Masked critiques of the system: Balkan comedies during the socialist period

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‘Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically...’ – Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 23)

The complicity between the comic and the tragic has very old roots, coming from Classic literature. At the end of Plato’s Symposium, Aristophanes and Socrates remained awake discussing how probably comedy and tragedy had similar origins. According to Andrew Horton comedy in cinema, unlike the epic, has often escaped close scrutiny for several reasons, such as historical bias, but its cultural and historical significance should not be undermined (1991: Introduction). Comedy cannot systematically be categorised under one totalising theory, nor is a plot necessarily funny in itself. Rather, the comic can be found in individual jokes or gags. The affirmation “no film plot is inherently funny” allows a film to always be potentially comic, melodramatic and/or tragic. My analysis of Balkan films made during the socialist period, where each can be labelled as a ‘comedy’ stems from this premise, but as we will see further, each film contains comic and tragic elements, often interchangeable, of everyday life in a socialist society. Satire, parody, comedy - the carnivalesque - derive from popular culture and subvert the dominant mode through humour offering a form of liberation and psychic release.

Through this paper I explore how Balkan comedies during the socialist period use traditional comic conventions inherited from silent cinema to offer critiques of the political and social systems through the analysis of three films: Ciguli Miguli (Yugoslavia, 1952,
released in 197, dir. Branko Marjanović), Koncert në vitin 1936/Concert in 1936 (Albania, 1978, dir. Saimir Kumbaro), and Господин за едни ден/ King for a day (Bulgaria, 1983, dir. Nikolay Volev). Travestied in comedies, these films provide parodical portraits of authorities and governing figures, as well as critical views of the social and political situations by gazing back at the past; Concert in 1936 and King for Day are both set in the mid 1930’s in rural areas of each country respectively, in monarchical Albania and in royalist authoritarian Bulgaria, whilst, Ciguli Miguli is supposedly set in an undefined time by the inter-title at the start of the film informing the viewers: “So it was once upon a time” but clearly takes place in post-war Yugoslavia. Ciguli Miguli was the first and the only “banned” Croatian film, as it was considered an anti-socialistic 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 work as subversive criticism of the system through the use of satire, parody and visual jokes.

All three films draw on stylistic and visual conventions of silent comedies (especially those of Chaplin, Keaton and Harold Lloyd) and employ these elements to create a range of comic characters and situations. These can be seen in the misadventures of the poor peasant Purko in King for a Day, the water fight in the town’s square between the musicians in Ciguli Miguli and the policeman’s mannerism in the rural community Lushnje in Concert in 1936. 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 party functionary Ivan Ivanović tries to reorganise cultural and artistic life of a small provincial town according to socialist and party values thus causing chaos and unrest. Whilst in Concert in 1936, two well educated female musicians want to give a concert in the traditional and patriarchal village of Lushnje consequently provoking tension within authorities and villagers. In King for a Day after the elegant couple’s visit from the city Purko’s life is changed irremediably. As a result, tension
is created by two oppositional elements which seem to be recurrent in many Balkan comedies similarly to the films mentioned above: modernity versus tradition, city versus rurality, progress versus backwardness, European culturedness versus Balkan primitiveness etc. I feel that the same elements are present in more contemporary films from the region which use comic and parodical characteristics of the Balkan stereotype(s), such as Edmond Budina’s *Balkan Pazar* (Albania, 2011), Corneliu Porumboiu’s short film *Calatori La Oraș* (Romania, 2003) or films by Emir Kusturica just to mention a few.

The case of *Ciguli Miguli* shows how political changes can affect cultural and artistic freedoms through censorship. The film was produced in the context of post-war Yugoslavia in 1950’s (the implementation of self-managed economy, the renaming of the communist party as the “League of Communists of Yugoslavia” at its Sixth Congress in November 1952 signalling a break with its Stalinist past and reinforcing its new political role in the country’s future, now only in theory divorced from the state), when a satire such as *Ciguli Miguli* did not conform to the ideals of ‘party discipline’ and so finished in the “bunker” along with some other uncomfortable films. Indeed, ‘The Sixth Party Congress of Yugoslavia officially rejected Socialist realism as a standard of representation as a result of Tito’s break with Stalin’ (Imre 2012: 9). It is important to keep in mind that all films were made with the financial support of the state at this time, while the “Uredba o cenzuri kinematografskih filmova” (Office for censorship of cinematographic films) established in 1945 would give permissions for screenings, which would later be 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), so in reality

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no film was formally banned but rather “put into the bunker” according to film historian Ivo Škrabalo. The film’s scriptwriter Jože Horvat was very active with the 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’ (see Pavičić, Jutarnji List). Through the 1960s and early 1970s, the communist party loosened its iron grip; Yugoslavia improved its relations with both communist and Western nations, including the USSR, China, the U.S., and the European Common Market nation, alongside incurring a large foreign debt, in 1974 the Yugoslav Constitution gave more rights to the individual republics and in April 1977 Ciguli Miguli, received censorship approval for public screening. However, it was not until a recent restoration of the film, that it received wider national media and public attention through organised screenings in Zagreb (Croatia), notably on 27th February 2012 as part of the program “Forbidden films” and consequently shown at 2013 Edition of the Festival of Nitrate Film in Belgrade (Serbia).

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 physically’ (Horton, 1993: 6). The subversive criticism of the ruling socialist system and outright parody of Stalinist models through a satirical film such as Ciguli Miguli, becomes an offense and defence 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…’ (Horton, 1993: 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, called “Kulturno posluživanje značajka socijalističkog trgovanja” literally “Cultural service of a socialist trading trait”) 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.

The imprint of farce, satire, "vaudeville", *commedia dell'arte*, and American "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 degenerates into total chaos so that the fire department intervenes with water hosing in order to stop the fighting uses gags and slapstick comedy (Figures 2 and 3). Purko’s character in *The King for a Day* is fashioned according to the ‘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. Yet, in another scene, Purko painted in white poses as the soldier’s statue after his pig had eaten the real statue’s cement leg at the inauguration in the village.
It is worthwhile 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. New parliament member’s speech\(^2\) 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 4). Finally Purko runs away chasing the pig, his mannerism reminiscent of silent comedy protagonists and slapstick humour (Figure 5). The scene of the arrival of the new member of parliament proclaiming the appreciation for the villagers’ participation in Bulgarian wars and the unveiling of the soldier’s statue commemorating the sacrifice while Purko’s poverty stays unchanged, is repeated various 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.

In the same fashion, Charles Eidsvik argues that the Eastern European ‘comedy of futility’ *par excellence* is Miloš Forman’s *The Fireman’s Ball* (1967), where ‘comedy depends on the sense that nothing *can* change in the kind of world he depicts.’ (Eidsvik 1991: 96) 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 House of Culture (Dom Kulture) 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. ‘In Eastern Europe the mood of humour is ignited by an appreciation for the ridiculousness inherent in futile plans and hopes’, which ‘have a

\(^2\) For each repeated scene, the parliament member’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 have too risen from the ranks of people and 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.”
history far longer than socialism in Eastern Europe’ (Eidsvik 1991: 103). 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’ (Eidsvik 1991: 103). *King for a Day* and *Ciguli Miguli* are perfect examples of this stance, both embodying the futility of socialist plans.

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’ (Eidsvik 1991: 93). Here the comical and the satirical appear in the daily life of people. 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 (Eidsvik 1991: 91). Indeed, countries in the Balkan Peninsula shared elements of official rhetoric and social dilemmas during the socialist period, which resulted in common elements in humour. 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 (1991: 92).

As Eidsvik further notes, Eastern European comedies are made and shown through state-run studios and distribution networks, so they need to mask their comic malice (1991: 92). This is indeed true of the Albanian cinema production during the Enver Hoxha regime, when the national movie studio Kinostudio “Shqipëria e Re” financed all fiction and non-fiction films made in Albania since its foundation in 1952 until its dissolution in 1992. The film industry was certainly 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’ (Williams 2012: 226-227). As Williams and O’Donnell suggest further, Enver Hoxha was a key figure in the creation of national culture and his leadership allowed Albania’s progression from a backward, feudal society into a modern nation (Albanian people became literate etc). Whilst he encouraged Socialist realism as the key aesthetics model to follow, ‘his personal stance on the arts was ambivalent’ and so it ‘allowed artists a number of loopholes whereby they could cut through the official orthodoxy of the regime’ (Williams 2012: 228). In fact, he also urged artists to study foreign art forms and expressions to use their potential to express Albania’s reality more creatively.

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 1970’s. The film plot is quite straightforward: European educated Albanian female singer travel to the small peasant community of Lushnje to give a concert but is soon confronted with resistance by authorities and the traditional male population, finally,

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however, with the help of local teachers they are able to organise the concert and perform in front of a large part of the community. In this way, female emancipation of the modern Albania, supported by education (teachers of the village), is contrasted with the old, 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 1930’s Albania. It seems to be ahistorical in this sense, and provides a contemporary critique of the bureaucratic socialist system, a society in which, as in Forman’s film (*Fireman’s Ball*), nothing can be achieved.

In one of the scenes, the arrival of two female musicians prompts the policeman and officer 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. The three authoritative figures in the village (the lieutenant, the mayor and the deputy prefect) have contradictory behaviour 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.

‘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’ (Horton, 1993: 11 – 12). 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 satirist operated under glasnost (Horton, 1993: 12). Similarly in the socialist period in the Balkans, the film directors operated with the image of socialism in a
more or less subversive way, 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 release. Carnivalesque 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 subverted the dominant atmosphere through the use of humour and chaos.

**Bibliography**


Mëhilli, Spiro Vasil (2011) *Arti i shtatë në Tiranë (Kinematë – filmat)*, Tiranë: AQSHF.


Images

Figure 2 - Still from Ciguli Miguli
Figure 3 - Still from Ciguli Miguli

Figure 4 – Still from King for a day
Figure 5 – Still from King for a day

Figure 6 – Still from Koncert në vitin 1936
Figure 7 – Still from Koncert në vitin 1936