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Designing a Socialist Man

Abstract: This paper asserts that graphic design can be analyzed as a performative act, particularly in relation to *political performativity*, a term coined by Reuben Rose-Redwood and Michael R. Glass after Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Graphic design as a mass media tool enables persistent and everyday reiteration of regime authority, thus enforcing the construction of preferable identities of ideal citizens. In the text, the scope of political performativity of graphic design as an example of socialist Yugoslavia is analyzed, based on the cultural theory and the theory of political performativity, and by using examples of poster, magazine and catalogue cover designs created for political and cultural events in Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) from the 1940s to the 1980s. It will be shown how graphic design has had an impact in shaping and reshaping the image of Yugoslav citizens through an everyday representation of men, women and youth in order to consistently reassert the dominant state/regime narrative. At the same time, it will be shown that graphic design, even when used within that narrative, is a powerful tool for subverting the regime's authority and challenging the perceived ideal thus helping shape new identities.

Keywords: graphic design; political poster; performativity; political performativity; socialism; Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

In this text, I analyze political performativity of graphic design in socialist Yugoslavia. Reuben Rose-Redwood and Michael R. Glass derive the term *political performativity* as "continuous reassertion of sovereign authority"[1] from, among others, Judith Butler's theory of performativity and, in particular, her statement that performativity must be understood as an everyday iterative and citational practice that brings into being that which it names.[2] Furthermore, in this text, I lean on contemporary concepts of culture as performative i.e. the view of culture as changeable, unstable, and created through practice.

In the enactment of political performativity, the practice of graphic design as a mass media tool and executor of a client's (in this case a regime's) orders, plays an important, even key role. It enables the everyday mass promotion of images of a devoted

[1] Reuben Rose-Redwood and Michael R. Glass, ed., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 22.

[2] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2

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subject and his/her desirable virtues, thus contributing to the formation of identity of an ideal Yugoslav citizen. However, let us not forget that at the same time the graphic design is used as a tool for combatting the dominant narrative, and subverting those ideal images and established political symbols. In this text I shall analyze how the graphic representation of various groups of citizens (men, women, workers, youth) transformed through forty-five years of existence of socialist Yugoslavia according to the needs of dominant state narratives (and their subversions), transforming at the same time identities of its audience.

In *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space* Redwood and Glass cite numerous contemporary theoreticians of political sciences and political geography that examine ties between national identities, nation-state and performativity. However, the starting point of the book (and many works written prior to it) is Judith Butler's theory and her statement that "[t]here is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability."[3]

Or, as Rose-Redwood and Glass simplify: "[i]t is only through the continuous reassertion of sovereign authority that the collective subject we call 'the state' comes into being as a performative effect." And, furthermore: "The sovereign state, according to such accounts, is not a pre-existing political actor that performs the sovereignty that it already possesses; it is through the assertions of sovereign power that the structural effect of 'the state' is performed."[4]

Ann Norton proposes a similar thesis when considering culture as performative category created through practice. For example, in *Thesis no 17: Culture is made in practice*, Norton claims: "Changes in practice reflect – and effect – changes in principles, values, structures, and conditions. As people change their practices, they change their cultures. […] Each culture embraces, in practice, a variety of ways in which social roles can be performed – myriad performances of nationality, gender, class."[5]

Performances in printed media such as posters, magazine or book covers, and even matchbox sleeves – as an aspect of visual material culture – are thus more than appropriate source of data not only on acceptable values and performances of identities in context of time and space of certain culture, but also on an active molding of preferred social values acceptable to the dominant narrative.

To paraphrase Trocki's statement on art, the design is not a mirror but a hammer: it does not reflect but shapes (and resulting form depends, of course, on hand that holds the hammer). The process of legitimization of a political system depends on the continued and consistent promotion of political symbols and fortification of their uniformity, which is particularly noticeable in the early stages of new regimes.

Finally, in *Thesis no 69*, Norton directly emphasizes the importance of form-giving for creation of meaning: "The form in which something is expressed determines

[3] Judith Butler,"Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal in Gay and Lesbian Studies* 1 (1993): 17.

[4] Rose-Redwood and Glass, ed., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space,* 22.

[5] Ann Norton, *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method* (New Haven: Yale Univesity Press, 2004), 36.

its meaning. The signifier constitutes the meaning of the sign."[6] Here, we can use the classic example of Barthes's analysis of *Le Paris Match* magazine cover[7] which vividly depicts that a simple description of a "soldier proudly viewing [the] French flag" gets completely different political connotation if we note that said soldier is black-skinned and from the French colonies.

Or, if we use an example from the area of socialist graphic design: during the first years of the new Yugoslav state, the symbol of a red five-pointed star was established by controlled, strict and persistent application as an unambiguous symbol. However, in the sixties, the established symbol begins to take on unimaginable connotations. For example, Mihajlo Arsovski in Zagreb (Figure 1: poster *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja / Showing of Hamlet at the Village Mrduša Donja*, 1971) and Slobodan Mašić in Belgrade (Figure 2: catalog cover *FEST72*, 1972) simultaneously inserted new meanings in the well-known symbol: so far untouchable five-pointed star becomes a symbol of show business as well.

When discussing graphic design, we cannot observe it separately from its essential part – printed media. In his book *The Performance of Nationalism* Jisha Menon, just like Norton or Rose-Redwood and Glass did, situates performance in the center of political power[8] and states that the *imagined community* (named so after Benedict Anderson's work: *Imagined Communities* from 1983) of a nation is realized through performance. However, Menon reminds that dominant theories of nationalism emphasize the key role of print technology and mass media in the process of creating the nations, mainly through creating consolidated public opinion and national identity.

Between the two world wars, film and radio introduced radical changes in communication between the regime and the public. Yet, traditional printed media underwent an equally dramatic transformation. New printing techniques enabled cheap multiplication and bigger editions, as well as easier and faster use of quality photography in papers, magazines and posters drastically changed the representation of political and social events. The new visual language also created new professionals – art directors and graphic designers – capable of using the new arsenal of printing elements, from photomontage to typography. As noted by Eric Hobsbawm,[9] from the end of the 19th century (in light of the transformation of subjects to citizens) new and old but dramatically transformed social communities demanded innovative approaches and methods in securing unity, obedience and loyalty and expression of identity. Thus, the necessity of mass politics stressed the importance of irrational elements in maintaining social order and cohesion: construction of new traditions, public ceremonies, parades, mass gatherings and, of course – national symbols. Michael Geisler[10] empha-

[6] Ibid., 102.

[7] Roland Barthes, *Mitologije* (Zagreb: Naklada Pelago, 2009), 148–9.

[8] Jisha Menon, *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10–13.

[9] Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-producing traditions. Europe, 1870–1914." in *The invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 263–307.

[10] Michael E. Geisler, ed., *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, (Middlebury, Vt: Middlebury College Press, 2005), 19.

sizes that national (state) symbols serve to affirm the collective identity and must be in constant circulation or their original meaning will be lost. Or, as Rose-Redwood and Glass wonder: "Indeed, what could be more performative, and utterly contingent, than the 'props' of institutional authority?"[11] Of course, the establishment of state symbols as authentic props of the institutional authority always brings with it the danger of their contamination – as already shown in example of transformation of a five-pointed star into a show business symbol, or, in somewhat later example of Matjaž Vipotnik's poster (Figure 3: *Missa in A minor*, Slovenia, 1980–81) – the absolute measure of an ideal man.

We can contemplate political performance in graphic design on several levels. Literally, performativity is manifested in urging the workers to perform better. Either through direct appeals for higher productivities or by providing the heroic examples of sacrifices (in battle and in rebuilding the country). Thus, posters "Takmičimo se u čast godišnjice V. kongresa KPJ" [*Let's compete in the honor of the anniversary of [the]5th congress of KPJ*, 1949] and "Ispunivši svoj zavjet autoput predajemo narodu, partiji i Titu" [*By fulfilling our promise, we present the highway to the people, the party and Tito,* Zagreb, 1949] illustrate (and entice) a zeal for rejuvenating the country in the early post-war years, when the dominant narrative insisted on *socialist contest* i.e. competitions in work efficiency (performance)[12] and continuation of the struggle against the superior enemy (in this case nature, which needed to be subjugated by new railways and highways).

Furthermore, posters and magazine cover served as a supplement for ritual ceremonies (Youth Day rallies, Labor Day or Republic Day celebrations), as they transferred the central happening out of the time and space of the event itself. Those images framed the live performance (of a rally or carrying a baton) by representing bodies of participants as standardized, uniform, multiplicated movement. It is important to note that on these posters the bodies are always strictly controlled and always additionally signified by ideological symbols. The symbol becomes a natural upgrade of the body through a hand that holds a sickle, a hammer or a baton (as seen on Figure 4: poster *Živeo Prvi maj / Long Live the First of May*, Serbia, 1946).

On another level, the performativity of posters can be observed in their role in forming the identity of citizens. Compositions displayed on these regime prints (mostly, these posters were sponsored by the state or republic organizations like the Communist Alliance or the Alliance of Socialist Youth) suggested an ideal picture of a certain part of the population, whether it is an ideal worker, a woman or an adolescent. However, as Norton notes, culture is not a static monolith and the process of legitimization, i.e. the ultimate achievement of absolute authority is not possible: it needs to be reasserted over and over again. During this continuous process of affirmation of changeable culture, the image of acceptable identities changes as well. Thus,

[11] Rose-Redwood and Glass, ed., *Performativity, Politics, and the Production of Social Space*, 13.

[12] Igor Duda, "Uvod: od nazadnosti do svemira, od projekta do zbornika," in *Stvaranje socijalističkog čovjeka,* ed. Igor Duda (Zagreb: Srednja Europa; Pula: Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile u Puli, 2017), 12.

political posters, leaflets and youth magazine covers as the most numerous preserved examples of addressing the people through printed mass media, give a good insight into the changes of dominant narratives. At the same time, it is important to note that these representations also reflect the changes in the dominant culture that the regime has been trying to match in order to maintain some relevance (here, in particular, I am referring to the way the regime posters from the 1960s on tried to catch the attention of younger population by incorporating elements of pop culture).

In the analysis of the imposition of requests for the transformation of certain population groups, the key example is an alteration of the image of the workers (formally, the fundamental unit of Yugoslav identity). During the early post-war years, the image of an ideal worker was perpetuated by numerous posters such as the Slovenian examples *Parada dela,* 1946 and *Osvobojeni gradimo / Liberated, we build*, 1945 (Figure 5): a man building a new state with his bare hands, through heavy physical and manual work (and without any protective equipment). In the fifties, with new five-year plans focusing on the construction of Yugoslav heavy industry, the workforce is represented by posters such as *Osnivački kongres sindikata radnika i službenika metalurgije Jugoslavije / Founding congress of the Syndicate of Workers and Officials in Yugoslav Metallurgy* (Belgrade, 1950), where the determined and frowning workers (of course, men) are dressed in protective suits, surrounded by soot chimneys and fires of factory furnaces. In the 1960s and the 1970s, with the advancement of technology and knowledge, the introduction of a market economy, and the parallel insistence on personal happiness and the well-being of the Yugoslav citizens, the images of workers' faces contorted by hard manual labor are replaced by a laughing worker in clean, professional overalls, posing in front of a modern and sunny city, as shown on the poster *Dan samoupravljača / Day of Self-managers* (Figure 6: Milan Stanković, Belgrade, 1974). Towards the end of the seventies, the worker illustrated on the poster for the first time became a female worker,[13] serious and focused, surrounded by modern electric machines and measuring instruments (*VIII. Kongres ZKS*, Slovenija, 1978). Changes in the concept of work and the position of a worker in society are well illustrated by the poster of Duško Šojlev from the early 1980s *Velike obrazovne potrebe Sve obrazovaniji radnici / Great educational needs More educated workers* (Figure 7: Zagreb, 1982) where the image of a worker is placed in the background (both in size and use of monochrome photography) while the poster is dominated by precise and luxurious graphs displaying statistical data.

Another favorite subject of political print in Socialist Yugoslavia was the youth population, a typical subject of numerous posters dedicated to Youth Work Actions (ORA) and Youth Day. The identity of the Yugoslav youth has undergone a process of transformation similar to the one in the workforce. In the early post-war years, a cult of Youth Work Actions was carefully groomed as captured by numerous early posters of ORA. However, there was an obvious change of course in later years concerning the purpose of these Actions and it was clearly captured in corresponding posters. In the

[13] The active female expert was shown in three out of three hundred posters identified by author of this text.

late forties and early fifties, participation in the ORA assumes hard mass effort, which has been reflected and stimulated through numerous portrayals of fervent young people at work, such as the one mentioned above (*Ispunivši svoj zavjet...*). According to Andrea Matošević, this first wave of work actions is well captured in the phrase 'reachable utopia' where "everyone wanted to do more and proudly show to Tito how impossible becomes possible".[14] Yet, as Matošević notes, already the late fifties' generation was reproached for imitation of western fashion, music, for 'vanity and rebellion' and 'immoral habits'. The posters of Youth Workers' Actions were struggling against new influences by attempting to impose the ideal of a responsible and conscientious generation through already established images of smiling and enthusiastic working youth. However, the rhetoric that was valid for the fifties was no longer applicable in the following decades. From the sixties on, youth magazines (*Polet*, *Pop ekspres*, *Omladinski list*) present new, very advanced designs. Thus, the design of posters for Youth Work Actions had to be updated as well and the messages that the state transmitted to the youth needed to be dressed in a contemporary fashion. The intention beyond new Youth Work Actions was to mitigate with consequences of political liberalization[15] and to conceive the coexistence of the communist ideology with the new rock generations. Youth Work Actions of the 1970s and the 1980s became places for socializing and leisure and the posters promoting them were defined by pop culture motifs. One of those posters – *ORA81* by Branko Gavrić (Figure 8: Belgrade, 1981), starring Superman – provides an interesting set of contradictions: an American (capitalist) superhero (with face of Yugoslav rocker Vlado Divjan) promotes Youth work action on a poster whose iconography otherwise recalls the 1974 poster for *Dan samoupravljača*.

Furthermore, on the majority of the 1980s political posters intended for the younger population, it is noticeable that the official symbols of the state are either camouflaged or entirely disappear. If they exist, they are often ambivalent if not openly subversive, and on verge of excess. The impression is that the state is persistently trying to capture the new generation which is uninterested in proclaimed communist values, but – especially from the second half of the 1980s – the performance of these posters and magazine covers seems to counter their intended use. Late Yugoslav youth posters are critical towards the contemporary generation and, like poster *40 godina omladinske pruge / 40 years of Youth Railway* (Serbia, 1986, Figure 9), remind new (ungrateful?) urban youth on the sacrifice of prior generations. Contrary to those complaints, there are openly confrontational magazines (like Slovenian *Mladina*) or self-critical (in best communist manner) messages from the poster for the 11th Congress of SSO Croatia (Figure 10: Zagreb, 1986) showing the leg of a ballerina dressed in red, precariously balancing on the edge. Rebellious youth demands more freedom,

[14] Andrea Matošević, "Posrednici u stvaranju socijalističkih ljudi na omladinskim radnim akcijama: utopija, dijalektika i vrijeme," in *Stvaranje socijalističkog čovjeka* ed. Igor Duda (Zagreb, Pula: Srednja Europa, Sveučilište Jurja Dobrile, 2017), 80.

[15] Reana Senjković, "Uvod," in *Omladinske radne akcije: dizajn ideologije* (Zagreb: Kultura Uimjetnosti, 2017), 8.

questions the future of the system and demands changes, just as it is foreshadowed by the slogan of the poster for the 11th Congress of SSO Serbia – *Menjajmo da nas ne promene / Let us change in order to not be replaced*, 1986.

The female population is rarely a protagonist of political posters or any other political print, and that says much about the female position in socialist Yugoslavia. Although formally equal, Yugoslav women are not the primary audience of political agitation, because they are not really meant to be politically active. Here and there, a female character is present on the earliest posters celebrating the rebuilding of the country, but even then, they are only supporting male labor. Women are always shown a step behind men, and most often with a sickle in their hand, as in poster *Društveno upravljanje Snaga socijalizma / Social self-management Strength of Socialism* (Croatia, 1960, Figure 11). Contrary to a manhandling a hammer or a flag as a symbol of a new industrial society and a new state, a woman with a sickle or a sheaf of wheat in hand is a representative of a village – secondary and backward: "In extensive social planning, urbanization and deagrarization follow them at a rate by designing new urban settlements, but also leaving the village on a sideways track where everything that is considered backward will be found."[16]

The female identity in Yugoslavia, at least when considering print media and graphic design, was formed mainly through advertising and women's magazines. This is particularly true in the 1960s when, after adopting the market economy, women are established as key consumers of the new Yugoslav industry. The political poster addresses men: even when political slogans seemingly acknowledge all Yugoslav citizens (*Let us build, let us compete*), the 'us' is illustrated by young males excluding the rest of population. And, when (rarely) they address women, as a poster for ORA (Gavrić, 1981, Figure 12), they address them as consumers, by asking: *What will you wear this summer?*

The only less present segment of the population in political propaganda than women were senior citizens (particularly older women). To paraphrase part of *Norton's Thesis No 6* – it is important to question what is not said/shown, what cannot be said/shown. Out of some three hundred identified Yugoslav political posters, only a few of them show a human figure past his/her prime. The exceptions, of course, being the portraits of fathers of communist ideology: Tito, Marx or Lenin. Still, even Tito's portrait, although the frequent subject of political poster, is rarely shown in his later years (in three posters altogether) and even then, it is highly rasterized to cover up the most prominent signs of aging (*8. kongres Saveza komunista Bosne i Hercegovine / 8th Congress of communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 1982, Figure 13). It could be deduced that Yugoslavia saw itself foremost as a virile, potent state of erect factory chimneys and shining batons. Or, as Igor Duda quotes Milorad *Đilas›s* report from 1949, "a Yugoslav man is a man of rich inner life, physically and morally healthy, stout and hearty."[17]

[16] Duda, "Uvod: od nazadnosti do svemira, od projekta do zbornika," 12.

[17] Ibid., 13.

When we talk of a subversive subtext in a political poster, the question arises – to what extent the designer has planted an unwanted message hidden to the client and to what extent it was simply a communist preference for self-criticism. In any case, the ambivalence of political posters and the possibility of multiple meanings in the previously established symbols can only be seen from the sixties onwards, after liberating the public space. At the end of the seventies and in the early eighties, especially within the press intended for young people, there are more frequent instances of clear and obvious criticism, although they usually occur within a dominant narrative and within institutions themselves. Ljubica Spasovska thus states: "[t]he reiteration of socialist slogans appeared anachronistic to a generation which witnessed their pure rhetorical, performative use and hence used them to challenge the official socialist discourse through various cultural forms."[18] Probably the most direct conflict with the dominant ideology occurred in Slovenia through the famous poster affair of 1987, when the *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (art collective formed in Slovenia in 1984) won the state competition for the Youth Day poster with their submission which turned out to be an appropriated image of Richard Klein's Nazi propaganda painting from the 1930s updated to the communist iconography.

Yet, as noted by Cvetka Požar,[19] the poster that replaced the scandalous proposal is equally critical of the political system: new and approved poster displayed a leaf of linden tree (symbol of Slovenia) partially torn by a five-pointed star. As already mentioned, in the late 1980s the federal authorities lost control over the local press/print (of various Yugoslav republics). The political poster, of course, continued to fulfill its function of forming an ideal citizen, but for the needs of another narrative.

The design of posters and newspapers had an important influence on the (trans)-formation of the identity of the main population groups in Yugoslavia, either through the ways of representing the ideal representatives of individual groups or through their omission. Graphic design as a part of the mass (and massive) industry of the print media had a significant reach in the transmission of regime messages, the establishment of state symbols, and the dominant narrative of desirable values and characteristics of citizens. The ubiquity of media products (posters, leaflets, cover pages) has enabled continuous repetition and iteration of messages aiming to form the ideal subject. At the same time, the established power itself has made these symbols vulnerable to subversion and contamination with additional meanings. Ultimately, when this other, contaminated meaning overwhelmed the regime's interpretations of the symbols, even the seemingly loyal political poster contributed to the downfall of a dominant narrative and the formation of new identities of its audience.

[18] Ljubica Spaskovska, *The Last Yugoslav Generation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 118.

[19] Cvetka Požar, *Stoletje plakata: Plakat 20. stoletja na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana: Muzej za arhitekturo in oblikovanje, 2015), 152.

Figure 1: Mihajlo Arsovski: poster *Predstava Hamleta u selu Mrduša Donja*, Zagreb, 1971; from the collection of Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb

Figure 2: Slobodan Mašić: catalog cover *FEST72*, Belgrade, 1972; from the collection of Museum of Applied Arts, Belgrade

Figure 3: Matjaž Vipotnik: poster *Missa in A minor*, Slovenia, 1980–81; from the collection of Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana

Figure 4: poster *Živeo Prvi maj*, Serbia, 1946; from the collection of Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade

Figure 5: Janez Trpin: poster *Osvobojeni gradimo*, Slovenia, 1945; from the collection of Museum of Architecture and Design, Ljubljana

Figure 6: Milan Stanković: poster *Dan samoupravljača*, Belgrade, 1974, from the collection of Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade

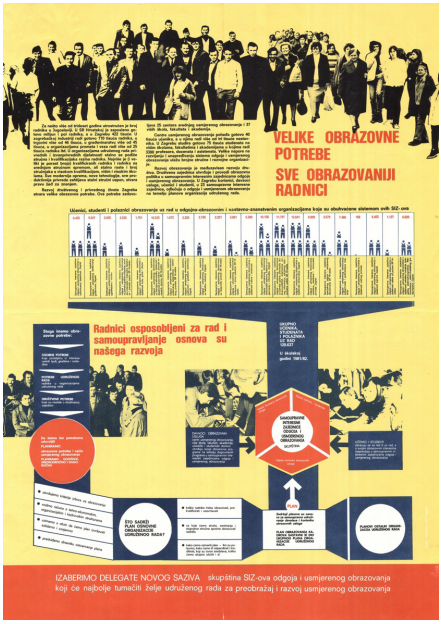

Figure 7: Duško Šojlev: poster *Velike obrazovne potrebe Sve obrazovaniji radnici*, Zagreb, 1982; from the collection of Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb

Figure 8: Branko Gavrić: poster *ORA81*, Belgrade, 1981; the property of Branko Gavrić

Figure 9: poster *40 godina omladinske pruge*, Serbia, 1986; from the collection of Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade

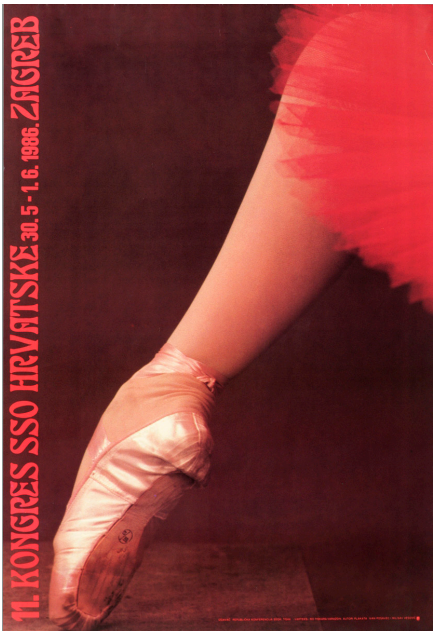

Figure 10: Ivan Posavec, Mio Vesović: poster *11th Congress of SSO Croatia,* Zagreb, 1986; from the collection of Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb

Figure 11: poster *Društveno upravljanje Snaga socijalizma*, Croatia, 1960; from the collection of Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb

Figure 12: Branko Gavrić: poster *Što ćete nositi ovog leta?*, Belgrade, 1981; the property of Branko Gavrić

Figure 13: poster *8. kongres Saveza komunista Bosne i Hercegovine*, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1982; from the collection of Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade

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