

ROOTS OF MULTIMEDIA IN VISUAL EXPERIMENTATION OF BELGRADE SURREALISTS

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Abstract: In this paper, we will try to emphasize the research spirit, tendency towards free experimentation and artistic development, and the ambition of the authors of the Serbian surrealist circle in the direction of discovering new artistic media, reshaping and combining verbal and visual material into new and unexpected forms of artistic expression that anticipate the emergence of multimedia content in the latter times. The paper analyzes certain forms and techniques of artistic experimentation of the Belgrade surrealists, bringing them into connection and comparing them with the techniques represented in French surrealism. Surrealists, whose headquarters were in Paris, in the surrealist circle gathered around André Breton, directly collaborated, had active correspondence and exchange of materials with the circle of Belgrade surrealists. In this correspondence, personal acquaintances, socializing and joint creative activities, new ideas emerged, by all accounts daring and avant-garde in relation to the previous premises of classical artistic expression and techniques. In the bilateral cultural exchange between French and Yugoslav artists, French authors did not always lead the way in everything, but rather individuality, inclination towards the new and unexpected, heuristic delight in dreams and nightmarish visions as a source of inspiration, led to original solutions by certain authors of Belgrade Surrealism. In the analysis of other found and applied techniques that use the discovery of a surrealist object, such as assemblage, frame and movement can be seen as a precursor to film. We conclude that Belgrade surrealism, an artistic phenomenon from the late twenties and early thirties of the twentieth century as one of the local factions of surrealism in Europe, is not just a mere echo of French surrealism. The paper references to the work of Stevan Živadinović, alias Vane Bor, especially in the field of experiments with photogram, as well as the hypothesis about his discovery of frame-by-frame animation. In this period, the first art magazines and the roots of new visual-literary forms of multimedia content such as comics, storyboards, animation, author's film appeared. Previously existing media such as photography and graphics in the Surrealists acquire new ways of artistic use and expression, leading to the application of photography in the sphere of film, and the combination of graphics and photography in the direction of innovative illustration and photomontage. Through new angles of observation that underline the cinematic content and expression of their works, we can take a deeper look at the contribution of the visual experimentation of the group of Belgrade surrealists to the opening of horizons towards the emergence of contemporary multimedia art forms. By exploring and introducing new techniques and ways of expression, thanks to an open and original spirit, as well as a desire for experimentation, the visual creations of the Belgrade surrealist circle heralded the interdisciplinary and multimedia nature that we encounter in contemporary art.

Keywords: Belgrade Surrealists, visual experimentation, storyboard, photomontage, animation, multimedia

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines the roots of multimedia, specifically the visual experiments of the Belgrade surrealist circle. Although initially underestimated and regarded as the playful endeavors of a group of young intellectuals (Trifunović, 1970, 79), their works already contained the seeds of multimedia, which later evolved alongside technological advancements into contemporary multimedia content. Today, multimedia is often associated with the digital era, referring to software that delivers information simultaneously across multiple senses in a synchronized manner, integrating sound, text, color, motion, and video to create a cohesive and engaging experience. Interactivity, allowing users to actively engage with content, is also a frequent component. However, the conceptual integration of art into everyday life—where everyone can be an artist—originates in the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century.

The connection between seemingly distant artistic phenomena, such as avant-garde visual experimentation and postmodern multimedia, remains underexplored. According to Evans (2016), by 2015, little research addressed the relationship between surrealism and science fiction, despite its influence on contemporary comics, SF cinema, animation, and advertising. Contemporary studies in graphic design increasingly focus on surrealist photomontage in 3D presentation (Demirel, 2024), often neglecting its roots in the historical surrealist avant-garde. Few studies link these temporally distant phenomena—surrealist art and contemporary virtual surrealism—yet the conceptual and aesthetic ties to science fiction have long been recognized.

The youngest Serbian avant-garde movement, the Yugoslav surrealist faction—the Belgrade surrealists—comprised thirteen young intellectuals engaged with poetry, metaphysics, parapsychology, and especially visual

experimentation in formally unrecognized techniques. Leading figures included Marko Ristić, Aleksandar Vučo, Dušan Matić, Oskar Davičo, Koča Popović, Radojica Živanović Noe, Milan Dedinac, and Stevan Živadinović—Vane Bor. They pursued collective and individual efforts to create a new poetry and art integrated into everyday life, in line with Breton's vision (Breton, 1979). Like all avant-garde movements, they sought to reformulate art alongside social transformation. Most members were also affiliated with or sympathizers of the Communist Party, then illegal. Their activity is documented in periodicals such as *Večnost*, *Svedočanstva*, *Nadrealizam danas i ovde*, and almanacs *Crno na belo* and *Nemoguće—L'Impossible* from the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Initially, reception of Belgrade surrealism was negative; Lazar Trifunović considered their visual experimentation marginal. A turning point came with an exhibition organized by Milorad B. Protić at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which positioned them within the national twentieth-century art narrative and introduced the notion of “social art” (Protić, 1961, 31). Protić was the first to recognize the visual works of the Belgrade surrealists, highlighting that without some hundred drawings, photograms (“rayograms”), collages, assemblages, and cadavres exquis, Serbian painting would have lacked one of its most lucid experimental forays into unexplored realms of life and image.

Significant rediscoveries emerged in the early twenty-first century, re-evaluating Belgrade surrealists' visual experimentation and emphasizing their revolutionary artistic contributions and correlations with contemporary French surrealism, as well as their openness to new media. These insights were brought forth by scholars of their visual work, including Milanka Todić, who emphasized interdisciplinarity and multimedia aspects (Todić, 2002b); Dejan Sretenović, who contextualized the group socio-politically (Sretenović, 2016); Biljana Andonovska and Branko Aleksić, focusing on literary achievements; and Pavle Levi, highlighting their contributions to film and multi-media precursors to cinema (Levi, 2012). The interplay of these researchers' findings underscores the integration of historical context, artistic transformation, and the interconnection of literary and visual media—drawing together text, drawing, painting, graphics, photography, and photomontage.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research material consists of preserved works produced during the active period of the Belgrade surrealists (1929–1936), held in the collections of the Museum of Applied Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belgrade. Following previous scholars, we also analyze reproductions published in the key periodical of Belgrade surrealism, *Nemoguće – L'Impossible* (1929) (Todić, 2002). In terms of innovative photomontage illustration, significant works include photomontages from Vane Bor's legacy in the MSU collection, as well as the reprint of the first edition of the surrealist children's poem *Podvizi družine pet petlića/Adventures of Five Roosters* (1931) by Aleksandar Vučo and Dušan Matić (Vučo, 1959). Comparisons with European artistic centers are addressed to a lesser extent. Synthesizing arguments supporting the hypothesis that Belgrade surrealists were precursors of innovative multimedia artistic expression relies on studies by art historian Milanka Todić (Todić, 2002, 2006, 2018, 2020, 2021), personal testimony by painter Mileta Prodanović regarding Stevan Živadinović (Prodanović, cited in Stojmenović, 2011), and film theorist Pavle Levi (Levi, 2012).

Vane Bor's visual experimentation—photograms and animation. According to Todić, Bor's experimental activity in creating and connecting photograms constitutes the first frame-by-frame animation in Serbian art history. His photographic practice demonstrates intensive engagement with new surrealist media languages, particularly photograms. Todić recalls that Man Ray experimented with photograms, or “rayograms,” as early as the 1920s, while the technique traces back to Fox Talbot's early photographic processes, including the calotype. Within surrealism, photograms were conceived as “dream imprints,” analogous to automatic writing. Bor, together with Marko Ristić, began producing photograms in 1926, considered the first examples of this technique in Serbian photography and avant-garde art. Bor emphasized that photograms are never accidental, illustrated in a series using broken glass pieces arranged deliberately to achieve the desired visual outcome. Departing from surrealism's reliance on “chance,” “objective accident,” and “automatic thought,” Bor's photograms were conceived as elements forming a “quasi-filmic structure,” where sequential static images generate motion and the effect of a stop-motion or animated film (Todić, 2018). Contemporary accounts and Bor's own statements support Todić's hypothesis, corroborated by Levi (2012), that Bor's experiments prefigured contemporary frame-by-frame animation.

Photographs by Vane Bor and Nikola Vučo. Bor's photographic portraits employ blurred effects, long exposures, and strong light-dark contrasts to evoke irrational, nightmare-like atmospheres, akin to psychological thriller imagery. Figures with pronounced black shadows, such as in *Portrait of Milica L. with Shadow*, suggest cinematic tension, suspense, or anticipation. Levi attributes a deliberate cinematic quality and heightened tension to these works. Todić explains that Bor aimed to explore the photographic image's potential, its intermedial connections—especially with film and text—since his photograms were published alongside main texts in the almanac *Nemoguće* (Todić, 2018). Similarly, Nikola Vučo's *Wall of Agnosticism* reflects a philosophical approach and was likely inspired by Breton's Nadja and Jacques-André Boiffard's 1928 surrealist photography. Vučo's nocturnal cityscapes

(Belgrade or Paris, 1929–1930) manifest the surrealist wanderer's pursuit of the irrational through exploration of specific spaces and encounters, conveying cinematic tension through dark tonalities and hidden architectures.

Alternative comic by Moni de Buli. Among the first Serbian surrealists in Paris, Moni de Buli established contacts with French surrealists (1924–1925). Breton, introduced to early Serbian surrealist publications by De Buli and Matić, was particularly interested in De Buli's *Vampire: a Novel in Pictures*, first published in *Svedočanstva* no.6 (January 1925) and subsequently in *La Révolution Surrealiste* (Todić, 2012, 20). The primitive comic, comprising roughly drawn illustrations with accompanying text, combines horror elements and prefigures later developments in the genre, freeing future authors from strict illustrative conventions.

Paper film by A. Vučo and M. Ristić—Ljuskari na prsima (Scales on the Chest). Vučo's automatic writing was paired with Ristić's twelve-collage series, forming a surrealist *paper film* published in *Nemoguće—L'Impossible* (1929). Ristić's collages create an autonomous visual structure that flows quasi-cinematically alongside Vučo's text (Todić, 2021, 35). This technique derives from optical toys and paper constructions that animated drawings on paper, precursors to cinematography (Id., 32–34). Collage segments, cut from natural history illustrations, appear successively against a scenographic background, suggesting animated film frames. Todić concludes that *Scales on the Chest* represents a hybrid, multilayered artistic creation, where cinematic thinking provided surrealist artists with a conceptual framework to construct a screen-based paradigm, a paradoxical space mediating between the real and the fictional (Id., 50).

Collective game—Le cadavre exquis. Collective works based on wordplay, automatic writing, and drawing, known as le cadavre exquis (French: "the exquisite corpse"), reflect the collaborative spirit of surrealist creation. Originally a word game cultivated by Parisian surrealists from 1925, it involved participants contributing words sequentially, producing seemingly nonsensical phrases with uncanny, otherworldly meanings ("Le cadavre – exquis – boira – le vin – nouveau" / "The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine"). In Belgrade in 1930, during a gathering of André Thirion, Katia Drenovska, Aleksandar and Lula Vučo, Ševa and Marko Ristić, and Dušan Matić, Thirion introduced this game, resulting in a collaborative work published in *Nemoguće* that same year (Todić, 2020, 59). Comparable games existed earlier among children, as paper-folding activities where each participant added drawings without seeing the previous contributions. The cadavre exquis drawings function as interactive, collectively generated illustrations, where divergent contributions create a living, animated visual effect, a chimera in constant metamorphosis from the first to the last author. This principle can be replicated with contemporary digital tools, where software edits, combines, and animates multiple contributors' visual motifs—a precursor to contemporary interactive and collaborative animation. The multipotential character of cadavre exquis underpins concepts explored in modern animation using current technology.

Assemblage by Dušan Matić and Aleksandar Vučo—Urnebesni kliker (The Riotous Marble). Assemblage, originating with the Cubists and elaborated by German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, involves creating new works from discarded materials. For surrealists, the technique held conceptual significance, redefining the notion of an artwork, its materials, and its relation to the unconscious and primordial content. Surrealist objects function as fetishes, translating the ordinary into the extraordinary. Works in this technique include Matić's *Assemblage* (1930), Julijana Lule Vučo and A. Vučo with D. Matić's *Une atmosphère du printemps et de jeunesse* (1930), and the collaborative *The Riotous Marble*. Divided into three segments using worn green, red, and black bases, filled with non-painterly materials and surrealist objects, the latter conveys rhythm and movement. Pavle Levi describes it as an example of "cinema by other means" within Belgrade surrealism: "Man Ray-like fantasies of tactile, plastic cinema were realized in 1930 when Yugoslav artists Aleksandar Vučo and Dušan Matić created one of their surrealist objects, *The Riotous Marble*" (Levi, 46). The material form and structure of the assemblage immediately generate the potential for a series of kinetic, cinematic effects (Id., 48). Levi further elaborates that the work's kinematic qualities—the distinction between motion and stillness, between single and sequential images—highlight the conceptual gap inherent in all media: the difference between the idea of a medium reproducing motion and its practical, functional realization through cinematic apparatus (Levi, 2013, 14).

Photocollage and photomontage in Belgrade surrealism—bearers of cinematic atmosphere and precursors of digital image transformation software. Technically aligned with traditional collage, surrealist photocollage acquires new value in semantic, aesthetic, and psychological terms through the "pictorial juxtaposition of motifs and figures from different registers." Through this method, the surrealist artist captures the essence of the surreal experience, uniting otherwise distant realities in a manner reminiscent of dream logic. Key practitioners of Belgrade surrealist photomontage include Dušan Matić, Vane Bor, and Milan Dedinac. In his photomontages, Bor achieves tension and anticipation by contrasting photographic details with voids of darkness, imparting a cinematic expressiveness. As Bogdanović notes, "Bor created significant works that questioned and expanded the limits of his medium, connecting it to the cinematic medium" (Bogdanović, 2023, 216).

Matić's photomontages hold a special place, appearing in 1931 as illustrations for Aleksandar Vučo's revolutionary-utopian children's poem *The Exploits of the Five Roosters*. In the preface, which critiques the position of children in prewar capitalism, Matić introduces photomontage poetically as "glue-images," cut-and-paste pictures; through reconfiguring photographs, the child could symbolically reshape reality, producing surreal experiences and novel outcomes. Visually, these photomontages are highly suggestive, detailed, and narrative, creating a cinematic atmosphere through unusual framing of children in unreal situations, resembling a storyboard.

In Belgrade surrealism, photomontage appears in two main forms: as rayograms by Vane Bor and Marko Ristić, and as double exposures in some works by Nikola Vučo. Rayograms juxtapose surrealist objects with portraits, while double exposures merge incongruous figures or unexpected landscapes, akin to the cinematic fade between shots. These techniques prefigure the cinematic expressiveness found in photograms. By representing coexisting realities, as in Ristić's photograms, the surrealists evoke an illusory cinematic journey through time, reminiscent of segments from Giuseppe Tornatore's *Baaria* (2009) or Kevin Godley's 1993 video for Sting's *Fields of Gold*.

The extraordinary effect of surrealist photomontages, or "cut-and-paste pictures" (Todić, 2006.) reappears in contemporary software such as Adobe Photoshop or newer applications like Canva, where users combine multiple figures and scenes in juxtaposed spaces or transform spatial depth into open voids. These avant-garde creations demonstrate that surrealist photomontage and photomontage experiments prefigured the magical, dreamlike effects of contemporary visual production, while the accessibility of modern software realizes the historical avant-garde ideal of art as a privilege for all and an integral part of everyday life.

3. RESULTS

Artists of the Belgrade surrealist circle: (1) explored, in parallel with Parisian surrealists, the potential of new artistic techniques and their further development; (2) prepared the public for their reception through publications and occasional exhibitions in the public sphere; (3) experimented with and expanded the ways in which literary content could be connected with visual imagery; and (4) stimulated new approaches to animation, cinematic effects, auteur film, and the transformation of visual content—approaches later realized through computer graphic software.

The Russian avant-garde artist Velimir Khlebnikov, cited by Pavle Levi (2012, 14.), argued that art should align itself with science and technology, with Technique "with a capital T." Yet he also questioned this assumption: if artists merely follow science and technological progress, how can they anticipate or imagine the future? After all, mythical and literary visions—such as the flying carpet long preceding the airplane, Daedalus, or figures like Captain Nemo and The Time Traveler—had already imagined technological possibilities before their realization.

Within Serbian culture, the visual experimentation of the Belgrade surrealists may therefore be understood as sowing the seeds of multimedia. Decades later, these ideas materialized in animation, comics, graphic design, illustration, and photomontage, now realized at a far more sophisticated level through contemporary digital software and multimedia visual production.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Within the activism of the historical avant-gardes, beginning with Dadaism, public events that combined text, costume, poetry, experimental sound, and provocation emerged as precursors of contemporary conceptual art and performance practices. At the same time, these activities articulated a strong socio-political critique of capitalist society and fostered an unprecedented diversity of experimental media techniques. The rejection of traditional artistic forms and conventions also implied an aspiration toward a new social order that would oppose the values of bourgeois culture and the art that served it.

The visual experimentation of the Belgrade surrealists was imbued with a spirit of rebellion and marked by a radical departure from established aesthetic norms. Their artistic production can be interpreted both as a reflection of the social tensions that characterized the interwar period and as a cultural anticipation of broader societal transformations. Considering that contemporary artistic practices likewise address urgent social issues—questioning the position of the individual within society, provoking reflection, and calling for action—the artistic activity of the Belgrade surrealist circle may be understood as an early model of socially engaged artistic practice. Through the emergence of intermedial and multimedia forms, as well as through their aspiration toward social transformation and the articulation of new ideological horizons, the art of the Belgrade surrealists can be viewed as anticipating certain tendencies later associated with postmodernism and contemporary visual culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

What ultimately defines an artist as innovative and avant-garde is not the mere use of new or technologically advanced tools, but rather a new conceptual mode of thinking—a creative consciousness open to transformation and experimentation, capable of transcending established techniques in pursuit of new forms of expression. In the

contemporary digital era, however, artistic innovation can be disseminated more rapidly and persuasively through the transformation of material forms into virtual and digitally mediated images. In many respects, the avant-garde aspiration to integrate art into everyday life has been realized in the new millennium. Through accessible digital design software and multimedia platforms, creative production has become widely available, while visual expression increasingly operates within the broader framework of contemporary media culture and consumer society.

At the same time, alternative artistic practices continue to generate critical reflection and stimulate social change. These interventions are often unconventional and interdisciplinary, involving spontaneous actions in public space and the combination of multiple media, materials, and techniques that sometimes resist clear categorization. Such practices are frequently described as performance, installation, mixed media, or, within digital contexts, multimedia art. The later institutional recognition of these expanded artistic forms—through exhibitions, museum collections, and critical discourse—can be partially attributed to the innovative example set by the Belgrade surrealists. The central thread that unites their works and distinguishes them from earlier artistic traditions lies in their pronounced interdisciplinarity and proto-multimedia character.

By examining the visual experimentation of the Belgrade surrealists, we gain a renewed perspective on hybrid artistic strategies that anticipated the expanded field of contemporary visual production. Their works demonstrate how the intersection of image, text, object, and technological imagination established conceptual foundations for later developments in animation, experimental film, graphic design, and digital image transformation. The visual experiments of the Belgrade surrealists demonstrate that the most enduring avant-garde innovations arise not from technology itself, but from the imaginative capacity to envision new media forms and cultural paradigms long before the technological conditions for their full realization exist.

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