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Research Article

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Laughter and Tragedy of the Absurd: Identifying Common Characteristics of Balkan Comedies Under State Socialism

Ana Grgić*

Comedy and comic conventions offer the possibility for laughter as a therapeutic and liberating force, as well as provide reflections on the absurdity of the everyday through the use of humour and chaos. This paper examines how Balkan comedies during the state socialist period used traditional comic conventions to offer critiques of the political and social systems, through analysis of three films: *Ciguli Miguli* (Branko Marjanović, Yugoslavia, 1952, released in 1977), *Koncert në vitin 1936* (*Concert in 1936*, Saimir Kumbaro, Albania, 1978), and *Господин за еден ден* (*King for a Day*, Nikolay Volev, Bulgaria, 1983). Drawing on the stylistic and visual conventions of silent comedies, these films create a range of comic characters and situations: the misadventures of peasant Purko in *King for a Day*, the water fight between musicians in *Ciguli Miguli*, and the policeman's mannerisms in *Concert in 1936*. Furthermore, some common characteristics inherent to the cinema of Balkan countries in this period will be identified, such as the struggle between the value system of tradition vs. modernity, civilisation vs. primitiveness, European-ness vs. Balkan-ness, suggesting that such Balkanist constructs which continue to feature in popular cinema in the recent period, did not disappear but were internalised by the communist ideologies.

Keywords: Balkan cinema, state socialism, comedy, satire, tragedy

Introduction

*“Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically [...]”*¹

The complicity between the comic and the tragic has very old “Balkan” roots, deriving from Ancient Greek literature. At the end of Plato’s *Symposium*, the author recounts how Aristophanes, Agathon and Socrates remained awake discussing how comedy and tragedy probably had similar origins. Socrates was compelling them to agree that “he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet.”² According to Andrew Horton, comedy in cinema, unlike the epic, has often escaped close scrutiny for several reasons, such as historical bias,

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¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 23.

² Plato. 1986. *The Symposium*. Trans. Seth Bernardete. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 286.

however its cultural and historical significance should not be undermined.³ Indeed, comedy cannot be systematically categorised under one totalising theory, nor is a plot necessarily funny in itself. Rather, the comic aspect can be found in individual jokes or gags. The affirmation that “no film plot is inherently funny” allows a film to always be potentially comic, melodramatic and/or tragic. This analysis of three Balkan films made during the socialist period, each of which can be labelled as a “comedy” stems from this premise, but as we will see, each film contains comic and tragic elements, often interchangeable, of the absurdities of everyday life in a communist society. Satire, parody, and comedy - the *carnivalesque* - derive from popular culture and subvert the dominant discourse through humour, offering a form of liberation and psychic release.

This paper explores how Balkan comedies during the state socialist period used traditional comic conventions inherited from silent cinema, literature and art forms to offer critiques of the political and social systems through the analysis of three films: *Ciguli Miguli* (Branko Marjanović, Yugoslavia, 1952, released in 1977), *Koncert në vitin 1936* (*Concert in 1936*, Saimir Kumbaro, Albania, 1978), and *Господин за еден ден* (*King for a Day*, Nikolay Volev, Bulgaria, 1983). Travestied as comedies, these films provide parodical portraits of authorities and governing figures, as well as critical views of social and political situations, by gazing back at the past: *Concert in 1936* and *King for a Day* are both set in the mid-1930s in rural areas of each country, in monarchical Albania and in royalist authoritarian Bulgaria respectively, whilst, *Ciguli Miguli* is supposedly set in an undefined time as indicated by the inter-title at the start of the film informing the viewers (“So it was once upon a time”), but it clearly takes place in post-World War II Yugoslavia. *Ciguli Miguli* was the first “banned” Croatian feature film made during socialist Yugoslavia, considered an anti-socialist and anti-bureaucratic satire by the ruling communist party at the time, and only released 25 years later in 1977. Alongside other Soviet and Eastern European “comedies,” these films employ varying degrees of critique of the political and social system through the use of satire, parody and visual jokes.

Furthermore, all three films seem to draw on the stylistic and visual conventions of silent comedies (especially those of Chaplin, Keaton and Harold Lloyd, but also those of European cinema) and engage these elements to create a range of comic characters and situations. These are visible in the misadventures of the poor peasant Purko in *King for a Day*, the water fight between musicians in the town’s square in *Ciguli Miguli*, and the policeman’s mannerisms in the rural community Lushnje in *Concert in 1936*.

Furthermore, in each of the films, comic tension is provoked by the arrival of one or more foreign characters to the village or town. In *Ciguli Miguli*, the communist party functionary Ivan Ivanović tries to reorganise the cultural and artistic life of a small provincial town according to socialist and party values, thus causing chaos and unrest. In *Concert in 1936*, two well-educated female musicians want to give a concert in the traditional and patriarchal village of

³ Horton, Andrew. (ed.). 1991. *Comedy/cinema/theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lushnje, consequently provoking tension within the royalist authorities and villagers. In *King for a Day*, after the elegant couple's visit from the city, the peasant Purko's life is changed irremediably. As a result, tension is created by two oppositional elements which seem to be recurrent in Balkan comedy, using similar tropes to the films mentioned above: modernity versus tradition, city versus rurality, progress versus backwardness, European cultured-ness versus Balkan primitiveness etc. As the analysis will show, these characteristics did not disappear during the socialist period, but mutated and were employed to critique or reinforce the communist ideology. The same elements are present in several recent films from the region which use comic and parodical characteristics of the Balkan(ist) stereotype(s), such as Edmond Budina's *Balkan Pazar* (Albania, 2011), Corneliu Porumboiu's short film *Calatorie La Oras* (*A Trip to the City*, Romania, 2003) or films by Emir Kusturica, to mention only a few.

By analysing these films, this essay aims to show how critique offered through laughter often escaped state censorship, and how, under guise, the films' authors could be critical of social and political systems and provide reflections on the absurdity of the everyday. These authors, directors and scriptwriters worked within the communist state system, and consequently do not enter the recognised realm of "Eastern European auteur/dissident" classification. This analysis should not simply be seen as part of post-socialist revisionism, but rather as an attempt to look beyond the obvious and apparent and to highlight the common characteristics inherent to the cinema of Balkan countries, by focusing on popular and mainstream cinema produced and enjoyed during the communist period. Furthermore, it suggests a historical continuity of the concern common to the national cinemas of Balkan countries, that of the struggle between the value system of tradition vs. modernity, civilisation vs. primitiveness, European-ness vs. Balkan-ness.

In an article on the Sarajevo Documentary School, Benjamin Halligan is critical of the current post-socialist revisionism of Eastern European cinema, in which there is a danger of reducing or misreading the ambiguities of a dissident text.⁴ On the other hand, the dominant paradigm of assessing Eastern European cinemas is still interpreted through a set of dichotomies (good vs. bad, liberation vs. oppression) which are "determined by the epistemological parameters of the Cold War order [...], privileging film and directors who took an oppositional stand in relation to communist totalitarianism."⁵ What is more, "The (West) European cinema has, since the end of World War II, had its identity firmly stamped by three features: its leading directors were recognized as auteurs, its styles and themes shaped a nation's self-image, and its new waves signified political as well as aesthetic renewal."⁶ These features were also identity constructors in which European cinema would differentiate itself, in regards to a "half-acknowledged presence"

⁴ Halligan, Benjamin. 2010. Idylls of Socialism: The Sarajevo Documentary School and the Problem of the Bosnian Sub-Proletariat. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 1(2), 197-216.

⁵ Imre, Aniko. 2005. *Introduction: East European Cinemas in New Perspectives*, in *East European Cinemas*, edited by Aniko, Imre. New York and London: Routledge, xi-xxvi, xii.

⁶ Elsaesser, Thomas. 2005. *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 9.

of Hollywood cinema and the “unacknowledged absence” of cinema in Socialist Europe.⁷

Film history has been viewed through such lenses for most of the last decade, while the more recent period strives to erase such clear-cut distinctions, requiring a re-mapping of films and cinema histories which can re-enter the realm of “European cinema.” Nebojša Jovanović warns of interpreting films (made under socialist regimes) under such binary dichotomies, and criticises the stance in which “the gates of the pantheon of Eastern European auteurs now should be closed.”⁸ This paper aims to go beyond such binary dichotomies and the auteur-director/dissident artist figure, in order to discover how the films made under state socialism can reveal different shades of grey interpretations, and offer an alternative reading of genre cinema in three Balkan countries (Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania).

Balkanism, self-exoticism, ambiguity

Drawing from Dina Iordanova’s work,⁹ this essay considers the Balkans as a cultural entity rather than a geographical concept; an entity widely defined as shared by ancient Greek and Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian legacies, and by specific marginal and crossroads positioning. “Balkan” therefore would refer to these countries as sharing a number of elements of their history, heritage and self-conceptualisation.

Words such as “Balkanization,” often used by journalists and politicians to describe the political fragmentations in the Balkan Peninsula, and “Balkan,” have acquired pejorative meanings in everyday language and media discourse throughout the twentieth century. The construction of such hegemonic discourses was analysed in Maria Todorova’s seminal work *Imagining the Balkans*, in which the author accounts for “the persistence of such a frozen image” throughout history.¹⁰ Geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as “the other,” the Balkans became, in time, the object of a number of externalized political, ideological and cultural frustrations and have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the “European” and “the west” has been constructed.¹¹

Balkan intellectuals and writers have also contributed to the formation of Balkanist discourse through self-designation, and negative self-perception was not simply formed by an outside view.¹² In nineteenth century literature, the transformation of an agricultural society into a bureaucratic society of the Western type, and that of a primitive peasant into a corrupted politician who

⁷ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 9.

⁸ Jovanović, Nebojša. 2012. *Bosnian Cinema in the Socialist Yugoslavia and the Anti-Yugoslav Backlash*. *KinoKultura* Special Issue 14 Bosnia (accessed: 06. February 2018).

⁹ Iordanova, Dina. 2001. *Cinema of Flames. Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*. London: BFI Publishing.

¹⁰ Todorova, Maria. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans (Updated Edition)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 7.

¹¹ Todorova, Maria. 1994. The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention. *Slavic Review* 53(2), 453-82, 455.

¹² Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 39.

mimics Western civilised values without embracing them, is a typical admission of non-Europeanness among the Balkan educated elites, which are characteristics reflected in the three films here under analysis.

Drawing from Edward Said, Robert Hayden and Milica Bakić-Hayden introduce the concept of “nesting orientalisms” to elucidate the dichotomy of east/west and the projection of both internal and external discourses in “the Balkan lands of Ottoman-ruled Europe.”¹³ The tendency to essentialise and isolate features of a group rendered these features unchanging, and at the same time these were used to differentiate groups; in the Balkans, these “primordial qualities” (ancient hatred, violent, primitive) were used to rationalize the “fate of nations” and appropriated by nationalist ideologies.¹⁴ The representation of the Balkans is historically constructed in travelogues and accounts through the lenses of the European Enlightenment, which use similar imagery to describe both Eastern Europe and the Asian lands; the “Balkan images of the oriental ‘other’ and the Ottoman Turk” are a result of the “imposed presence” of colonial and imperialist administrators and travellers.¹⁵

Dina Iordanova argues that “‘orientalisation’ of the Balkans cannot be declared a purely Western project,” as Balkan intellectuals, writers and film-makers contribute towards the construction of “the Balkans as compliant to Western stereotypes” by a way of a preferred mode of self-representation: “self-exoticism.”¹⁶ Similarly, Tomas Longinović theorises “self-balkanisation” - an internalisation and performance of the external look of foreigners.¹⁷ Through an analysis of several works of literature and film by Balkan authors, Iordanova qualifies this self-exoticism due to adoption of the distinctive travelogue-type narrative structure, in which the Balkans are the object of the Western traveller’s gaze merely accepting and not critically challenging it, therefore failing to acknowledge “the controversial effects of Eurocentric construct.”¹⁸ These films emphasise “difference” establishing “otherness,” and the Balkans continue to be conceptually excluded from the European cultural sphere.¹⁹

An analysis of Balkan humour, visual jokes and narrative conventions in the three films, *Ciguli Miguli*, *King for a Day* and *Concert in 1936*, reveal the connections and relationships present in the Balkans in the way everyday life is conceived under communist rule, and shows affinities in the taste for humour. Even though made during the socialist period, all three comedies play with the image of the rural, peasant and backward communities of the Balkans, contrasted to the modern, progressive citizens who love Western

¹³ Bakić-Hayden, Milica and Robert M. Hayden. 1992. Orientalist Variations on the Theme Balkans: Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics. *Slavic Review* 51(1), 1-15; Bakić-Hayden, Milica. 1995. Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54(4), 917-31.

¹⁴ Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalisms*, 918-19.

¹⁵ Bakić-Hayden, *Nesting Orientalisms*, 921-22.

¹⁶ Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames*, 56.

¹⁷ Longinović, Tomislav. 2005. *Playing the Western Eye: Balkan Masculinity and Post-Yugoslav War Cinema*, in *Eastern European Cinema*, edited by Imre, Anikó. Routledge: New York, 35-47.

¹⁸ Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames*, 56.

¹⁹ Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames*, 68.

European values, revealing the internal struggle of these elements. This emerges as the main catalyst behind the plot progression and comic effect, which did not disappear under communism, but continued to be exploited as an underlying idea through these representations. The nineteenth century image from literature and the political ideas of the European educated elites persisted in the new post-war system, and was carried over to recent cinema, for instance in certain films of Emir Kusturica, whose films can be described as self-exoticising.

Cinema and state censorship

“Filmmaking in state-socialist Eastern Europe (1948-89) represented probably the best case of a tightly vertically integrated film industry. Film production and distribution here worked within a specific framework of cultural administration.”²⁰ Film financing was centralised and generous; funding came exclusively from the state, while state-owned studio and other production facilities employed permanent teams of salaried workers. Cinema was seen as a major vehicle for ideology: as a popular medium it easily reached mass audiences. Locally produced films were distributed nationwide, shown within state-owned theatres and then eventually screened on national television. During state socialism, “it was enough for the film to return investment,”²¹ which was ensured as the films were seen by large audiences domestically. As Iordanova suggests, this was a streamlined production-distribution-exhibition process. Yugoslavia (in Pula), Albania (in Tirana) and Bulgaria (in Varna) had an annual national film festival where the yearly film output could be seen and awards were distributed. Obviously, this meant state control and censorship, which influenced artistic freedom, but on the other hand, the cinema and its authors were not exposed to free market liberal capitalist competition and commercialism.

The case of *Ciguli Miguli* shows how political and economic changes can affect cultural and artistic freedoms through censorship, but is also revealing of the atmosphere at the time. The film’s plot is as follows: a party functionary Ivan Ivanović comes to a small provincial Croatian town to replace the absent cultural attaché, and decides to reform the cultural life of its citizens according to socialist prerogatives. In addition, Ivanović closes down the town’s musical associations and gives an order to remove the monument dedicated to the late local musician *Ciguli Miguli*. This leads to local unrest, and a skirmish in the city centre resembling a slapstick comedy of the silent period. The film was produced in the context of post-war Yugoslavia in the 1950s: when a satire such as *Ciguli Miguli* did not conform to the ideals of “party discipline,” it was deemed unacceptable and so ended up in the “bunker” along with some other uncomfortable films.²²

²⁰ Iordanova, Dina. 2007. *Bulgaria*, in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, edited by Hjort, Mette and Duncan Petrie. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 93-110, 94.

²¹ Iordanova, *Bulgaria*, 94.

²² For further reading on censorship in FYR Yugoslavia and the case of film *Ciguli Miguli*, see article in *Slobodna Dalmacija*. 2009. [Bitka za ekran: i partizanski filmovi su završavali u bunkeru](#). *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 14. November 2009 (accessed: 14. February 2018); and an interview with film historian Ivo Škrabalo, in Pavičić, Jurica. 2007. [Filmovi u bunkeru: Što su nam drugovi branili da](#)

Produced by Jadran Film, this was the second collaboration of director Branko Marjanović, scriptwriter Jože Horvat and cinematographer Nikola Tanhofer. The first was *The Flag* (*Zastava*, Yugoslavia, 1949), which dealt with Partisan battles against the Ustasha and was honoured with an award by the government.²³ *Ciguli Miguli* was intended as a satire, which was reinforced by the motto at the beginning: “Any resemblance with the dead – excluded,” and which the film’s critics interpreted as an attack of the current system. The authors’ irony of the current bureaucratic system was not seen as a satire, but rather as an anti-socialist pamphlet by the critics and authorities of the time.²⁴ The chief editor of the journal *Vjesnik* (6. June 1952), Frane Barbieri, considered it “a pamphlet against the national state and socialism,” and the film served as an ode “to the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie.”²⁵ For instance, the confiscation of Ciguli Miguli’s statue in the film was interpreted as an allusion to the removal of the Ban Jelačić monument from the Republic Square in Zagreb (film review by Milutin Baltić, *Vjesnik*, 22 June 1952). The very name of the party functionary, Ivan Ivanović, sounds deliberately Russian, and through his character it seems the author offered a critique of a typical uneducated and opportunistic party apparatchik of the time.

The 1950s saw the implementation of a self-managed economy, and the renaming of the communist party as the “League of Communists of Yugoslavia” at its Sixth Congress in November 1952, which signalled a clear break with its Stalinist past. The break was signalled by the Yugoslav-Soviet split which had occurred four years earlier, in 1948, when Yugoslavia was expelled from the Communist Information Bureau (Cominform). In turn, this move reinforced the Communist Party’s new political role in the country’s future, now only in theory divorced from the state. Furthermore, “The Sixth Party Congress of Yugoslavia officially rejected Socialist realism as a standard of representation as a result of Tito’s break with Stalin.”²⁶ It is important to keep in mind that all films in Yugoslavia were made with the financial support of the state at this time, while the “Uredba o cenzuri kinematografskih filmova” (Office for the Censorship of Cinematographic Films), established in 1945, would give permissions for screenings. It was later known as “Savezna komisija za pregled filmova” (Federal Commission for Film Inspection, 1962) and consequently “Republička komisija za pregled filmova” (Republic Commission for Film Inspection, 1976).

In reality, no film was formally banned, but rather “put into the bunker,” according to the film historian Ivo Škrabalo. The scriptwriter Jože Horvat, of the film *Ciguli Miguli*, was actually very active within the communist party (and a prominent member of Agitprop - the Central Committee of the Croatian

[gledamo](#). *Jutarnji list*, 24. March 2007 (accessed: 14. February 2018); see also Polimac, Nenad. 2005. *Iskoraci iz uobičajenog*. *Matica*, 17. March 2005 (accessed: 14. February 2018).

²³ Škrabalo, Ivo. 2012. *Croatian Film in the Yugoslav Context in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, in *In Contrast: Croatian Film Today*, edited by Vidan, Aida and Gordana P. Crnković. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books and Zagreb: Croatian Film Association, 21-41, 26.

²⁴ Škrabalo, Ivo. 1984. *Između publike i države: Povijest hrvatske kinematografije 1896-1980*. Zagreb: Znanje, 156.

²⁵ Škrabalo, *Između publike i države*, 157.

²⁶ Imre, Aniko. 2012. *Introduction*, in *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (First Edition), edited by Imre, Aniko. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1-22, 9.

Communist Party) and so doubly criticised for the film's content. In an interview, Ivo Škrabalo affirms that "the party bigwig, Jože Horvat, probably suffered because the film *Ciguli Miguli* had left a negative impression on Tito personally, and nobody could do anything to change his opinion."²⁷ Mila Turajlić's documentary *Cinema Komunisto* (Serbia, 2010) dwells on the relationship between Marshal Tito and cinematographic activities in the former Yugoslavia, showing through several archival documents how Tito had read and participated in the editing of several film scripts.²⁸ Decades later, the scriptwriter Jože Horvat confirmed in an interview that he had requested from the Central Committee to go overseas until the polemics surrounding the film had calmed down, and so left for Paris (*Oko*, Nr 198, 1 November, 1979).

Even though apparently never banned, *Ciguli Miguli* finally received censorship approval for public screening in February 1977, by the "Komisija za pregled filmova SR Hrvatske." According to Škrabalo the film was consequently released in cinema theatres on "the eve of the fall of socialism"²⁹ in 1989, and met with little success.³⁰ Through the 1960s and early 1970s, the communist party loosened its iron grip and Yugoslavia improved its relations with both communist and Western nations, including the USSR, China, the USA, and the European Common Market nations. The state incurred a large foreign debt during this period, and in 1974 the Yugoslav Constitution gave more rights to the individual republics. Furthermore, Yugoslavia underwent several instances of economic turmoil during the 1960s, followed by a series of national protests in the 1970s. Therefore, the cultural and social climate of 1960s and 1970s Yugoslavia advocated criticism of the current situation, which resounded in the thematic and formal concerns of the Yugoslav Novi Film and the Black Wave. The film scholar Greg De Cuir explains how the Yugoslav Black Wave existed in opposition to the optimism of Yugoslav Socialist Realism: "There was not a lot of "romanticism" in everyday life; people were often locked in a daily struggle for survival."³¹ Novi Film and the Black Wave critiqued the regime and their filmmakers were often persecuted, some continuing to make films in exile (Makavejev, Žilnik and others). This, however, does not mean that the directors and writers who continued to work under the communist system did not offer critical insights into everyday life and politics.

As Eidsvik notes, Eastern European comedies are made and shown through state-run studios and distribution networks, so they need to mask their comic malice.³² This is indeed true of the Albanian cinema production during the

²⁷ Pavičić, *Filmovi u bunkeru*.

²⁸ It would seem that Tito was quite a cinéphile: as his personal projectionist Leka Konstantinović attests, he watched a film every night, and he particularly admired American westerns.

²⁹ Škrabalo, *Croatian Film*, 26.

³⁰ *Ciguli Miguli* was on the program in April 2004, alongside Branko Marjanović's *The Flag* (1949), at the renowned cinema Tuškanac in the centre of Zagreb. In 2013, it was included in the program "Forbidden films" in Zagreb and consequently screened as part of the "Zabranjeni i zaboravljeni filmovi u Art-kinu Croatia" in Rijeka (Croatia). That same year it was shown at the 2013 Edition of the Festival of Nitrate Film in Belgrade (Serbia).

³¹ De Cuir Jr., Greg. 2012. *The Yugoslav Black Wave: The History and Poetics of Polemical Cinema in the 1960s and the 1970s in Yugoslavia*, in *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*, edited by Imre, Aniko. Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 403-24, 416-17.

³² Eidsvik, Charles. 1991. *Mock Realism: The Comedy of Futility in Eastern Europe*, in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, edited by Horton, Andrew. Berkeley: University of California Press, 91-105, 92.

Enver Hoxha regime, when the national movie studio Kinostudio “Shqipëria e Re” (New Albania) financed all fiction and non-fiction films made in Albania since its foundation in 1952 until its dissolution in 1990. Enver Hoxha was at the head of the Stalinist style of state administration from 1945 until his death in 1985, and the country championed self-reliance and grew increasingly isolationist during the Cold War years. Discussing the regime’s insecurity, Elidor Mëhilli argues that “The irony is that tiny, isolated Albania, which shunned the (Non-Aligned) Movement, ultimately ended up radically non-aligned: violently critical of Moscow, Beijing, and Washington, and deeply distrustful of practically everyone else.”³³ Private cinemas were nationalised in the early Hoxha years, and movie theatres were constructed in remote areas. As the film historian Abaz Hoxha notes, cinema “was evaluated as a powerful means of propaganda to introduce the new ideology and to avoid entrance of adversary ideology and tendencies.”³⁴ On 10 July 1952, the film studios “Shqipëria e Re” were inaugurated by the renowned film editor and director Xhanfise Keko, author of many children’s films, and the communist leader, Enver Hoxha. In the early period, some Albanian directors, editors and filmmakers studied cinema in the Czech Republic, Hungary, the USSR and Romania, while most were trained by working and learning at the Kinostudio itself. The film industry was used for ideological and propaganda purposes, with some 247 films produced during this period. However: “despite the widespread belief that Kinostudio was merely an instrument of propaganda, its history was complex and its ideology more ambiguous than many acknowledge.”³⁵ Very few Albanian films were seen outside the national context under communism, apart from rare screenings at international film festivals, and during the Cultural Revolution in China, when Albanian films were very popular.

O’Donnell suggests that Enver Hoxha was a key figure in the creation of national culture, and while he encouraged Socialist realism as the key aesthetic model to follow, “his personal stance on the arts was ambivalent.”³⁶ According to Williams, it “allowed artists a number of loopholes whereby they could cut through the official orthodoxy of the regime.”³⁷ Artists were urged to study foreign art forms and expressions to express Albania’s reality more creatively. In the 1970s, Kinostudio films were categorised in terms of their themes: the working class, social transformation, the National Liberation War, the collectivised countryside, the emancipation of women, family life and so on.³⁸ In 1974, Hoxha spoke about the importance of cinema’s didactic and educational role, which was implemented by the Kinostudio agenda for the next year.³⁹

³³ Mëhilli, Elidor. 2015. States of Insecurity. *The International History Review* 37(5), 1037-1058, 1039.

³⁴ Hoxha, Abaz. 1994. *Arti i shtate ne shqiperi (The Seventh Art in Albania)*. Tirana: Albin, 74.

³⁵ Williams, Bruce. 2012. *Red Shift. New Albanian Cinema and its Dialogue with the Old*, in *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (First Edition), edited by Imre, Aniko. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 224-43, 226-27.

³⁶ O’Donnell, James S. 1999. *A Coming of Age: Albania under Enver Hoxha*. New York: Columbia University Press.

³⁷ Williams, *Red Shift*, 228.

³⁸ Williams, *Red Shift*, 227.

³⁹ Williams, *Red Shift*, 227.

Concert in 1936 was the first film directed by Saimir Kumbaro in 1978, which premiered in Tirana on 22 April 1979. Kumbaro had previously co-directed *Factory and School* (1973) with Vangjush Furrxhi about the factory workers in Korca, *Rrugicat që kërkonin diell* (*Alleys That Seek the Sun*, 1975), the story of a young coal worker who encounters underground partisan fighters, and *Ilegalët* (*The illegals*, 1976) with Rikard Ljarja, on the anti-fascist movement and enemy espionage during World War II. Kumbaro had graduated from the Arts Institute in Tirana as an actor, and first started to work at the Kinostudio as assistant director in 1972, while at the same time playing small roles in several Albanian feature films. He then attended a training course at the Kinostudio for film direction, held by the first generation of Albanian film directors who had studied abroad in Russia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. He was quite prolific in the 1980s, directing several feature films, and he also made many documentaries for Kinostudio until the 1990s. Another successful film was his *The Small Siege* (*Rrethimi i vogel*, Albania, 1986), filmed in Pogradec on the Ohrid Lake, which won Best Film Award at the 7th National Film Festival. After the regime fell, *Death of the Horse* (*Vdekja e kalit*, Saimir Kumbaro, Albania, 1992) was the first film of the post-dictatorship era to condemn the communist regime. This film received a special mention at the Euro Festival in Saint Etienne, France in 1997.



Figure 1 - Set photograph *Concert in 1936* (Image courtesy of AQSHF)

Concert in 1936 certainly has a visible didactic and ideological role, further reinforced by the fact that Kinostudio categorised Albanian films according to their thematic throughout the 1970s.⁴⁰ The storyline is based on a novel by the leading representative of Albanian Socialist Realism, Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi, while the main female protagonist represents the highly praised Albanian singer Tefta Tashko-Koço. Tashko-Koço studied singing in the Paris Conservatoire from 1932 to 1936, and upon her return to Albania, she performed in opera and chamber music as well as Albanian urban songs, posthumously receiving the award of People's Artist of Albania. The film plot is quite straightforward: a European-educated Albanian female singer, accompanied by a pianist, travels to the small peasant community of Lushnje to give a concert, but is soon confronted with resistance by the authorities and the traditional male population (Figure 1). Finally, however, with the help of local teachers, they are able to organise the concert and perform in front of a

⁴⁰ For further reading on Kinostudio's categorisation, see Williams, *Red Shift*.

large part of the community. In this way, the female emancipation of the modern Albania, supported by education (teachers of the village), is contrasted with the old-fashioned, monarchical and patriarchal Albania. While this film may be a vehicle for state ideology, it also presents an array of comical characters caught in a bureaucratic system in the context of feudal 1930s Albania, and the forced imprisonment of a teacher at the end of the film. The teacher's imprisonment resonates with events experienced by members of the Albanian intelligentsia and political dissidents during the Hoxha regime.

During the second half of the 1970s, the Albanian government funneled money into the construction of tens of thousands of military fortifications: a costly physical manifestation of the "siege mentality" that became pervasive.⁴¹ The fear and suspicion of both external and internal enemies manifested itself strongly in the formation and activities of the notorious secret police *Sigurimi*. The *Sigurimi* exercised a state of terror during the communist period, and many regime dissidents were either imprisoned, killed, or simply disappeared.⁴² While set in pre-World War II Albania, the film in some ways provides a critique of the bureaucratic and militarist social system of communist Albania which the spectators can identify with, and a society in which, as in Forman's film *Firemen's Ball*, nothing can be achieved.

Gospodin za edin den (*King for a Day*, Nikolay Volev, Bulgaria, 1983) was immensely popular upon its release in Bulgaria, and the second out of three big box office hits in the 1980s to feature Todor Kolev in the main role. The other two films were *The Double* (Nikolay Volev, 1980) and *Dangerous Charm* (Ivan Andonov, 1984). The plot centres on Purko's life and misadventures: a poor peasant with many children trying to get out of poverty during the hard times between the two world wars, one day he encounters an elegant couple from the city who promise him prosperity if he mortgages the house and invests money in their business. Produced by the state-owned studios Boyana, the screenplay was written by the novelist Nikola Statkov based on his short stories *The Outlander* and *Mister*, and had an excellent cast, most noted for Todor Kolev's performance. In the 1970s and 1980s, Iordanova notes how Bulgarian cinema was known for "its lyrical and sensitive approach to love and affection, for its elegiac and graceful treatment of universal existential themes, and for its tongue-in-cheek assessment of history's volatilities."⁴³ *King for a Day* reveals the social situation of 1930s rural Bulgaria, and the irony of life, which many spectators could identify with, produced at the height of Bulgaria's cinema production in the 1980s.

"Nearly 600 feature films were produced during the forty-five years of state socialism (1945-89), peaking at around twenty-five features annually in the mid-1980s" (Iordanova 2007, 97).⁴⁴ Bulgarian films played at international film festivals and were distributed to other Eastern European countries. The extent of Bulgaria's cinema industry is evident in the number of films produced per year and the film professionals employed full-time: "the industry employed

⁴¹ Mëhilli, *States of Insecurity*, 1051.

⁴² Over that period and until the collapse of Communism in 1991, more than 100,000 people were put in camps, another 20,000 were imprisoned, and some 6,000 others died or simply disappeared.

⁴³ Iordanova, *Bulgaria*, 98.

⁴⁴ Iordanova, *Bulgaria*, 97.

about 2,500 highly qualified workers engaged around the film studio Boyana and a number of production units and companies making features, documentaries and animation.”⁴⁵ While the film’s story is set in 1930s Bulgaria, the contemporary spectators (under socialism) could identify with the irony and absurdity of everyday situations that the protagonist encountered. Under the guise of the past, one could laugh at the present, and the film offered a form of psychic release for the frustrations of the everyday.

Laughter and the absurd

Perhaps what transpires through these films, then, is cynicism towards any ruling system, as felt by the local communities in the Balkans: prior to the most recent liberal capitalism (and democracy), communism; before that a monarchy, and prior to the monarchy, a series of empires and kingdoms throughout history. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek compares the East as it used to be (“official obeisance, private cynicism”) to the West as it has always been (“officially we’re free, privately we obey, and because our cynicism is empty, we only function through our conformism.”⁴⁶

In his work *Inside Soviet Film Satire*, Andrew Horton argues:

*“that the satiric impulse as demonstrated in jokes, ironic comments, and such is a necessary ingredient of daily life for citizens within a totalitarian or authoritarian state if they are to maintain their own sense of worth, individuality, and self-esteem. Satire in such a context within a totalitarian framework thus is both offense - an attack on the system - and defence - survival itself, psychologically, spiritually, and even physical.”*⁴⁷

The subversive criticism of the ruling socialist system and outright parody of Stalinist models through a satirical film such as *Ciguli Miguli* becomes an offensive and defensive mechanism for the people living in this context. In fact, “[...] in a period of rapidly changing values - or the shattering of all values - reality itself becomes more absurd than a satirist can portray [...]”⁴⁸



Figure 2 - Still from *Ciguli Miguli*

⁴⁵ Iordanova, *Bulgaria*, 97.

⁴⁶ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 345.

⁴⁷ Horton, Andrew. (ed.). 1993. *Inside Soviet Film Satire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 6.

⁴⁸ Horton, *Inside Soviet Film Satire*, 12.

The absurdity of this reality is highlighted in one of the scenes where the musician goes to the socially reformed music store (no longer private but in public ownership, which displays a banner stating “Kulturno posluživanje značajka socijalističkog trgovanja,” loosely translated as “Polite service is a socialist merchant’s trait,” therefore parodying typical slogans of the era) to purchase a clarinet reed, but is forced to buy a children’s colouring book along with the reed, as the store has received too many (Figure 2). The imprint of farce, satire, “vaudeville,” *commedia dell’arte*, and American and European “silent comedies” can be found in Balkan comedies, notably in the gags and visual jokes throughout the three films, which consist of outrageous absurdity, slapstick and camera tricks.

The *Ciguli Miguli* scene in which the musicians fight in the main square, which degenerates into such total chaos that the fire department intervenes using water hoses in order to stop the fighting, uses gags and slapstick comedy. Purko’s character in *King for a Day* is fashioned according to the role of a “silent comedy protagonist,” employing a number of visual jokes and slapstick tricks in several scenes throughout the film: in one scene he hides in a haystack when the taxman arrives to collect the debts, who, after trying to take advantage of Purko’s wife, angrily departs, planting the pitchfork in the haystack where Purko was hiding and so piercing him. In another scene, Purko, painted in white, poses as a statue of a soldier after his pig had eaten the real statue’s cement leg at the inauguration in the village.

What is more, Purko resembles the infamous Bulgarian literary personage Bai Ganio in many respects. Stojanova examines the concept of the Trickster in contemporary Bulgarian cinema, and she identifies three psychological paradigms in Bulgarian arts and literature which relate to Bai Ganio as “a quintessential Trickster figure”: “self-deprecation, self-aggrandizement and self-knowledge.”⁴⁹ The self-deprecating discourse crystallizes in the negative western attitudes assigned to Balkan people which are internalised by the Balkan subject: an inferiority complex which Todorova calls “imputed Balkanness.”⁵⁰ Furthermore, for Stojanova “[t]he problematic self-esteem of Bulgarians vis-à-vis their Western European Other is most eloquently illustrated by the quintessential Trickster figure of Bai Ganio.”⁵¹ Created by Aleko Konstantinov (1863-1897), Bai Ganio emerged amidst social and cultural turmoil following Bulgarian independence after Ottoman rule (1878). One of the most popular stories in the collection is *Bai Ganio on His Way to Europe*, a realist account of the adventures of this village bumpkin, who meets refined Western Europeans in Vienna, Budapest and Prague, epitomising the “representation of a common and resilient type of Balkan machismo.”⁵² In *Bai Ganio Returns From Europe*, the previously “comic primitive buffoon” on a European journey, upon return becomes “a dangerous savage [...] among his own, where he is the *nouveau riche* and newly hatched corrupt politician.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Stojanova, Christina. 2013. The Trickster in Bulgarian Identity Discourses and His Manifestations in Postcommunist Bulgarian Cinema. *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 4(2), 161-80, 3.

⁵⁰ Stojanova, *The Trickster*, 4.

⁵¹ Stojanova, *The Trickster*, 5.

⁵² Stojanova, *The Trickster*, 5.

⁵³ Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 39.

King for a Day plays with these notions of self-depreciation and self-aggrandizement, which are inherent in the Trickster figure of Bai Ganio, and re-presented not only through Purko's character, but also through the series of local politicians. As Stojanova has noted, Bai Ganio "survived as a symbol of misguided national pride, for identifying with Bai Ganio's antics has become a way of returning the gaze at the educated and refined (central) Europeans, whose condescension has been a constant source of national inferiority complexes."⁵⁴ Purko exhibits the envy and desire to become like the visiting couple from the city, elegantly dressed in European-like clothing, and, of course, rich. However, in *King for a Day* Purko's character can only imitate the educated and refined European temporarily, but cannot truly embody the gentlemanly figure. Due to his naiveté and inexperience, and perhaps lack of cultured, Purko's situation regresses notably at the end, where he literally loses everything.



Figure 3 - Still from King for a day



Figure 4 - Still from King for a day

It is worth noting that the film exemplifies the poverty in Bulgarian villages between the two world wars, and the struggle for survival contrasted with futile promises of the government. A new member of parliament's speech⁵⁵ is undermined and ridiculed, as Purko, posing as the statue of the soldier, starts to sneeze and kick the pig trying to nibble on his leg, causing a wave of laughter amongst the villagers (Figure 3 and 4). Finally Purko runs away chasing the pig, his mannerism reminiscent of silent comedy protagonists and slapstick humour. The scene of the arrival of the new member of parliament proclaiming appreciation for the villagers' participation in Bulgaria's wars, and the unveiling of the soldier's statue commemorating the sacrifice while Purko's poverty stays unchanged, is repeated several times throughout the film in a comic and grotesque style, thus revealing the ridiculousness and futility of such promises and plans of the state contrasted with economic failure. Purko's destiny remains the same, and is worsened at the end of the film as he is arrested by the authorities, unable to repay his debt. Albanian, Yugoslav or Bulgarian rural and 'primitive' life is in contrast with the urban and modern:

⁵⁴ Stojanova, *The Trickster*, 6.

⁵⁵ For each repeated scene, the member of parliament's speech is essentially the same: "Congratulations! Ladies and gentlemen, our party erected this monument as a symbol of the dear victims that your small but heroic village has suffered for the sake of Bulgaria. I too have risen from the ranks of people and was reared with your suffering, so I most solemnly declare that our party will undertake drastic measures so that we can overcome the desperate situation you are in and finally end your suffering."

in all the films, these typical stereotypes of “imputed Balkanness” are explored to create comic relief and recognisable characters.



Figure 5 – Still from *Koncert në vitin* 1936 Figure 6 – Still from *Koncert në vitin* 1936

prompts the policeman and officer to fret to tidy the office and dust the photograph of King Zog hanging on the wall: their mannerism is comical and ridiculous, discrediting their authority (Figure 5). The three authoritative figures in the village (the lieutenant, the mayor and the deputy prefect) behave in a contradictory manner and constantly telephone each other to agree and disagree on the outcome of the concert. Their comical aspect is further underlined through a scene in which the boy brings them coffee in turn one by one: when he enters the governor’s office, he reproaches the boy for not serving him coffee first, rendering the gesture a parody and their authoritative figures more ridiculous. Here, again there is a play on the Balkan typical machismo, in which the primitive and unrefined man strives and pretends to be a gentleman, which in turn creates comic agency.

In the same fashion, Charles Eidsvik argues that the Eastern European “comedy of futility” *par excellence* is Miloš Forman’s *Hoří, má panenko* (*The Firemen’s Ball*, Czechoslovakia/Italy, 1967), where “comedy depends on the sense that nothing *can* change in the kind of world he depicts.”⁵⁶ Comical situations in *Ciguli Miguli* arise from squabbles and misadventures, where nothing can go right or as planned under the socialist system of values, not even the ceremonial opening of the “Dom Kulture” (the House of Culture) in a small town. In comedy, the establishment may be blamed for dumb values or a stupid semantic system, the comical is found in the futility of socialist plans. Ivan Ivanovic’s order to remove the statue of *Ciguli Miguli* merely results in putting up wooden boards around it, which ruins the aesthetics of the town’s square, in order to hide it temporarily. “In Eastern Europe the mood of humour is ignited by an appreciation for the ridiculousness inherent in futile plans and hopes,” which “have a history far longer than socialism in Eastern Europe.”⁵⁷ As a result, “Life under socialism or even in general may be hopeless, and there may be little to be done except to play, except to laugh.”⁵⁸ *King for a Day* and *Ciguli Miguli* are perfect examples of this stance, both embodying the futility of socialist plans. The water fight, this child-like game and skirmish in the town’s square, alludes to the absurdity and hopelessness of the situation, which in the exaggeration of the scene, invites laughter on the part of audiences.

⁵⁶ Eidsvik, *Mock Realism*, 96.

⁵⁷ Eidsvik, *Mock Realism*, 103.

⁵⁸ Eidsvik, *Mock Realism*, 103.

The comical and satirical intent of a comedy depends largely on the conspiratorial relationship with the viewer, alongside the historical, cultural and political context. Indeed, watching these comedies more than three decades later may prove to be difficult, as many contextual/original jokes may be lost due to historical distance/difference and culturally specific references. "What creates the comic effect is that allusions to the real world of the viewer allow the viewer to react in terms of an imagined world suggested by the film - one that is incongruous and funny."⁵⁹ Here the comical and the satirical appear in the people's daily lives. In his analyses of Czechoslovak and Polish films, Eidsvik finds that "Eastern European comedies tend to be deadpan and sly spinoffs from 'ordinary' realism and employ 'mock realism', which refers to humour of the everyday and is revealing about social realities."⁶⁰ Comedy in Eastern Europe is more overtly political than what Western viewers are accustomed to, thus humour is often treated as an act of rebellion against state-sanctioned values and taboos.⁶¹ Indeed, countries in the Balkan Peninsula shared elements of official rhetoric and social dilemmas during the socialist period, which resulted in common elements of humour.

Conclusion

Satire, burlesque or comedy tantalises with the real and the imaginary, perhaps always remaining slightly on the surface and often taken less seriously. If we take Socrates' paradigm that the great tragic poet is also a great comic poet, then tragedy stems from comedy and the comic is found in the tragic. Interchangeable as well as necessary for survival (and not only under communism), if we take Bakhtin's assertion as true, laughter serves to approach life realistically, and has a cathartic effect for the viewer while exceeding its very ideology. "The fantasy-frame [...] is one of the symptoms of enjoyment, [...] at once secreted by and exceeding ideology. Enjoyment, as the laughter of derision, but also the unbearable, un-representable core of psychic existence, obliges Žižek to make, via the cinema, a second distinction: that between, bluntly speaking, collective ideology, individual identity and subjectivity, or in more Lacanian terms, to renegotiate the relation between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, in favor of investigating, ever so tentatively, the much more terrifying relation between the Imaginary and the Real."⁶²

Absorbing the gags and visual jokes from silent cinema comedies, and creating a more suitable Balkan type character, all three films serve as a vehicle for their own ideological purpose - laughter and derision. What is more, they use the very same conventions of the system (both West and East, capitalist and communist) to create dialogue with the spectators in such a way that they provide psychic release, and *jouissance* (enjoyment) in the Lacanian sense. Having embodied and internalised the assigned negative Western attitudes to Balkan people (the primitive, uneducated, savage, barbaric, folk, peasant, backward), the authors play with these representations to produce comic effect.

⁵⁹ Eidsvik, *Mock Realism*, 93.

⁶⁰ Eidsvik, *Mock Realism*, 92.

⁶¹ Eidsvik, *Mock Realism*, 91.

⁶² Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 347.

In *King for a Day*, Purko, an uneducated peasant trying to imitate the refined urban (European) gentlemen; in *Ciguli Miguli*, Ivan Ivanović, a primitive opportunist who was assigned to be the cultural minister of the town; and in *Concert in 1936*, both the mayor and the deputy prefect are typical examples of backwardness elevated to important administrative positions, thus rendering them dangerous. In all three films, these characters are ridiculed and satirised, despite representing figures of authority in the latter cases.

“We have described satire as purposeful, even when that purpose is the pure sense of liberation sanctioned by carnival. But besides being a form of pamphleteering, propaganda, and offense against a designated target enemy, satire does also embody laughter as psychic release and thus as a survival tool for the individual rather than an instrument of social change.”⁶³ Harry Levin suggests that satire should be considered iconoclastic, as the satirist strives to shatter images, while in the Soviet Union, it is with the image of socialism that the satirist operated under *glasnost*.⁶⁴ Similarly in the socialist period in the Balkans, the film directors operated with the image of socialism in varying degrees of subversion, especially under the guise of comedy, where the everyday social reality became absurd and grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin terms the all-inclusiveness of carnival “grotesque realism,” yet he insists on the seriousness of such a release. Carnavalesque satire and laughter is a popular, folk laughter of the people, by the people, for the people, and is, in the spirit of carnival, a sanctioned, liberating attack on all authority. These three films can be seen as a process of socially liberating catharsis by their authors within totalitarian societies, and for people under a socialist system as futile or as hopeless as it may be. Balkan comedies during the socialist period offered the possibility for laughter, which holds a therapeutic and liberating force, and their carnivalesque aspect played and at times undermined the dominant atmosphere through the use of humour and chaos.

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⁶³ Horton, *Inside Soviet Film Satire*, 11-12.

⁶⁴ Horton, *Inside Soviet Film Satire*, 12.

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