

THE POLITICS AND AESTHETICS OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM IN  
YUGOSLAV MODERNITY. THE CASE OF YUGOSLAV MODERNISM  
AND ITS IMPACT: SOME EXAMPLES OF BREAKTHROUGH ART IN  
THE CONTEXT OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

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**ABSTRACT**

*One of the first Yugoslav films, which reflected the emerging urban middle class and the values of a cosmopolitan part of the younger generation in 1960s, was Boštjan Hladnik's film Peščeni grad (A Sand Castle, 1962). The film reminds one of Godard's film Pierrot le fou (1965), which was actually shot three years later than Hladnik's "Sand Castle". Hladnik's Milena vanishes on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea at the end of the film and so does Godard's Ferdinand. The film is taken as a starting point of a presentation of Yugoslav history differently than in the post-communist reductionist approaches.*

*Keywords: film, socialism, Yugoslavia, New Left, West, art*

LA POLITICA E L'ESTETICA DEL SOCIALISMO DEMOCRATICO NELLA  
MODERNITÀ JUGOSLAVA. IL CASO DEL MODERNISMO JUGOSLAVO  
E IL SUO IMPATTO: ALCUNI ESEMPI DI ARTE INNOVATIVA NEL CONTESTO  
DELL'AUTOGESTIONE

**SINTESI**

*Uno dei primi film jugoslavi a riflettere l'emergente classe media urbana e i valori della parte cosmopolita delle generazioni più giovani negli anni '60 fu il Peščeni grad (Castello di sabbia, 1962) di Boštjan Hladnik. Il film richiama una delle pellicole di Jean-Luc Godard, Pierrot le Fou (Il bandito delle 11, 1965), che in realtà fu prodotta tre anni dopo il Castello di Hladnik. Alla fine del film, la Milena di Hladnik scompare sulle coste del Mediterraneo proprio come succede con il Ferdinand di Godard. Il film funge da spunto per una presentazione della storia jugoslava in modo alternativo agli approcci post-comunisti riduzionisti.*

*Parole chiave: film, socialismo, Jugoslavia, Nuova Sinistra, Occidente, arte*

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

*The Gulag is not the only story to be told about Eastern Europe.*  
(Parvulescu, 2009, 78).

Nobody disagrees with the statement that the system of socialism<sup>2</sup> actually existed and that it made a difference, concerning the continuity of the variety of social and political organisations and orders, unfortunately prevalently in the economically and culturally “backward” countries. However, as the time distance from the socialist epoch is increasing, many research problems arise. Especially touching upon history, some related social sciences and humanities cannot be left out of the diverse equations of determining times and spaces. It is open to discussion what kind of freedom and social changes were brought to the so-called former communist societies due to the fall of the Berlin wall. However, this event immediately functioned to signify the discourses of a construction of differences between the past and the future. But then just after less than two decades following the symbolic episodes of fallen walls, cut barbed wires and the waving of flags with the cut out presumably hated emblems, and after many “liberations” subsequent to the so called end of communism, a widespread disappointment with democracy and the neoliberal destruction of welfare state on the both sides of the torn iron curtain became overwhelming. The apparition of a revolution against socialism did not produce anything, but a very weak nostalgia for the “good old times”. It should be more accurately stated that we have to deal now with social amnesia. As much as superficial journalism and an upsurge of anti-communist rhetoric obviously instigated a large scale waning of historical consciousness, the social sciences contributed their own not very big, but substantial share to this amnesia. Especially political sciences and sociology, which were eager all the time after the proclaimed end of

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1 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me about the need to mention the context of the two cases, which I interpret in some detail. I realised that without some additional explanations and the mentioning of facts and different views the whole article would not be comprehensible enough for international readership.

2 Even in the academic sphere the terminology of naming “one party systems” is not generally accepted and clear. Judging from my own experiences, especially American peer reviewers tend to advise authors to use the term “communism” instead “socialism”. In the terminology of journals such as, for instance, *Soviet Studies*, *East European Politics and Societies*, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, *Problems of Post-Communism* etc., the usage of both terms is somewhat vague, but the term “communism” is prevailing, when authors mean former “one party systems” and/or their ideology. European journals, among which *New Left Review* is the most prominent example, distinguish between both terms in various modalities. It seems that this terminological problem points to a much wider conceptual puzzle, which represent a concern in the field of history and in other social sciences. I am insisting on the appropriateness of the term of “socialism” since “former communist regimes” generally called themselves “socialist”, even though in their doctrines they envisioned “communism” as a new phase of socialism. The terminology is further knotty due to the fact that the ruling parties named themselves “communist”. Anyway, in the space of former Yugoslavia the usage of both terms in scholarly discourses is quite clearly accepted. For instance, in all my bibliographical references in this paper that originate in this space, the authors are maintaining the usage, which I adhere to as well.

communism to promote democracy and market economy, developed rather reductionist definitions of the socialist societies.

Many definitions of the epoch of socialism were, and still are, rooted in the fundamentally misunderstood Lyotard's idea of the "end of grand narratives" (Lyotard, 1979). Let me take just one example of reductionism, in which the author adhered to the seemingly generally accepted definition of socialism:

*According to ideological discourse, the socialist society was the 'one class' society – a society of ruling working class and few remainders of 'the defeated classes'. Such ideology relegated socialist society to a purely transitional state – as the working class suppressed the remaining fractions of the capitalist class it would abolish itself, introducing the communist society (Hafner-Fink, 1999, 173).*

This description of "ideology" is based on the assumption that socialist states were "one dimensional" with all such attributes as the suppression of civil and political rights, the frequent violations of human rights, etc. In this example we are not dealing with an intentionally misguided condensed description of socialism and not even with a statement without a trace of truth in it. The problem is that this description takes for granted the *retrospective construction of the state of affairs under socialism*. On the other hand, the misperceptions in this example – which happen to be quite common in many similar approaches in countless papers and books – simply overlook the evidence, which indicates that the political slogans and celebratory declamations had not been "taken seriously" and that they functioned primarily in the framework of "cynical distance", as Slavoj Žižek (2008, 225) pointed out in some of his essays already before the termination of Yugoslavia.

Of course, taken at face value, such retrospective determinations, such as the one cited above, cannot simply just be denied. In the post-communist narratives, they operate as the denotations of the past that through the power of emphasis on "dictatorial" aspects becomes reduced to primarily one dimension, which concerns the structure of power. In any case, socialist societies were – especially after a series of so-called political thaws – gradually becoming more complex than it seems when one looks upon them mainly through the optics of power and its mechanisms of domination. What should be taken into account here is the coinciding of the demise of modernity with the period of last years of socialism, which means that the socialist societies were participating in modernist transformations. Thus, they shared roughly similar problems as the Western welfare states. Even politics, labelled as dictatorial, was involved in the constant renegotiations of the terms of co-existence between various social actors within society throughout the relevant period of European modernity. This especially holds true in the case of Yugoslavia after the first troublesome decade or so after the end of the World War II.

In view of the Agnes Heller's (1990) reflections on modernity as the epoch, when the *sense of the present* ruled, it can be ascertained that the broader cultural, intellectual and social spheres under socialism were far from totally closed for artistic, scientific and, indeed, social inventions. In the 1950s, it seemed that while still lagging behind the

West economically and technologically, at least some socialist states advanced and even surpassed the West in the field of education, which became apparent and even quite exaggerated in the West after Sputnik's sensational success in 1957. All these aspects must be remembered as we are confronted with a ceaseless anti-communist rhetoric and in many cases unintended obliviousness even in the social sciences of post-modernity.

*Modernity looks at the future, hopes for it, plans for it, constructs it, and builds it. Post-modernity has lost or thrown away any sense of time direction. The past as well as the future and the present become 'virtual realities', or simultaneously combinable elements, as in post-modern architecture (Therborn, 1995, 4–5).*

Considering such distinctions, we should realise that a new de-construction or at least re-evaluation of the past becomes necessary.

*Modernity ends when words like progress, advance, development, emancipation, liberation, growth, accumulation, enlightenment, embetterment, avant-garde, lose their attraction and their function as guides to social action (Therborn, 1995, 4).*

The “post-modern post-communism” in the framework of neoliberalism and – as Alain Badiou (2009, 72) would have it – in the context of *generic fascism*, does not only impair modernist impulses, but it even immobilises the potentials for any social action. What we understand nowadays through the notion of neoliberalism is in fact not only a process of restoration of the pre-socialist order, but, above all, a subtle and indirect suppression of the multiple emancipatory initiatives, which erupted in the event of May 1968. As much as some modernist categories may appear obsolete, a re-enactment of the meaning of such notions as emancipation, enlightenment and liberation seems at least theoretically imminent. These categories lost their significance as their historical foundations were left to oblivion, denunciation, misidentification and censure. My aim with this paper is not so ambitious as to do the complex work of regaining an array of seemingly lost meanings of the notions of the past. I am only taking a few examples in order to signal that such an effort could be argued for on the bases of evident modernist heritage of socialism. Yugoslavia, as a milieu of a quite singular type of socialism, is in this respect important and interesting.

## THE COEXISTENCE OF POLITICAL POWER AND CULTURE

The impressive view from Kalemegdan, Belgrade's ancient fortress, comprises not only the confluence of two mighty rivers (Sava and Danube), but also the sight of two interesting buildings, which are situated on the peninsula between the rivers. One can admire a quite radically modernist edifice of the Museum of Contemporary Art with its triple façade, which is characterised by the geometrically meticulous triangularity of its concrete and glass elements. The building was designed by architects Ivan Antić and Ivanka Raspopović and it was finished in the year 1965. Right behind this aesthetically at-



*Fig. 1: View of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Mihailo Janković's skyscraper in Belgrade (Wikimedia Commons).*

tractive assembly is the gleaming glazed skyscraper towering over 100 meters high which was designed by Mihailo Janković, the author of a number of other prominent buildings in Belgrade at the time when the city had been the Capital of Yugoslavia. In the Belgrade daily jargon, the tower is still referred to as the “CK building” (meaning Central Committee of the League of Communists) although its function was changed to a business centre in 2009 after the completing of the reconstruction of the building, which was damaged by the NATO bombings of 1999. This unique view could be taken as an allegory of the coexistences within the Yugoslav singular type of socialism, in which political power and culture in the context of the development of the model of the self-management system cohabited in a sometimes strained, but overall tolerant relationship. The fact that both buildings were designed in the modernist manner – and not, for instance, in a “monumental” Soviet style – speaks for itself.

*“Socialist realism was definitely abandoned through Krleža’s paper presentation at the Congress of the Association of Writers in Ljubljana in 1952” (Denegri, 2016, 13). In the aftermath of the World War II, Yugoslav Communists indeed embraced the Soviet*

“model” of socialist revolution, which meant industrialisation, agrarian reform and the collectivisation of farms, nationalisation of private property and at the level of “super-structure”, among other changes, also an appropriation of the doctrine of Socialist Realism in artistic creation. However, this cultural element of the implementation of indeed huge social changes, was not a central concern of the Party compared to its focus on the big problems of social changes and international placement of the country, but multiple interactions between both spheres were noticeable. The ensuing clash with Stalin already in 1948 contributed to the demise of the doctrine of Socialist Realism. Hence, an attempt by the Yugoslav “fine artists’ association” to exhibit the products of the Yugoslav brand of Socialist Realism did not make any lasting impression:

*The 1949 show did not fully succeed in its goal of showcasing representative Socialist Realist works or teaching the masses. Many of the artworks did not conform to Socialist Realist tenets, displaying instead a broad variety of aesthetic and stylistic forms (Videkanić, 2016, 4).*

Therefore, the modernist approaches in many different manifestations in all varieties and genres of art blossomed in this period, which is also decisively marked by the introduction of workers’ self-management. “*As an adequate phenomenon in such a model of socialism in politics and in the arts, a specific Yugoslav ‘socialist modernism’ establishes itself*” (Denegri, 2016, 31). Ješa Denegri also claims that in this mutual recognition between politics and art, a majority of artists did not oppose the regime. The activity of the group EXAT-51 in early 1950s, whose members (painters and architects) Protić, Čelić, Picelj, Kristl, Rihter, Bernardi and others did not meet many obstacles in their work. They introduced the elements of styles of *Bauhaus* and *De Stijl* along with their own experiments. The same holds true for a number of different artistic groupings and movements as *Enformel*, which was a movement that introduced abstract painting. In the same category, one finds also the group *Gorgona* – actually artists in Zagreb gathered around the journal of the same name – and the *New Tendencies*, which Denegri (2016, 52) labels as the “last avant-garde”. Still, the coexistence between art and politics was not smooth throughout the period of Yugoslav socialism. Denegri makes a point that Tito’s “attack” in the official daily *Borba* in 1963 on abstract art, which in his view should not have been supported by public funds, remains inexplicable. In his view, this ideological condemnation, which did not have serious consequences, should be ascribed to “oscillations” of Yugoslav politics between East and West (Denegri, 2016, 113). Without much further ado, I can say that modernism in all its various manifestations in the Yugoslav mainly urban cultural environments developed in a very similar manner as in the West in spite of some scandals, political pressures and some cases of a bit stronger public reactions, concerning the “artistic value” of the sophisticated or provocative works of art.

While discussing all this (art) history, one should keep in mind that Yugoslavia was the federation, which was composed of different cultural entities – called “nations” in the Yugoslav system. Each Yugoslav republic to a large extent developed its own culture

and in each of them there were specific conflicts between the political establishment and different artistic and other intellectual actors. Tomaž Brejc, for example, labelled the Slovenian version of modernism “Dark Modernism”. Commenting on Marij Pregelj’s paintings, Brejc (1991, 181) pointed out that “*The ethics of [his] message is not ideological; in fact, it is determined by the existential imagination of the artist.*” Indeed, existentialism as philosophy and as the attitude in artistic creation was widely appropriated by the Slovenian artists in the most varieties of art. Writers and poets like Lojze Kovačič, Vitomil Zupan, Dominik Smole, Peter Božič, Ciril Zlobec, Kajetan Kovič, Dane Zajc and others clearly adopted existentialism.

*The term ‘critical generation’, which marks Zajc’s belonging to the circle of Perspektive, acquires a new dimension: it is about the allegorical-symbolic and allusive strategies of the critique of the political domination and the deconstruction of its ideologemes (Juvan, 2000, 238).*

Each of these artistic personalities took their specific stand and some of them came close to a type of intellectual position such as those known in the Eastern bloc countries as “dissident”. However, any detailed analysis would demonstrate that the controversies and especially a level of harshness of the governmental reactions in the Soviet bloc and in non-aligned Yugoslavia were incomparable, with the exception of the “pre-modern” political showdown with Stalinism. Many real and would-be Stalinists happened to be confined in the severe prison on the island *Goli Otok* in the Adriatic sea.

The notion of “generation” was often used in discourses on modernist art in Yugoslavia. Roughly, Yugoslav modernism consisted of at least three generations. The first was rooted in quite significant pre-war artistic phenomena. The second generation – including the “critical generation” in Slovenia – was represented by artists born not long before the war. The final manifestations of the most radical modernism were the work of artists of the baby-boom post-war generation. As it were, different controversies in many instances transcended just the relations between political authorities and artists as they were interwoven with disagreements of the conceptual nature between generations as well with some inevitable personal rivalries, which sometimes have been translated into a given ideological vernacular. Of course, educational and cultural institutions and their growth played a very noteworthy role in the process of materialisation of the conditions for artistic work. National and international festivals had a big role in the growth of, for example, modernist theatre. On the other hand, each of the artistic trends had different logic and dynamics in different fields of artistic activity. Cinema barely existed as an art prior to World War II and, consequently, the modernist film enters the central stage quite a bit later than other arts.

I chose to give a closer look at just two examples among the few that I mentioned above. These two examples amongst the multiplicity of artistic phenomena of the modernist period in the socialist Yugoslavia, happen to be somewhat a little bit more representative than others for my aim in this paper. Hladnik’s cinema, without any disso-

nance between film theoreticians, was supposed to be the inauguration of the cinematic modernism in Slovenia and at the same time in the entire Yugoslavia. The other example, the group *OHO*, represents a breakthrough within the modernist framework in view of the new generation and in view of their specific conceptualism with an ambivalent social and political message.

### THE SAND CASTLE

Pertinent comparisons between the Western and Eastern production of films, following the phenomenon of the French *Nouvelle Vague*, especially demonstrate that in the intellectual and artistic spheres division between “two worlds” did not mirror the political and so-called ideological divisions in post-war Europe. Student movements and various trends in the domain of the mass and youth culture of 1960s further invalidate the projections to the past in the form of the cliché of “free world vs. dictatorship”.

[...] *‘Eastern Europe’ triggers visions of repressive politics, fundamentally different from the ‘gentle coercion’ that is thought to characterize disciplining mechanisms in the capitalist West. Concerned with the everyday workings of power within conditions of ‘normalcy’, the films challenge these widespread Cold War assumptions, which, ironically, have also been uncritically adopted by intellectual elites of a post-1989, capitalism-bound Eastern Europe* (Parvulescu, 2009, 78).

Contemporary film studies are currently still gradually working on the un-written “programme” of an analysis and deconstruction of the aesthetic form along with social and political contexts of the film productions in the period of cold war, which happened to be at the same time the age of the so-called author’s cinema. The Eastern part of the narrative about the last film avant-garde in known history is still being added to the whole historical picture of the European cinema of 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup> To make my point about this in this paper I am only taking the example of one Slovenian film: Boštjan Hladnik’s *Sand Castle* (*Peščeni grad* – 1962). This particular film can be perceived as a part of evidence that the times of socialism – in Yugoslavia and to various degrees elsewhere in the Eastern and Central Europe – were not just a “black hole in history”. On the contrary, some periods in Yugoslavia were artistically and intellectually highly productive.

*As the period of post-war prosperity on both sides of the iron curtain opened a space for a new self-definition of younger generations, a great number of the European films*

3 More extensively about this in: Štrajn, 2008, where I pointed to many common traits in “Eastern” and “Western” cinema of the time. The same holds true also for almost all other forms of art as well as for philosophy and most of other humanities in the epoch of late modernism, but it is less true for empirically oriented social sciences.



*of the period addressed the position of individual in a society in a manner, which uncovered the illusory stability of the world* (Štrajn, 2008, 45).

Hladnik's film *Sand Castle* was one of the first Yugoslav films, which reflected the emerging urban middle class, new values and the life style of a cosmopolitan part of the post-war generation. The film was shot at the time of fully constituted self-management of the already quite visible Yugoslav "experiment" of so-called market socialism. Roughly a decade and a half after Tito's clash with Stalin, Yugoslavia made a significant difference within the whole Eastern bloc countries. It should be stressed that the multi-ethnic federal country on its way to building its own model of socialism was not formally a member of any Soviet controlled Eastern alliances.

*The 1960s paved the emancipatory opening of SFR Yugoslavia, arising from the establishment of the significant differences between the Yugoslav self-governing, non-aligned socialism and Soviet bureaucratic socialism* (Šuvaković, 2012, 288).

The part and parcel of this differentiating were such moves by the Yugoslav government in the 1960s such as the opening of the borders and enabling free travel for its citizens as well as accelerating a development of tourism; another important step away from the Soviet model was the economic reform, which introduced market mechanisms and instigated consumer spending. A little-known fact is that the reform of the compulsory education and secondary schooling took place as well. In the context of all these openings, art became a space of quite free experimenting and uninhibited creativity. Although the Yugoslav Communist Party in its "Stalinist phase" tried to follow the politics of socialist realism in all areas of art, already in the 1950s the artists were showing little enthusiasm for the "style" of praising and decorating the achievements of the socialist revolution. A rather singular Yugoslav film genre called *partisan film* did in fact follow some patterns of the Soviet cinema, but even within this genre, films increasingly tackled the existential and psychological aspects of the war theme. When the Yugoslav republics started to organise their own film productions, which were based on the logic of self-management that gained specific forms in the sectors outside of factories and retail activities, the aesthetics of the films followed suit. The "basic law on film" in 1956 enabled relatively independent film productions (Škrabalo, 1998; Stankovič, 2012). Hence, apart from partisan films, realism in Yugoslav films resembled much more the Italian neo-realism than the socialist realism. This trait evolved much further in the specific Yugoslav New Wave cinema, which developed various forms of social criticism and, ultimately in 1970s, it experienced a degree of censorship due to its supposedly "too pessimistic" visualising of social reality. The label "crni film" (black cinema) was invented in the corridors of power, but it entered the cannon of Yugoslav cinema of the time.

In spite of a relatively small production, Slovenian cinema took the lead early on in introducing the modernist current in the Yugoslav cultural and social context. Boštjan Hladnik (1929–2006), who was additionally trained for film directing in Par-

is, where he worked, among others, with a renowned *nouvelle vague* author Claude Chabrol, made his breakthrough with the film *Ples v dežju* (*Dancing in the Rain* – 1961), which was well received by the critics and sophisticated public, but it was less understood and liked by the wider public. The melancholy and existential despair from *Dancing in the Rain* were replaced then in *Sand Castle* by a frivolous focus on the present-day joy of life in the manner of the recognisable modernist attitude and in the footsteps of the New Wave movement in European cinema. Accordingly, “ideology” or any explicit topics from political reality seem to be absent from the film, except for the so much more forceful concluding scenes of the film. The narrative is very rudimentary: the main character after failing his university exam travels in his *deux cheveaux* car to the sea and picks up two hitch-hikers, a boy and a girl. The film afterwards develops into a love-triangle-road-movie in black and white technology. It was shot in very bright photography lit by summer sunshine. Contributing to the whole aesthetic impression, the movements of the camera follow the dynamism and vitality of the three youngsters. The film reminds one of Jean-Luc Godard and his film *Crazy Pete* (*Pierrot le fou* – 1965), which was actually shot three years *later* than Hladnik’s “Castle”. The political signifiers, which were always decipherable in the new wave cinema, signal an existential conflict between an individual and the social system, which is, within the narrative structure, a source of senselessness and of the particular “crazy” reactions of characters. In Hladnik’s film, Milena’s behaviour (the female character) is explained at the end of film as a consequence of her traumatic childhood experience. At the end of the film, viewers are told by a doctor from a psychiatric hospital that the traumatised girl was born in a concentration camp. Just before this, Milena vanishes on the shore of the Adriatic Sea, as also does Godard’s Ferdinand in a different manner on the shore of the French Riviera. At the time of the first screenings of the film, viewers were forced to realise that barely over a decade and a half had passed from the end of the World War II. The character of the girl, born in the troubled times of World War II and living in the times of illusionary normalcy thus stands for an identity problem of the whole generation of the modernist period. Interestingly, the film looks clearly more suggestive in the light of wars in Yugoslavia after the end of socialism, due to its contrasting of the joys and the pleasures of youth with the traumatic final signal from history.

The critical public at the time was not as enthusiastic about the film as in the case of the first Hladnik’s film, which was substantially more strongly determined by the literary cannon. Niko Grafenauer, mostly still known in Slovenia for his poetry and for his political alliances with the right-wing politics, not so long before and immediately after the end of Yugoslavia, at the time wrote:

*The film lacks almost everything in its dramatic shape: solid narrative with organically included dialogue, conceptual composition, and especially the presence of time reality. Instead of the film telling about a world like it is [...], it deceives the viewer into a fiction, into a lie that is entirely foreign to our contemporary environment and often borders on absurdity* (Grafenauer, 1963, 279).

What Grafenauer holds against the film are exactly those attributes that qualify the film as an accomplished masterpiece of the new wave cinema. His discourse, interestingly, coincided with any typical phrasing within the Communist Party rhetoric of the time, which distinguished the “quality” of works of art on the basis of their corresponding to “our reality” and circumstances.<sup>4</sup> However, the ideological agents of the Party, which had its say in everything social, did not see any problem with this film. Another critic, who saw symptoms of “escapism” in the film, had more understanding for Hladnik’s message:

*The end and beginning of the film join into a mighty chord. It’s not twenty years since the times of the concentration camps, slowly sinking into oblivion, but in the world that is still not completely healed from wounds, there is not enough humanism, warmth, air, sun and peace* (Černej, 1963, 284).

In any case, my point is, that Hladnik’s film can be taken as evidence of the existence of free space for artistic production within the system of self-management socialism. Even more, “controversial” author’s like Hladnik were financed through the institutional channels of the film production of the time.

#### FROM MODERNISM TO AVANT-GARDE

Hladnik’s work in film was not just a product of some *genius loci*. His references to the cinematic New Wave were quite direct due to his studies and practice in Paris between 1957 and 1960. Especially after the opening of Yugoslavia to the West, following the clash with Stalin’s Russia, such contacts were not so very exceptional. The well-educated representatives of the Yugoslav baby boom generation more than followed suit. Students and academics were well travelled, various grants (such as the Fulbright grant) were available and many informal contacts between intellectuals from the West and, to an extent, from the East existed. Youth organisations and various agencies offered numerous possibilities for travel, learning and training all over Europe and America. Later in the 1960s and especially the 1970s, students travelled to distant places in the Far East together with their Western counterparts, who searched for self-fulfilment in places like Afghanistan, India and Sri Lanka. At the same time, Yugoslav institutions financed visits and studies abroad and some of these grants were available also to students and young researchers in the fields of social sciences and humanities. Of course, as ever, students of more “tangible” subjects in natural sciences were allegedly preferred.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, contrary to the grim portrayals of the period of “communist

4 I cannot enter here into a debate on hegemonic discourses, but still let me just remark that what had been the hard-core dogmatic thinking of Communist Party intellectual hardliners, seamlessly transformed into the post-communist discourses of right wing politics, which still take modernist emancipation as a threat to “our values”.

5 I am not sure about the availability of any statistics concerning this aspect. It would take a special effort to search for them in the archives. It is also questionable whether documentations of some agencies such as the Agency for International Scientific and Technological Exchange of Slovenia (ZAMTES) still exist or not. Therefore, my assertion is mainly hypothetical, and it is based on my own perception from the time.

dictatorship” in today’s chronicles of anti-communism, Yugoslavia was culturally open to the world, which includes all forms of popular culture as well. Still, one should not idealise these times since a not very high degree of censorship, and especially the restrictions of political freedoms, were in place. Yugoslav intelligence services also paid some attention and kept their records about many of these travels and contacts.<sup>6</sup> However, the authorities did not prevent artistic inventions and intellectual activities, which transcended local spaces. The artistic productions and ideas were inscribed into the modernist nomadic movements of ideas. Still, some of these inventions, actions, attitudes and statements provoked critical reactions from the side of the “cultural elite”, which was close to the Party leadership.

In the history of modern art in Slovenia an artistic group, the self-named *OHO*, was the best example of eruptive artistic invention, based also on the breakthrough aesthetics of the time. Saying that *OHO* was the “best example” implies that this example was well embedded in a wider framework of modernism in the Republic of Slovenia. The movements corresponding to the ones in the rest of Yugoslavia – mentioned in the second section of this paper – and some quite specific Slovenian ones sprung up in 1950s and 1960s. So, I am mentioning just briefly some examples in performing arts like *Oder 57* (*Stage 57*) and closer to the time of the appearance of *OHO*, the Experimental Theatre *Glej* (*Watch*) in 1960s. Somewhat corresponding to the breakthrough of *OHO* were the especially interesting performance group the *Theatre of Pupilija Ferkeverk* and the alternative theatre *Pekarna* (*Bakery*) which appeared soon after the *OHO*’s interventions. The context of modernist culture was further supported also in music by, for instance, *Pro Musica Viva*. Virtually all of the most important Slovenian modern composers like Petrič, Srebotnjak, Stibilj, (Darjan) Božič and others have been members of this group, which broke the traditional cannons in music. Almost needless to say, the field of literature – especially prominent for the Slovenian culture – made part of the whole context. Besides the already fairly well-established writers like Kovachič, Zupan or Božič, at the time younger writers and poets like Švabič, Kovač “Chubby” and, of course, the highest ranked modernist poet Tomaž Šalamun, contributed to the widening of free cultural space. Šalamun was himself a most outspoken member of *OHO*. All this could be further contextualised in more cosmopolitan terms:

*The OHO group was created in the atmosphere of new international and local artistic, aesthetic, philosophical, cultural and social movements such as Slovenian reism, French structuralism, Tel Quel and international post-structuralism, New Left, hippie culture, and then poor art (arte povera), antiform art, body art, experimental film, conceptual art, post-project artistic practices and ludism* (Šuvaković, 2012, 289).

6 I had my own experience of this surveillance. When I came back from a student summer exchange programme in the USA in 1971, I was invited to the headquarters of the Slovenian branch of UJV (Administration of Public Safety) for what, indeed, was really just a polite inquiry into my impressions about the States. The officer was, of course, especially interested in my eventual encounters with Yugoslav political emigrants, whom I had not met anyway.

A breakthrough manifestation was the 1968 exhibition of the group's work at the Modern Gallery in Ljubljana, which was accompanied by a special edition of the journal *Problemi* that for this occasion transgressed a framework of publishing mainly literature and literary theory. A special edition under the title *Katalog* featured some highly sophisticated structuralist texts (some original and some translations) and some characteristic “visual poetry”, a mind-boggling comic strip, etc. *Problemi* in this case

[...] *connected with the new developments within the art scene, the first example of which was the cooperation with the OHO group in the 1960s. In very broad terms, the OHO group, in the history of Slovenian art, marks 'the shift from modernism to avant-garde'* (Irwin & Motoh, 2014, 29).

Contrary to the not so much interested or in any sense easily shocked audiences of today, the phenomenon of *OHO* prompted a lively debate amongst general public. A difficulty in understanding how such a wide public could have been provoked by conceptual art displays a change in the position of art considering the trajectory of its showing from the 1960s onwards.

*In the first phase, the conceptual basis for the movement was reism (lat. res = the thing). In art, OHO rejected the self-evidence of an established anthropocentric view of the world, in which man is superior to objects and classifies them only through his hierarchical system of usability and purpose. OHO wanted to establish a new, more democratic attitude towards the world* (Nečimer, 2018).

A larger group, which consisted of a number of more or less younger philosophers, art historians and sociologists, mingling with artists and poets, later on narrowed to a group of artists, of whom some – like Pogačnik and Matanović – happen to be still quite active. Anyhow, their early actions and performances have been considered to be scandalous, which triggered a public reaction by a group of “traditional” critics and artists, who voiced their disagreements in strangely political terms after the manifestation of *OHO* group's work in the Modern Gallery and after the publication of *Problemi – Katalog*. The title of their protest, which was published in the main daily *Delo* in the autumn 1968, was *Democracy Yes, Destruction No!* Although the first undersigned Matej Bor, the lyrical poet and playwright and Josip Vidmar, a literary critic and highly esteemed personality of the Slovenian pre-war and post-war culture, have been well connected to the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia, one cannot ascertain that the action of the “fundamentalists”, who defended the “true art”, was commanded by the authorities. Still, the whole scandal coincided with the political process of the time. An unusually publicly open quarrel between the Slovenian government of Stane Kavčič and the federal authorities broke out over the distribution of foreign loans for infrastructural projects. Slovenia was longing for a highway from the Capital Ljubljana to the Adriatic Sea and it was unable to secure a loan for the desired amount. The whole event is firmly placed in history as the “road

affair” at the same time as the beginning of the end of the period of Yugoslav “liberalism”. Of course, the group *OHO* had not much to do with this affair, but it contributed to the whole atmosphere of suspense.

Actually, *OHO* continued its work and won, at first, Yugoslav and later on international acclaim. It could be a matter of guessing as to what extent the group was left to exhibit its work without any problems worth mentioning, due to the fact that subsequent and politically much more outspoken activities took place. The activities I have in mind here transcended the field of aesthetics and the provocations of modernist abstract gestures. Since, in some cases, not only just metaphoric “too outspoken” artistic products and the unexpected students’ movements, along with the public criticism by some social scientists were objects of censorship and even repression, a hypothesis that the freedom of modernist art represented just a “safety valve”, gradually gained some support already in its time. Nevertheless, even so, different artefacts bear witness to the fact that the society under the rule of socialism, especially in the period of, by this time, well developed self-management, was not so “closed” to different ideas as many superficial journalists and anti-communist speakers would have it.

#### CONCLUSION: THE IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

The two cases and their contexts, briefly presented above, can serve as the two among many possible examples of lively cosmopolitan, aesthetically accomplished and to various degrees controversial activities in the period at the end of the age of European modernism. Not only in Yugoslavia, but also in the relatively tighter controlled countries (i.e. Poland and Czechoslovakia) such phenomena were visible. However, a quite high degree of tolerance by the authorities and the ideological controllers for the artistic work had its limits, which were not always clearly defined, and which varied in different periods. Prevalently the Serb “black wave” (*črni val*) in the cinema of the 1960s and the early 1970s even got high praises for its international success, but it became “problematic” in the context of a new ideological “frost” in mid 1970s. In spite of some pressures and the prevention of some films from public showing, a new generation of film makers – actually educated by “black wave” film authors – continued to shoot similar films with a slightly visible higher degree of prudency. On the other hand, at the time also the very style of new wave underwent great transformations all over Europe anyway.

The topic of freedom of expression in art and in the humanities in public life was followed by stronger controversies in politics. Numerous international communications between the then younger generations brought about a “Western type” left wing student movements mainly in three Yugoslav republics: Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. These movements were interwoven with some currents among intellectuals, who openly cooperated with Western counterparts in the fields of the so-called Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and New Left politics. The movements, which could be labelled as the movements for a *democratic socialism*, were most loudly expressed in student demonstrations in 1968 and at the Ljubljana occupation of Faculty of Arts in 1971.

*The student movements and their simultaneously New Leftist, spiritual exoticist and liberal emancipatory political platform were directed against the bureaucracy and technocracy of the capitalist Cold War society in France, Germany and the USA, and, on the other side, against post-revolutionary bureaucracy and etatisation, i.e. deviations from revolutionary utopias in real-communist cold-war societies, for example, in Yugoslavia or Poland (Šuvaković, 2012, 149).*

The artistic events, products, performances, etc. functioned in a sense as the signifiers of the dilemmas, with which the Yugoslav Party leadership and its rank and file had to deal with. And maybe they all together were not even aware that these dilemmas were the consequences of the emancipatory potential generated by the introduction of the self-management model of “people’s participation” in the affairs of economy and social life. However, they realised on their own terms that an undefined inevitable social change was looming, which led to the “purification” of the ranks in the League of Communists and within the whole structure of power in all federal units. New political forces within the Party in Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia – personalised by Stane Kavčič in Slovenia, Savka Dabčević-Kučar in Croatia and Latinka Perović and Marko Nikezić in Serbia – were targeted as “deviations” from the “right direction” although these movements had not so much in common.

Yugoslav communists were stunned and confused when they had to come to terms with the New Leftist critical discourse. Unfortunately, the ideological bodies within the Party could not recognise the potential for a decisive up-grade of the unique Yugoslav socialist model and so they have chosen to perceive the leftist movements as the enemies of the regime. The fact that within ideological and political ranks of the Party, the “old guard” had a significant say in the whole decision making, it should be recognised as one of the reasons for the inadequate communication. Not only the role of the charismatic personality of Tito, but also the position of the “partisan generation” were quite firmly hindering the changing of the course, although at the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1964 it almost seemed that an ideological opening was conceivable. I am not saying anything definitive about this, but I think that a detailed discursive analysis of the Party’s rhetoric of the time would uncover a combination of reasons for a grand misunderstanding with the rebellious youth and the intellectual opposition. These reasons in my view touch upon the structure of power and the positions of different institutional and social agencies within it, like the army, “technocratic” management and local political elites. Some intellectual voices within the Party apparatus were regrettably too feeble to change the course, but they did influence a degree of softness in the acts of repression against the political opponents.

Anyhow, within these coordinates, a somewhat harder repressive politics became apparent in mid 1970s. The secret police contributed its share by producing surreptitious information sheets concerning a “special warfare”, in which in its view the New Left played a role. Scientific seminars, summer schools, symposiums, scholarships and student strikes were followed and analyzed on the basis of such paranoid pat-

terns of the perception of political reality. In view of such reading of the activities of student movements, groups of philosophers, social scientists and other intellectuals appeared as that they

*[...] were led by the 'ideas of 68', where 'anarcho-liberals' experienced their own historical promotion openly appearing as opponents of the official SKJ (League of Communists) line, criticizing the economic reforms, the 'frustrated ideology' of the SKJ, the mediocrities on the leadership positions, who were unable to solve basic social problems and social inequality (the 'red bourgeoisie' slogan!). In addition to Belgrade, the second center was in Zagreb (journal Praxis and Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb), then there was a group of professors and students at the University of Ljubljana, less in other universities centers (Sarajevo, Skopje) (Cvetković, 2011, 40).*

In spite of some more open-minded gestures by some “enlightened” Party leaders, including the main Tito’s “ideologue” Edvard Kardelj, who tried one last “reform” in the later 1970s to empower social actors within the plurality of self-managed institutions, it can be concluded that the Party missed the opportunity to make the modernising alliances with the New Left. Still, the end of the 1970s brought about a new political thaw in a strange concomitance with initiatives, tendencies and impulses in the direction of the dissolution of the country. But, a necessary social invention, which would maybe make a substantial difference in the mode of exiting the socialist model of self-management did not happen.



POLITIKA IN ESTETIKA DEMOKRATIČNEGA SOCIALIZMA V  
JUGOSLOVANSKI MODERNI. PRIMER JUGOSLOVANSKEGA  
MODERNIZMA IN NJEGOVEGA VPLIVA: NEKAJ ZGLEDov PREBOJNE  
UMETNOSTI V KONTEKSTU SAMOUPRAVLJANJA

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POVZETEK

*Značaj mladenke v filmu Peščeni grad (1962), rojene v težavnih časih druge svetovne vojne in živeče v obdobju iluzorne normalnosti, predstavlja identitetni problem celotne generacije modernističnega obdobja. Film, ki ga je režiral Boštjan Hladnik, lahko dojemamo kot dokaz, da obdobje socializma v Jugoslaviji ni bilo samo "črna luknja zgodovine". Nasprotno! Nekatera obdobja v Jugoslaviji so bila umetniško in intelektualno zelo produktivna. Še posebej po spopadu s Stalino Sovjetsko zvezo so številne mednarodne zveze med tedanjimi mlajšimi generacijami postopoma prinesle "zahodni tip" levičarskih študentskih gibanj. Ta gibanja so bila prepletena z nekaterimi intelektualnimi tokovi, ki so odkrito sodelovali z zahodnimi kolegi na področjih kritične teorije in politik nove levice. Gibanja, ki bi jih lahko označili kot gibanja za demokratični socializem, so se najbolj glasno izrazila na študentskih demonstracijah leta 1968 in v ljubljanski zasedbi Filozofske fakultete leta 1971. Članek temelji na kritičnem dekonstruktivnem branju dela obdobja modernizma v Jugoslaviji in se opira na pristop kulturnih študij za osvetlitev zgodovine.*

*Ključne besede: film, socializem, Jugoslavija, nova levica, Zahod, umetnost*

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