

# Engaging Miki Muster's Legacy: Remembering Zvitorepec (Slyboots) in Contemporary Slovenia

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*Abstract.* This paper explores Miki Muster's work and its reception in both socialist and contemporary Slovenia, arguing that a certain type of public corresponds to a specific aesthetic regime. The central thesis is that the socialist public behaves differently compared to the contemporary configuration, resulting in a changed reception of Muster's work. With reference to Miško Šuvaković, the socialist social configuration follows a distinctive mode of governance, meaning that the heterogeneity of acting in public needs to be taken into account. This paper demonstrates that Muster intertwines Western visual images of his comic characters with the historical aesthetic configuration of Socialist Yugoslavia. Due to the change of the political system, the current reception of Muster's work operates as a nostalgic phenomenon, which is demonstrated by the questionnaire distributed to different generations. In the concluding part, the paper presents a synthesis via Ann Rigney's dynamic model of cultural memory and elaborates on the future potential of Muster's comic imagery.

*Key Words:* Miki Muster, Slyboots, political cartoons, nostalgia, capitalism, socialism

## **Spominjanje Mustrovega Zvitorepca v sodobni slovenski družbi**

*Povzetek.* Članek obravnava delo Mikija Mustra in njegovo recepcijo tako v socialistični kot sodobni Sloveniji, pri čemer izpostavlja, da določen tip javnosti ustreza specifičnemu estetskemu režimu. Osrednja teza je, da socialistična javnost v primerjavi s sodobno učinkuje drugače, kar vpliva na spremenjeno recepcijo Mustrovega dela. Po besedah Miška Šuvakovića socialistična javnost sledi posebnemu načinu delovanja. Članek predstavi načine, kako Miki Muster prepleta vizualne

podobe z Zahoda z (zgodovinsko) estetsko konfiguracijo socialistične Jugoslavije. Zaradi spremembe političnega sistema sodobna recepcija Mustrovega dela učinkuje kot nostalgичen fenomen, kar dokazuje tudi anketni vprašalnik, ki so ga izpolnile različne generacije. V sklepnem delu članek predstavi sintezo preko koncepta kulturnega spomina Ann Rigney in podrobneje obravnava potencial Mustrovih stripovskih podob.

*Ključne besede:* Miki Muster, Zvitorepec, politične karikature, nostalgija, kapitalizem, socializem

## Introduction

Our first encounter with Miki Muster, and in particular with his famous Slyboots comics, is inherently linked to school summer holidays, which, at least in the time of Yugoslavia were usually spent somewhere on the Adriatic coast (figure 1). On one occasion, luckily for us, the summer sweetness of a child's boredom was saved by a series of Slyboots comics, given to us by a neighbouring camper. However, the tranquillity of the childhood privilege of not needing to care about the labyrinthine complexities of social reality abruptly ended with the Balkan wars in the 1990s, when innocence and naivety was turned into asking questions that did not have an easy answer – or to refer to the 1960s phrase, personal suddenly became political. While growing older, we ran into Muster's political cartoons, many of them functioning differently from Slyboots comics, read in our childhoods. How was this possible, we asked each other, encouraging us to think about the reception of Muster's work today.

In this manner, this article will investigate the relation between Miki Muster's work Zvitorepec (Slyboots) and the public in both socialist and contemporary Slovenia; we argue that a certain type of public corresponds to a specific aesthetic regime.

Jovita Pristovšek's (2019) argument in which she claims that the aesthetic regime blurs the boundaries between art and other spheres of production will allow us to rearticulate all three key spaces of social (re)production – i.e. the aesthetic, the public and the political – as actual regimes, demonstrating that socialist and contemporary regimes have distinctive sets of norms, rules and protocols around which the expectations and actions of the subjects are constituted.

Accordingly, this paper argues, in reference to Miško Šuvaković, that the socialist social configuration follows a distinctive mode of governance, meaning that the heterogeneity of acting in public needs to be



Figure 1

Slyboots (Zvi-torepec), the Wise Tortoise Trdonja, and the Always Hungry Wolf Lakotnik (reproduced with permission of the copyright owner)

taken into account (Šuvaković 2011). Thus, this study's central thesis is that a socialist public acts differently in comparison to the contemporary configuration, resulting in a changed reception of Muster's work.

Furthermore, this paper will demonstrate that Muster intertwines Western visual images of his comic characters with the historical configuration of Socialist Yugoslavia. Along these lines, Muster's work seems to resonate Fredric Jameson's (1991, 54) claim concerning the effacement of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture. Additionally, we claim that due to the change of the political system, the contemporary reception of Muster's work operates as a nostalgic phenomenon, which is demonstrated by the questionnaire handed to different generations.

In the concluding part we will deliver synthesis via Ann Rigney's dynamic model of cultural memory and elaborate on the future potential of the image of Muster's comics.

### Public Sphere, Life and Aesthetic Regime

To be able to connect Muster's image with a specific aesthetic regime, we need to articulate the relation between the public sphere, life and aesthetic regime. We will start with Habermas's concept of the public sphere.

Much has been said about Habermas's (1989, 49) conceptual idea of a public sphere, where supposedly all citizens would be able to gather

and discuss matters of common interest in an ‘unrestricted fashion.’ However, the Habermasian model of a public sphere is a normative one and is an effect of the process of marking boundaries, resulting in exclusion (Deutsche 1998). Another challenge with the Habermasian model is that it is based on the dividing line between state and society, separating the private sphere from the public sphere, neglecting specifics of, for example, socialist states, underlining Nancy Fraser’s (1992) claim that it is almost impossible to separate matters of public and private concern, especially for historically marginalized groups.

Fraser’s (1992) criticism of the Habermasian model that overlooks marginalized groups, which nonetheless form their own spaces, has been taken as an epistemic base for this paper in order to inspect the structure of the socialist model of the public sphere, examining its specifics through an analysis of Muster’s works.

In her book *Structural Racism, Theory and Power*, Pristovšek (2019) evocates Rancière’s notion of the aesthetic regime to – among other things – rethink aesthetics in the vicinity of the nation-state. The importance of Rancière’s understanding of aesthetic regime is his underlining of a link between the production of works (or artistic practice) and the forms of visibility that these forms take (Deranty 2010), enabling us to think art production and life on the same plane.

‘Aesthetic regime’ thus represents a field in which a new paradigm of community can be conceived, epistemically positioning itself as a place that opens to political thinking, which, as Habermas shows, is after all connected to the public. In regard to Rancière’s analysis, we have identified two distinctive historical public forms, which has allowed us to address specific themes of socialist and contemporary Slovenia with reference to Muster’s work.

### ***Structuring the Public Sphere in Socialist Yugoslavia and Postsocialist Slovenia***

The public sphere is a space of social reflection which is constructed differently in specific historical formations. Jasmina Založnik (2017), for instance, writes that in Socialist Yugoslavia various unitarisms proclaimed social egalitarianism, brotherhood and unity; a project of language and cultural unitarisms, gender blindness, etc., structuring the public in Yugoslavia as enmeshed with politics to usher in the revolutionary project.

Despite some of the common traits, the socialist public sphere did change over time. Already in the 1960s, Yugoslav praxis philosophers de-

manded a free public sphere, although in the context of understanding public discourse as a medium for facilitating socialist society in Marx's sense (Križan 1989). Further changes took place with the formation of civil society in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Mastnak 1990), with civil society being seen as separated from the state; in this regard new social movements, e.g. punk, were essential in constituting an alternative public sphere and new political subjectivities.

Despite the common opinion among western philosophers and sociologists arguing that the Yugoslav system was where socialist humanism was well-anchored, and where, accordingly, emphasis was placed on the greater respect of individual rights, compared to its Soviet counterpart (Ramšak 2018). This propelled the so-called self-management system, however even in the 1980s, it was according to Marina Gržinić (2023), difficult to enter the public space, which was characterized as a distinctive space.

With respect to Muster's work, in his interview for *Dnevnik*, he explains that when he started drawing, anything which resembled America was not allowed (Mehle 2015), clearly demonstrating the unique relation between the public sphere, collective life and aesthetic regime. However, as we will later show, Muster's comic image drew importantly on Western influences.

On the other hand, the Slovenian contemporary public sphere cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the unique processes of the Slovenian media sphere's privatization that took place within the change of the political-economic system.

In their analysis of the Slovenian media space, Sandra Bašić Hrvatin and Lenart J. Kučič (2004) stress that at the beginning of the 1990s a specific privatization model was implemented in Slovenia; they also argue that the main feature of the present day media space in Slovenia is corporatization of media discourse, resulting in media content being subordinated to the interests of media owners and the largest advertisers. Referring to Bašić Hrvatin and Kučič (2004), in contrast to other socialist East and Central European countries that sold off their media to foreign owners at the beginning of the transition period, Slovenia took a decade to carry out the privatization process; however, in the end it experienced a rather similar outcome that it otherwise aimed to prevent. In a similar vein, other researches claim the same, arguing that the process of trading and exchanging ownership shares of state-owned companies from 1995 to 2006 resulted in a consolidation of ownership, where a small num-

ber of ‘domestic’ (Slovenian) owners enabled both horizontal and vertical concentration of ownership via numerous interlinked and cross-owned companies (Ribač 2019). To summarize with Marko Milosavljević (2016), the Slovenian media landscape has been influenced by the economic and political restructuring of the former socialist society. Furthermore, with the economic crisis of 2008/2009, the Slovenian media sector exhibited a considerable level of weakness, leaving various actors, e.g. media companies, weaker and exposed to both political and advertising pressure from owners and other ‘key agents’ in society (Milosavljević 2016).

The structural conditions of the Slovenia contemporary media space – among other things, in Slovenia there are more than 2,000 media outlets, more than 2,000 journalists and only 2 million inhabitants – and wider technological transformation, e.g. social media channels, are undoubtedly playing an important role in shaping this space’s content, which is characterized by the use of tabloid narratives, and even verbal excesses in journalistic stories (Vežjak 2024). In addition, we are seeing an expansion of hate speech and phenomena linked to fake news and overall spread of misinformation, encouraging a culture of subjective opinions. To encapsulate, both public spheres, i.e. socialist and contemporary, are related to a specific social bond, which is reflected in distinctive content production. By delineating the characteristics of both the socialist and contemporary Slovenian public space, elaboration of each of the aesthetic regimes can be conducted to demonstrate the reception of Muster’s Slyboots in both versions of the public space. We will now focus on the case study of Muster’s Slyboots.

### **Case Study: Miki Muster’s Slyboots**

#### ***Who is Miki Muster?***

Miki Muster, born in 1925, is a pioneer of Slovenian comics and one of the most successful creators in the field of comics, known for his iconic comic series Slyboots (1952–1973). Slyboots’s characters gained an iconic status very quickly, literally from its launch in the 1950s, when Western cultural novelties were more or less reluctantly introduced to the socialist environment. He is regarded as one of the most successful creators of cartoons in Slovenia as well. His overall oeuvre is enviable in scope, quality and diversity.

Between 1952 and 1973 he published in *Slovenski poročevalec*, a predecessor of *Delo*, a central Slovenian newspaper, where he worked as a journalist and illustrator. In 1973 he moved to Munich, where he was engaged

in production of cartoon films. During this time Muster also made his legendary commercial advertisements and created a world-famous series of cartoons based on the ideas of the French cartoonist of Argentine origin, Guillermo Mordillo. In the 90s, Muster worked as a political cartoonist for *Mag* and later *Reporter* magazine. In 2015, Muster was awarded the Prešeren Prize for Lifetime Achievement, which is considered as one the most prestigious national awards in arts.

Already during his lifetime, Muster was like a rock star: people stopped him and asked if they could shake his hand. Even today, if (in particular older generations, as we will later show) asked about Muster, they will usually respond that Muster still makes them feel like they have a child inside them.

### ***Historical Development of Slyboots***

Let us now focus on the historical context of *Slyboots*. *Slyboots* was first published in July 1952 in a predecessor of *Delo*. However, his debut, according to Alja Brglez's (2011) extensive study on Muster, was not really a result of a deliberate desire to instigate home-grown comic strip production. On the contrary, seven years after the end of the Second World War and four years after the Informbiro, influenced by Stalin, the editor Igor Šentjunc commissioned a Disney comic to be published on the most famous and most prominent back page. But the comic did not arrive in time – in one of his interviews, Muster hinted, 'that the comic had arrived, but that it was then taken to customs or wherever, so as not to spoil the youth' (Brglez 2011, 59).

Leaving his suspicions aside, Muster, at that time employed as a journalist-illustrator, was asked to draw one of his own comics, which would resemble Walt Disney's animal-like characters, but with some Slovenian touches, so that readers would be able to identify with them more easily.

Handily, within the early socialist period, a quintessential (Western) content in a distinctly modern form was introduced to Slovenia, questioning the belief that the first years of the Yugoslav and Slovenian socialist development were sealed from everything which was not ideologically consistent and defined by the definitions of the new social order.

Muster's comics and his protagonists resembled Disney-like characters, but were adapted to the Slovenian cultural heritage of local fairy tales (to prevent Muster being accused of Americanism) and made a strong connection with their audience (Brglez 2011).

In one of his interviews, Muster underlined the role of his readers, who



Figure 2

Road to the Moon (reproduced with permission of the copyright owner)

were making eager demands to editors to enable a constant flow of the comics, easing the threat, so to speak, of possible censorship (Brglez 2011). Muster also explained how he was allowed to draw, albeit on condition that he would not draw American-like comics.

When the atmosphere liberalized and when it became clear that his comics could do no (political) harm, Muster started drawing picture books. However, there was in fact one reported incident of political censorship. In his comic story *Road to the Moon*, published in 1959 (Muster 2011a), Muster's vision of space exploration and above all, a critique of geopolitical tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies, the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc, Muster's protagonists were stopped by the Soviets, which happened to be drawn like bears. Slyboots's main characters have anthropomorphic animal traits; nevertheless, the Soviet embassy protested to the Muster's editor, who asked Muster, 'What are we going to do?' and Muster responded:



'Nothing, give me a week to think of something' (Brglez 2011, 71). Muster continued the story, so the Soviets let the matter go; the Americans did not really care how they were represented (figure 2).

### *Slyboots's Image in Socialist Yugoslavia: Traces of Western Aesthetics in the Socialist Aesthetic Regime*

In the following section of the paper, we would like to show the mechanisms by which Muster intertwines Western visual images of his comic characters with the historical configuration of Socialist Yugoslavia.

In one of the first in-depth studies on comics in Yugoslavia, France Zupan (1969), an art historian and sociologist of culture, underlined the character of mass culture in comics. Zupan (1969) also stressed the importance of regular publication and the unique set of values and tradition of the Slovenian cultural space; however, he also emphasized the intermeshing between Western and socialist aesthetics.

Yet, Muster's comics are devoid of official socio-ideology, although the wise tortoise Trdonja openly wears a middle-class bow tie, while the always-hungry wolf called Lakotnik dresses akin to Uncle Sam (without the stars and stripes). This indicates that Muster by no means shied away from conceptual messages. Therefore, he was politically incorrect, which is typical for youth comics. Additionally, there is one story, a direct criticism of the socialist economy, Problems with Construction (figure 3 and figure 4) from the early years of economic liberalization (before Kavčič's



Figure 3

Problems with Construction (reproduced with permission of the copyright owner)

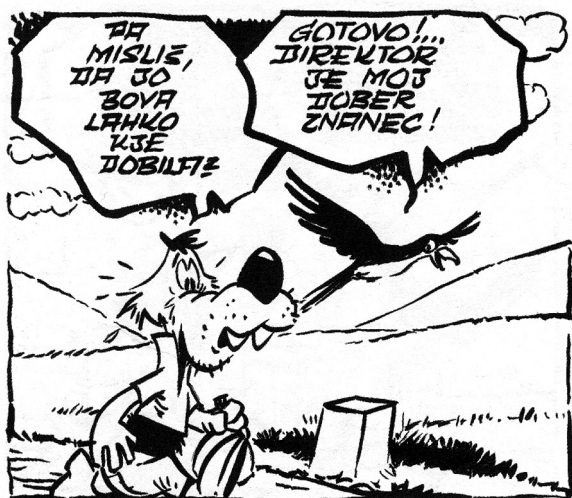


Figure 4

Problems with Construction (reproduced with permission of the copyright owner)

reforms) in 1963 (Muster 2011b). It serves as a direct and clear satire on bureaucracy and social corruption, revealing that socialist Slovenia was not totalitarian (Vidmar 2011, 4).

Igor Vidmar states that Slyboots (Zvitorepec), the tortoise Trdonja, and the wolf Lakotnik (figure 5) remain vivid in his memory, not merely as nostalgic figures but as joyful, vibrant, native, comic animal-human hero-archetypes. They represent his initial encounter with the high-quality and dynamic use of comic language, which consistently transcended the mundane aspects of socialist society, leading us into the realms of a global state of mind (Vidmar 2011, 4).

Miki Muster, a pioneer of Slovenian comics and a world-class animator, did not receive many awards for his work. However, in 1978, the Yugoslav association established the Andrija Award (named after the Croatian comics pioneer Andrija Maurović) for achievements in the field of comics, with Muster being the first recipient for his lifelong contributions. The accompanying explanation stated (Modic 2011b, 8):

Miki Muster, as the most prominent Slovenian creator of graphic literature to date, is recognized for his unique quality achievements in the tradition of Disney's caricature animal comics, particularly in the earlier period. His work, characterized by drawing integrity and script processing, lays the foundation of Slovenian and Yugoslav comics while simultaneously earning its place among the classics of the European ninth art.



**Figure 5**

Slyboots (Zvitorepec), the Wise Tortoise Trdonja, and the Always Hungry Wolf Lakotnik (reproduced with permission of the copyright owner)

Max Modic revealed that Muster remarked that without socialism, he might have established his own studio much earlier in Slovenia. In 1973, as already stated, Muster relocated to Germany for better creative conditions and while there, he crossed paths with Guillermo Mordillo, a world-renowned French cartoonist of Argentine descent, who sought a European studio to adapt his caricatures into cartoons. Muster produced nearly 400 films for Mordillo, albeit without receiving credit (Modic 2011a, 5–8). He conceptualized animated films as moving comic books. Upon his return from Germany in 1990, Muster's body of work in comics and cartoons was extraordinary. He devoted sixteen hours a day to drawing (Modic 2011b, 5–6).

Stylistically, Muster's work in Slyboots is distinguished by his transparent framing, effective comic dynamics, inventive scripts, fluent dialogue and an overall reliable composition. Muster used a concise outline drawing, initially a pen drawing technique, later ink, with his style gradually maturing into a distinctly precise contour drawing, stylisation and realistic perfectionism (Brglez 2011).

In terms of the characters, demand resulted in characters' development in stages, as not all of his main protagonists were developed together. Gradually, the series ended in three anthropomorphic, animal-like char-

acters, with the witty and inventive fox, clever and good-natured tortoise, and edgy and greedy wolf who became most popular with the readers (Brglez 2011). To quote from one of Muster's interviews (Teran Košir 2011):

Sometimes there are stories in which he is the only protagonist. He was enough because he was a figure you could do a lot of things with. I also liked him. At the beginning he was bloodthirsty, because in the fable the wolf is just like that, but over time he became a positive character.

France Zupan (1969) also identified a set of values promoted by the central Slyboots characters, i.e. optimism, chivalry, honesty, camaraderie, not being too fond of individualistic ambitiousness, self-importance, or authoritarian personalities, and furthermore, always being on the side of the weak. In Slyboots, this value set is played via evocation of the narratological framework of adventure, the use of narrative techniques such as gags and innovative scripts.

### **Back to the Present: Slyboots's Image in the Contemporary Aesthetic Regime**

Let us now jump to contemporary times. Muster's comic series offers a potent research ground for analysing the historical reception of capitalist content in early socialist Yugoslavia (Brglez 2011) and beyond.

But perhaps even more interesting is how Muster's work is remembered within contemporary Slovenia, which cannot be fully understood without taking into account its specific transition from socialist Yugoslavia to capitalism – a process marked by different stages of neoliberal capitalization (Hočevár 2021) and its accompanying cultural mode of production, which in regard to Muster in particular, comes to light in his later work from the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century, when he was active as a political cartoonist.

### ***Study on the Reception of Miki Muster's Work: Beyond Slyboots***

For the purposes of identifying reception of Muster's work in contemporary times, we constructed a survey using Google forms. The survey, which consisted of 8 open questions,<sup>1</sup> took place between 15th and 20th of January 2023. Thirty-nine responses were received, with women and men being almost equally represented. In terms of age, the most responses

<sup>1</sup> The questions are listed in the appendix section.

came from persons aged 40, followed by persons aged 36 and 44.<sup>2</sup> But it was important for us to check if there are any differences between age groups, especially in people born in the late 1990s vs. people born in the 1950s. Unfortunately, it was rather difficult to gain data from the second group, which we attribute to the lack of digital skills and competences.

In terms of education, the majority of respondents obtained a high school degree, followed by a bachelor and a master degree.

A question at which age the readers were introduced to the comic series is semi-demographical and more content related. Nevertheless, most people started reading comics at the age of 10.

Due to the open-ended questions design, we were able to get access to more nuanced sentiments about Muster's work. The questions aspired to understand respondents' remembrance modes; furthermore, the survey wanted to 'test' the dimension of forgetting by checking if the respondents remembered the main Slyboots characters, although identification of the so-called critical distance was also installed into the survey, by asking whether the comics and Muster's work are problematic in any way, e.g. by putting focus on his later work in reference to his political cartoons.

What the results show is an obvious sentiment of nostalgia; quoting some of the responses:

They [Slyboots comic series] are a very nice reminder of my youth, when I had the passion, time and energy to read and learn about the world. I would recommend them to today's generations, perhaps with notes about the time and place in which they were written.

Even to me they were presented as a kind of legacy, a memory of the past, and in that sense I can imagine that they could be entertaining for the younger generations of today.

They remind me of relaxed summer days, so I have fond memories [...] quite nostalgic. I would also recommend them to the present generation.

What we have found interesting is that out of 39 responses, almost 75% of respondents remember Slyboots's characters. In regard to 'contemporary lenses,' 14 respondents problematize representation of women, which they say evokes patriarchy and orientalism. In terms of controversy, related to political cartoons, only 6 respondents are aware of them, of which 5 problematized them, with one response wrapping up nicely:

<sup>2</sup> Figure 6 in the appendix.

I saw the cartoons and I didn't really like them. Miki is primarily a children's author and I don't think he's good at political cartoons.

In terms of relevance, again the sentiment of nostalgia is evoked, especially in terms of the value of camaraderie, although we also found out that at least two respondents commented on the issue of comics being outdated due to the type of language Muster was using and the issue of technology. To quote one response:

I'm afraid [the comics are (not) relevant]. Because the stories are very non-digital, non-technological, very often linked to past eras (stone age, knights, cowboys ...), the language and the characters suffer the 'teeth of time.'

On the other hand, underlining Muster's comics as a national legacy, and perhaps more importantly, the factor of nostalgia has been again underscored in respondents' reactions.

### **Engaging Miki Muster's Legacy: Remembering Zvitorepec (Slyboots) in Contemporary Slovenia; The Contemporary Aesthetic Regime**

What to make of the collected data in regard to Muster's work, including his political cartoons, with reference to nostalgia? Let us first start with the definition of nostalgia. Christopher Lasch (1991, 83) understands nostalgia as an evocation of a time that is lost forever, and is therefore timeless. The prevalence of nostalgia can of course be very well observed in the conducted survey, as 6 respondents out of 39 speak about nostalgia directly. But can evocation of nostalgia address the intertwining of Western and socialist aesthetics and furthermore, give an insight into the functioning of both aesthetic regimes, socialist and contemporary?

Following Susan Stewart (1993, 23), 'nostalgia – like any other form of narrative – is always ideological: the past it seeks never existed elsewhere than in narrative,' and exactly this dimension of the narrative construction is key, as on one hand it enables us to obtain an insight into cultural memory of Muster's work, shedding light on the role of comics in transmitting and distributing these memories and on the other hand, it reveals Muster's complex reproduction of the ideological position towards socialist Yugoslavia. Muster spoke about Yugoslavia's political-economic system in many of his interviews (Bratož 2015):

I lived in a system that instilled fear; the post-war period was the worst, when you didn't dare open your mouth, even among family, relatives or friends, because you never knew who would report you.

In his interview with *Dnevnik*, along with *Delo*, another central Slovenian newspaper, Muster directly declared his political position (Mehle 2015). Interestingly enough, only three respondents in the survey associated Muster with his declared ideological position. But even these three, along with the rest of the respondents, remember and relate Muster and the Slyboots comics with their pleasant childhood memories, underlining the role of the narrative as something which is shared and as such provides a common channel for the transmission of memorability via which different generations articulate their experiences and convert them into a transferable form of disseminating narratives about the past.

### ***Nostalgia Stumbles upon Dissonance***

Let us go back to the moment when our childhood nostalgia stumbled upon dissonance, detected in Muster's later work. We will try to address it via Ann Rigney's (2018) thesis on the *dynamic and generative model of cultural memory*, which is about memorability being culturally produced in changing contexts. Conceptually potent is, in particular, Rigney's (2018, 243) claim that 'memory of recent events can work against the power that myths have acquired over much longer periods of time.'

In regard to Muster's case, Rigney's argument proves especially useful as his readers do not really problematize the socialist past; on the contrary, following their responses, Muster's claims are ontologically closer to myth. Furthermore, Muster is actually perceived as an indispensable part of socialist Yugoslavia – for instance, one respondent very clearly and directly wrote that Muster's comics were a mirror of the Slovenian society of that time, but not in a way Muster had perhaps envisaged. If Muster held a grudge towards socialist Yugoslavia, it can be provocatively claimed that it was the sociopolitical and cultural context of socialist Yugoslavia which functioned as a 'source' and impetus for his work, demonstrating that remembrance is an active process, occurring within specific historical relations. But remembrance is also a resource for redefinition of the past, albeit in this case of Muster's work operating as a reservoir for production of images for the purposes of consumerism (for instance, Muster's images are still used today for selling different products, for example, Nutella-like products) and further capitalist valorization, omitting Muster's sometimes problematic political cartoons and images of patriarchy, orientalism, etc. In terms of the narrative aspect, it is important to add that this reservoir functions as some kind of narrative, which according to Stewart (1993) is directly linked to nostalgia.

## Conclusion

If we have started this paper with nostalgia, it is only adequate to finish with it again. Clearly, Muster's comics are not achieving the popularity today that they did during socialism. And for this, there are several reasons, be it transformation of the aesthetic form (analogue to digital), be it the changed conditions of the medium's formats in terms of production and distribution (digitization and digitalization together), or be it the changed conditions of how creative industries contents are consumed, with circulation being, to refer to Jonathan Beller (2006), a mode of capitalist production on its own (Beller 2006).

However, the strange twist, or even irony of history, is that reception of Muster's comics nowadays is more or less based on the somehow lost values of socialism, e.g. camaraderie and collectivism, which are, at least for the neoliberal organization of the social bond, more or less abolished in favour of individualism, which is clearly detested by at least one of Muster's central characters, if not all of them, emphasizing the unique traits of the socialist aesthetic Yugoslav regime. Muster's comic figures are an example of the regime, where artistic form, mass or commercial culture, collective life and politics come together. Based on the responses from the respondents, Stewart's argument on nostalgia being always ideological resonates well, underlining the proposed argument to think about Muster's work via aesthetic regimes.

When analysing Muster's comics, we attempted to identify the reception of the contemporary audience. During this process, we observed a certain duality. In his late interviews, Muster encourages his readers to contemplate broader social issues, but on the other hand, his discourse is the discourse of the 20th century.

If the contemporary aesthetic regime is the regime of global capitalism together with its associated art forms and modes of subjectivities, characterized by a burden to create their own biographies (Beck 1992), narration of memories becomes indispensable for the reproduction of not just individual, but shared memories too. Following the conducted survey, it is interesting that most of the participants who responded to our invitation to take part in the questionnaire are in their late 30s and early 40s and what most of them have in common is their shared memory of the socialist past. But perhaps even more interesting – and a proposal for the next research – would be to get younger people to participate in the survey and delve into Maja Breznik and Rastko Močnik's (2021) hypoth-



esis on being able to have a shared memory of the past events which the involved individuals *did not* experience – solely based on experiencing Muster's comics and political cartoons.

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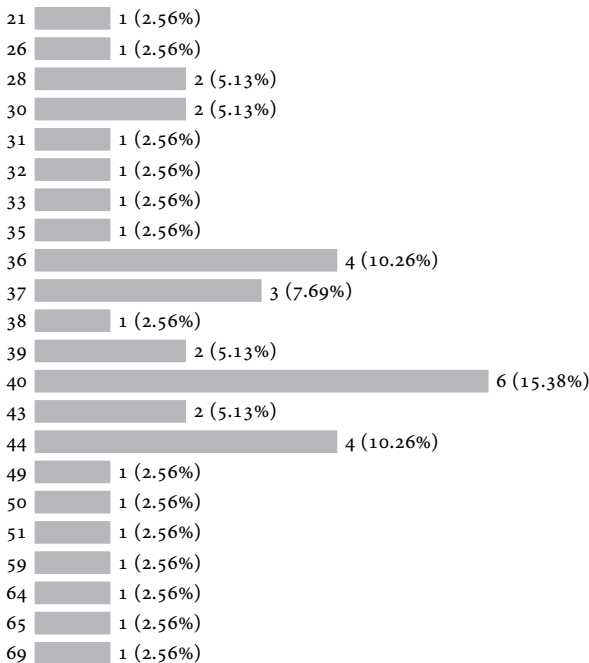
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## Appendix

The survey on the reception of Muster's work was conducted via Google forms between 15th and 20th of January 2023, consisting of 8 open questions and also demographical data. We received 39 responses. For the purpose of this paper, the responses were appropriately anonymized and used for interpretation purposes only. Below, we reproduce the 8 open-ended questions from the survey:

1. Have you ever read Muster's comic strip Slyboots? If so, could you give your approximate age when you read them?
2. If you answered yes to the above question, how do you remember them – perhaps you can share with me some of your memories, associations, etc.?
3. If you answered yes about reading the comics, perhaps you could indicate how you remember the characters of the main characters?
4. If you have read these comics, do you find them problematic in any way today: e.g. how are gender, social inequality or social systems (socialism vs. capitalism, the Cold War, new technologies, etc.), criticism of social systems, the value system (e.g. patriarchy, etc.) dealt with?
5. In the case you have read the comics, do you think they are still relevant today – can you briefly explain?
6. Do you know any other works by him? If yes, please indicate which ones.
7. If you answered yes to the last question, and if you have mentioned Muster's political cartoons, I would like to ask you for a brief comment on them: do you remember them, where did you see them, what ideas and values did they convey?
8. What do the Slyboots comics mean to you today – would you recommend them to today's generations?



**Figure 6** Age of the Participants Who Responded to the Survey