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### **Book Review: Vladimir Veljašević, *Slobodan pad [Free Fall]*, Beograd: Besna kobila, 2017, 120 pp., ISBN 978-86-88389-15-0**

Graphic narratives do not commonly appear in Serbia, therefore *Slobodan pad [Free Fall]*, the graphic novel by Vladimir Veljašević, professor at the Printmaking Department of Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Arts in Belgrade, is an important contribution to this field of creativity. It is, as Jelena Spaić explains in her introductory note, a “pictogram guide through Ljubomir Micić’s no-end, exercise in style about Dadaism and/or Zenitism literature, the first endeavour of this kind made by the Printmaking Cabinet of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade.” As we live in a media-saturated world, with its continual flow of visual images, our visual literacy becomes more sophisticated. Thus, this is the context in which this work has appeared. A graphic novel is defined as a transmedia work in which words and images are combined in order to construct a story. The graphic novel is a genre that has strong references to comic books as well as filmmaking techniques; in a way graphic novels are cinematic, their image plates reminiscent of film stills.

Veljašević’s graphic novel is actually the visual biography of a ‘superhero’, the Yugoslav avant-garde artist Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971), who in 1921 in Zagreb launched the avant-garde journal *Zenit* which was edited in Belgrade from 1925, establishing the Balkan avant-garde movement dubbed Zenitism. Although the definition of transmedia works is a combination of words and images, in Veljašević’s work images are dominant, with few words, usually those that refer to the avant-garde movements from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like *Dada*, *Zenitism*, etc. There are also visual references functioning as visual clues: usually covers of Zenitist books and a journal, as well as other avant-garde journals Micić was familiar with, like *De Stijl* or Dragan Aleksić’s *Dada-tank*, Marinetti’s *parolibre* or commercial posters of the time, like one advertising Bata shoes.

At the beginning of the book we find two texts written by Jelena Spaić, on the project and on Ljubomir Micić’s life and work, which function as paratexts, helping us to navigate through this biographical graphic novel. Spaić gives a short but at the same time detailed account of Micić’s life and work, which will later to be traced in pictograms of Veljašević’s graphic novel. Visually constructing the narrative of Micić’s life, Veljašević posits him and his work in the broader geopolitical context of the time, pointing to the dramatic historical moment of European history but also the dramatic

story of the art and of one extremely complex and controversial personality and his oeuvre. The decision that Micić and Zenitism should be the theme of this work is symptomatic of the broader present period's dominant: the period in which experimental art and literature became finally globally historized and posited at the centre of cultural interest. It is an especially important fact in the Serbian context, which was, like many others, for a long period of time extremely hostile toward any kind of experiment in art and literature.

I will now trace in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cultural spaces the works which could be understand as precursors of Veljašević's undertaking. At the beginning I will point to Branko ve Poljanski's film-novel titled *77 samoubica (77 suisiders)* published in 1923. The genre film-novel points to transmediality: the film-novel is realized as dominantly language art but in which visual elements are inserted, and it moves between two literary genres: poetry and prose. But the main idea was to transfer film techniques into the dominantly written media, and the impact of German expressionist movies is evident. In the 1960s Marko Pogačnik realized comics as a combination of words and images, published in a magazine, and also realized as an installation. Vujica Rešin Tucić realized the graphic novel *Struganje mašte*, published as a book in 1991, which could be also contextualized as an experimental work in the context of poetry. Writing about Veljašević's graphic novel, Spaić in her text mentioned pictograms, which reminds of poet and artist Vlado Martek's explanation that he invented a range of pictograms, which reappear in his visual and visual/verbal works as a kind of his signature style.

Poljanski's film-novel is symptomatic of bourgeois urban Yugoslav citizens and their obsession with and/or ambivalence towards modern consumer culture, with its main media – film – that impacted and transformed art, with the strong influence on experimental arts. Pogačnik's comic and Tucić's graphic novel were symptoms of socialist Yugoslav culture, in which from the 1960s onward a conglomerate of consumer culture, popular youth culture and experimental art were penetrating socialism's everyday life and made possible experimental arts which were getoized in Student cultural centres in all major Yugoslav towns. Although Martek and Veljašević come from different cultural and artistic contexts of the former Yugoslavia, their commonality is the shared heritage of Yugoslav experimental art, which includes the strong impact of Zenitists avant-garde, or of neo-avant-garde and conceptualism of the OHO group, as well as the Group of Six authors to which Martek belonged. On the other hand, it is important to stress that all these artistic movements and individual artists fought for the constructing and participating in of international (we will today say transnational) artistic language, which transgress national borders.

At the promotion of his book in Parobrod, Veljašević stressed one important thing for understanding his work. He said that all pictograms in his books are taken from the Internet. Having said this, he pointed to the historical difference: his work appeared in the age of the domination of global communication thanks to the Internet. This fact also points to the question of originality in art. Originality was an

ideological concept that functioned as a fundamental, unquestionable fact in creating artistic value. The postmodernists from the 1970s and 80s proclaimed originality as a Modernist myth. The difference between visual art and literature is in relevance of originality, or of unoriginality, as pointed out by American poet Kenneth Goldsmith. In relation to Veljašević's work, it could be stressed that the language of graphic design, the field from which our artist comes, with its iconic signs, is a contemporary 'universal' language of public communication. The relevance of the Internet is crucial, because it is the repository of a limitless number of images and texts, which are offered for use in different ways. Veljašević uses this possibility in his graphic novel, thus making this an exciting and interesting artwork.