimenting with various alternative techniques such as coffee on glass (*Zlatorog, 2000*; *I Can Imagine It Very Well, 2003*) or oil on glass (*The Cake, 1997*; *A Film with a Girl, 2000*) for more than a decade. More recently, Michaele Müller, a Swiss native studying and working in Zagreb, used painting on glass and enhanced sound design in her graduation piece *Miramare (2009)* to associatively recount the complexities of life on the Croatian Mediterranean shore. The artistic boldness paid off: the film was selected in the category of graduation films for both the 2010 Cannes Film Festival and 2010 Annecy Animated Film Festival and it won the Spirit Award for Animation at the 2010 Brooklyn Film Festival. The cases of both Šuljić and Müller—as well as that of Dragić, Trenc, and Hewitt—also highlight the need to conceive of contemporary Croatian animation as not only, or not even primarily, a national cinema practice, but as a product of international transits, exchanges, and culturally diverse routes of social and artistic identification.

Such a proliferation of new animation art has not passed unnoticed. In 2009 the London International Animation Film Festival featured both a Zagreb Film tribute and a panorama of new Croatian animation. In 2010 a comparable program was mounted at Fantoche, the International Animated Film Festival in Baden,

Switzerland. As I write this text, encouraging news is coming in. Popović's *My Way* (*Moj put*, 2010; based on a novel by Svjetlan Junaković) and Meštrović's *No Sleep Won't Kill You* were featured in the highly selective competition programs of the 2010 Annecy festival; and the latter won the 2010 EUNIC Award for the Best Experimental Film at the I've Seen Films Festival in Milan. Bakliža's *Format* won the 2010 Best Experimental Film at the Golden Boli Festival in Adana.

I started this article with a quotation from a Zagreb-School manifesto. In the words of Zagreb-School authors, animation should be warm—which means creating sparks, or, simply, a bit of smoke. What these lines call for is not so much an inflammation as a subtle working with everyday social and political reality, so that the coldness of the world—our petrification in certain modes of behavior or certain structures of feeling—can be challenged anew. Does contemporary Croatian animation live up to this project or even subscribe to the same view of film art? While it would still be difficult to offer a definite answer to this question, the recent evidence of increasing experimentation with animation styles and multiple-audience messages, as well as the new inventiveness in the production-distribution strategies, confirm, convincingly, that Croatian animation is alive and ambitious. It does not purport to offer a unified worldview and it values and gradates its own artistic practices differently. In all its forms, however, it appears committed to an engagement with the external world: to be “warm”; to create, at least, a little bit of smoke. ”

Illustrations courtesy of Zagreb Film

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