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Eastern European Genres





Reframing socialist cinema



The Cinema We No Longer Feel Ashamed of

— Ewa Mazierska



The Sons of Great Bear

There are both similarities and differences in popular cinema produced in Eastern European countries during the state socialist period. The similarities result from following the same ideology and politics after the Second World War; the differences from their different sizes, literary and cultural traditions, as well as from more subtle variations in politics.

Popular' in terms such as 'popular music' and 'popular cinema', can be understood in two principal ways. One refers to art which happens to be popular, like much of folk art, which is anonymous, copied and disseminated by people not interested in its authorship. The second type of popular art concerns art which was produced with the intention of reaching a wide audience and reaping the benefits of popularity. The division of art into light/popular and serious/elitist most likely first concerned music, where this process started in the early nineteenth century and consolidated in the second half. The author who is particularly identified with the second meaning is Theodor Adorno, for whom the defining feature was standardization (Adorno 1990, pp. 302–307). As he put it, 'As one particular song scored a great success, hundreds of others sprang up imitating the successful one' (ibid, p. 306). Adorno links the development of intentionally produced popular music with the development of industrial capitalism, which brought a strict division of time into time for work and time for leisure. Popular music was meant to fill this 'leisure time' (ibid., pp. 309–311).

When popular cinema is considered, it is associated with standardization through employing genre conventions and simple modes of narration, striving for entertainment, for filling leisure time, as mentioned in Adorno's scheme, creating a spectacle and achieving high commercial returns. On the one hand, this does not mean that films which do not follow this formula have no chance to achieve popularity. There are cases, particularly in Eastern Europe, of films which shunned entertainment, yet became popular, such as Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Marble* (1976) and *Man of Iron* (1981). On the other hand, many genre and spectacular films failed on their road to popularity. Let's now look in more detail at the strategies used in Eastern Europe to create popular cinema. I intend to focus on Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia with some references to other countries from the socialist bloc, yet without the Soviet Union, which due to its size requires a separate study.

Historical trajectory and Socialist Realism

The history of Eastern European cinema under state socialism can be divided into three main periods: 1) that of socialist realism, which started in the late 1940s and finished around



mid-1950s, 2) of building national arthouse cinemas, from the mid-1950s till the mid-1970s, and 3) of early neoliberalisation, which covered the remainder of the period, till the fall of the system at the end of the 1980s. Each period can be further divided into smaller units and there were also differences between countries in regard to the cultural policies of specific periods. For example, the 1970s was a time of cultural liberalisation in Poland and Hungary, while Czechoslovakia suffered from re-Stalinisation and increased censorship. Yugoslavia, which broke its links with the Soviet Union in 1948, was more market-oriented than countries which remained in the Soviet bloc, as demonstrated by its investment in war films, often coproduced with western countries, such as *The Battle of Sutjeska* (1973), directed by Stipe Delić, but its cinematic history is remarkably similar.

Nevertheless, each period had a particular relationship to popular cinema. In the first stage, there was practically no differentiation between popular cinema and cinema at large – each film was meant to be popular and address ‘the people’, the totality of the population, and join in efforts to create a socialist ‘new man’. Paradoxically, such a task fell mainly on filmmakers (directors, scriptwriters, actors) who were active before and during WWII, when cinema was a capitalist institution. They were best positioned to fulfil it, because they knew how to work according to a specific blueprint. In Poland and Hungary, this group of filmmakers even had similar names: ‘professionals’, ‘specialists’ or ‘bourgeois specialists’ (Lubelski 2009, p. 79–80; Varga 2017, p. 89).

In this period, we find many musical comedies, typically scripted and directed by these veterans. Examples are *Forbidden Songs* (1947), and *An Adventure at Marienstadt* (1954; both directed and scripted by Leonard Buczkowski and Ludwik Starski, respectively) in Poland; *State Department Store* (1953, Viktor Gertler), in Hungary and *Swelling Melodies* (1955, E.W. Fiedler) or *My Wife Makes Music* (1958, Hans Heinrich) in the GDR; and in Czechoslovakia films by Bořivoj Zeman with a ticket inspector Mr. Angel, *Holiday with Angel* (1952) and *Angel in the Mountains* (1955). These films often updated formulas tested in the interwar period, such as operettas. However, unlike the interwar films, where the plot revolved around bridging the gap between members of different classes, in socialist realism films the intrigue was usually centred on ‘socialist competition’ between individual men and women and brigades made up of members of different genres. The purpose of such stories was often to convince the viewers about the advantages of gender equality, consisting of granting women more dignity and freedom, as well as increasing productivity. The latter was important in the situation of shortages that followed the wartime destruction and industrial backwardness in many regions of Eastern Europe.

Building of Arthouse Cinema

After the death of Stalin in 1953 and the subsequent demise of Stalinism in the wake of the so-called Khrushchev Thaw of 1956, there was a shift in the communist leadership not only in the Soviet Union, but also in other socialist coun-

tries, epitomised by the new Party Secretaries in Poland and Hungary, Władysław Gomułka and János Kádár. They were more nationalist in their outlook and rejected the heavy-handed proselytising approach of their predecessors. Rather than forcing people to become socialist new men and women, spending every hour of their lives on work and self-improvement, they were satisfied when the citizens passively accepted the *status quo*. Popular culture was seen as an important tool in the depoliticization of societies, as well as of more discrete boosting of national pride (Varga 2017). It also played an important role in improving the country’s finances. For this reason, the 1960s were not only a period of increased production of popular films and importation of films from the West, but also of building entertainment infrastructure, which included, for example, the establishment of music festivals.

Recognition of the importance of entertainment led to the diversification of national cinemas in Eastern Europe into arthouse and popular cinema in the late 1950s and 1960s. This change was also prompted by an increased independence of filmmakers from the state, thanks to the easing of censorship and bureaucratic restrictions on filmmaking. Another factor was the ageing and dying off of the older filmmakers, who were replaced by cadres trained under the new system, or as in Estonia (and some other Soviet Republics), by local filmmakers, who dominated over the ‘old guard’, namely filmmakers who were sent by the central Soviet authorities after the end of WWII, leading to a ‘national awakening’ (Näripea 2012). These young filmmakers were in a position to make films in which they expressed themselves and which could be critical about the dominant ideology, although in a covert way. This led to the development of a metaphorical language, the deciphering of which bestowed on viewers a sense of intellectual superiority over those who watched films merely for their entertainment value. Arthouse filmmakers also enjoyed higher social status because their films were sent to international festivals, in part to prove that Eastern European countries were politically liberal. By contrast, the producers of genre films were typically confined to the national arena or – at best – other socialist countries. Their status was further affected by the fact that profit was not adequately rewarded under the system of state patronage. Indeed, on occasions the opposite was the case: filmmakers were paid according to their budget rather than profits. Thus, it did not matter if one made an expensive flop or a commercial success.

Because of these peculiarities of the state socialist film economy, in countries such as Poland and Hungary ‘popular cinema’ became a repository of films and directors, who were seen as less successful and more politically conformist than the arthouse ones, even if their films did very well at the box office. In Czechoslovakia, the situation was somewhat different due to a stronger tradition of comedy than in other countries. Although some ‘veterans’ were criticised for making formulaic films, this did not deter the new cadre of filmmakers from trying their hand in this genre. Consequently, the gap between arthouse and popular filmmakers here was smaller.



Eolomea

For example, in Czechoslovakia Václav Vorlíček, who directed the comedies *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* (1966) and *The End of Agent W4C* (1967) enjoyed significant critical acclaim. On the other hand, Jiří Menzel, who received Oscar for his debut *Closely Observed Trains* (1966) was seen by many viewers simply as a director of comedies.

Early neoliberalisation

While in the 1950s and 1960s genre films were more conformist than arthouse films, the situation changed in subsequent decades, with popular films becoming more openly political and critical of the *status quo*. On one hand, this reflected the growing political liberalisation in these countries and, on the other, an increase in recognition by the authorities of the importance of the commercial appeal of films. This process started in already in the 1960s, but intensified in the 1970s, due to the deteriorating economic situation, particularly in the second half of the decade. The transformation of comedies illustrate this shift well. While in socialist realism comedies tended to criticise the remnants of the bourgeoisie and their mindset, in the 1960s

there was an upsurge in comedies of manners and absurd comedies, and in the 1970s and 1980s satirical comedy flourished (Varga 2017, p. 90-91; Machek 2019, p. 273-276). However, rather than criticising people who refused to live according to socialist rules, these films criticised the state, its institutions and socialist ideology. They often went so far in this criticism that it undermined the need for the use of the metaphorical language perfected by arthouse directors. A good example is the career of Polish film director Stanisław Bareja, whose early comedies, such as *Adventure with a Song* (1968), presented an idealised version of socialism, while late ones, particularly *Teddy Bear* (1980), painted socialist reality as deeply dystopian.

The push towards making commercial films on the one hand, and the exhaustion of the metaphorical idiom of Eastern European cinema on the other, resulted in the emergence of filmmakers in the 1980s who chose commercial cinema rather than being consigned to this category due to a supposed lack of talent or bad luck. In the Polish context, the model of this new type of director was Juliusz Machulski, who in the 1980s was the most successful Polish director



which affected the overall budgets for film production, and particular cultural traditions. The genres which we find practically everywhere in the Soviet Union and its satellites are comedies and children's films. Their popularity can be explained by the fact that they played an important role in educating the audiences by criticising negative traits in society and, in the case of children's cinema, having a ready-made and eager audience. In some countries, such as the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, musical comedies were particularly popular (Varga 2017, p. 91), which reflected the fact that on this occasion the audiences were offered two pleasures for the price of one.

The third phenomenon which took root in the cinemas of Eastern Europe were historical films, which included the genre of war films. There were fewer historical films than comedies and children's films (Varga 2017, pp. 93–96) but they required substantial resources for film production. Some of such films were superproductions. Their budgets and prestige resulted in arthouse directors being tempted to make them: Andrzej Wajda and Jerzy Kawalerowicz in Poland, István Szabó and Miklos Jancsó in Hungary, Kurt Maetzig and Konrad Wolf in the GDR. The majority of historical films concerned national histories. Their production had two main purposes. One was to re-write the old national histories as proto-communist, in which political or religious leaders, such as Jan Hus, as in the 'Hussite Revolutionary Trilogy', which included *Jan Hus* (1954) by Otakar Vávra, or Lajos Kossuth in *The Sea Has Risen* (1953), directed by László Ránody, Mihály Szemes and Kálmán Nádasdy, were presented as early revolutionaries fighting for equality and justice. The second purpose was to boost national pride by recalling old conquests and military successes, as in Polish films based on Henryk Sienkiewicz's novels (Aleksander Ford's 1960 *Knights of the Teutonic Order* or Jerzy Hoffman's 1974 *The Deluge*). Of course, the filmmakers needed to do this with sensitivity, most importantly to avoid representing Russians as enemies, so as not to offend their principal 'friends'.

at the box office. Poignancy was added to his decision to make films such as *Hit the Bank* (1981) and *Sex Mission* (1983) by the fact that he started his career in cinema acting in the arthouse films of Krzysztof Kieślowski or Krzysztof Zanussi. Irrespective of Machulski's personal preferences, it was a good decision, given that after the fall of state socialism, the prestige of arthouse cinema sank. Machulski has no straightforward counterpart in other Eastern European countries. In Hungary, the closest is Péter Timár, whose films, such as *Sound Eroticism* (1985) were both audience hits and well received by critics, who treated him as an auteur. However, his films are not 'obvious' genre films as is the case with Machulski.

Genre diversification, specialisation and coproduction

Popular films were produced in all the countries of Eastern Europe. However, not all genres and subgenres flourished in all countries of the region. We can list genres which can be found in almost all countries and others, which were only tried in some. This reflected the size of the country,

In contrast to these genres, crime and science fiction films were less developed. The first was explained by the fact that in a state socialist, egalitarian society, where there were few opportunities to live the 'high life' without attracting criticism and punishment, there were also few incentives to form gangs and organise crime. Moreover, showing large-scale criminality in a socialist country was risky because it might suggest that people in such countries failed to internalise socialist values. Hence, crime films often involved an act committed by a foreigner or a local man corrupted by western influence, such as selling a precious object to the West as in Polish *Balthazar's Feast* (1954, J. Zarzycki), at the centre of which was a plan to smuggle a painting by Veronese abroad.

The development of the science fiction genre heavily depended on very high budgets and the right infrastructure to sustain such projects. Only larger and more affluent countries could afford to produce science fiction films, especially of the type which involved space travel. But even such countries struggled with realising more ambi-



Holiday With Angel

tious projects on their own, due to such factors as lacking the right landscape which could imitate the surface of different planets or visual imagery and sound specialists to provide futuristic special effects. Hence, science fiction cinema became an arena of genuine international collaboration within the bloc, as exemplified by three films by Marek Piestrak, which were Polish-Estonian coproductions (beginning with *The Test of Pilot Pirx*, 1977). Other examples of 'internationalist' SF also include the superproduction *Eolomea* (1972, Herrmann Zschoche) which was produced in the most part by East Germany's DEFA, but shot in Bulgaria and technologically supported by the Soviet Union (development of the 70mm print); and, last but not least, *Mr. Blot in Space* (1988, Krzysztof Gradowski), which is widely regarded as Polish, but was one of the most elaborate examples of international cooperation within the bloc. It had a Polish director but was co-produced with Czechoslovakia (Studio Koliba) and the Soviet Union (Mosfilm). Some of the episodes were shot on the territory of the Soviet Union, such as the airport in the capital of Armenia, Yerevan, and the botanical gardens in Batumi in Georgia, and Czech and Soviet technicians were used to produce futuristic effects.

Other examples of specialisation leading to co-productions were Czechoslovak successes in fairytale films, which encouraged East Germany to seek partnership with Czech producers (Hanáková 2008, p. 112). Although certain genres, such as comedy, were practiced almost everywhere, the level of organisational, operational and technical sophistication in producing certain types of popular films was rather low. In other words, unlike in Hollywood, where studios and specific creative teams focused on repeating and perfecting a winning formula, in Eastern Europe this rarely happened.

In part this reflected the relative neglect of profits and privileging directors over other filmmakers, such as actors and scriptwriters, which led to the lack of nurturing of creative teams. Hence, when specialisation did occur, it was largely because such creative teams, at the heart of which were director-scriptwriter partnerships, came into existence and lasted for a long time. This was the case in Czechoslovakia, which, as mentioned above, specialised in productions of fairy tales and parodies (Szczepanik 2017, p. 107). There were also attempts to create a 'group style' around producing musical comedies in Poland, following the success of Janusz Rzeszewski's *Hello, Fred the Beard* (1978), but ultimately this did not happen, either because the instability of the 1980s did not allow such changes to be made or because there was no strong network behind this idea.

If we were to find one of the most peculiar genres from the former socialist bloc, it would definitely be the Eastern European equivalent to the Western film genre, often called the 'Eastern' or 'Red Western'. These terms have a narrower and a wider meaning. In a narrower sense, it refers to films set in American Wild West between 1865 and 1900. Such films were the preserve of East Germany's film industry, where they were labelled 'Indianerfilme'. This series began in 1966, with *The Sons of Great Bear*, directed by the Czechoslovak director Josef Mach. The superstar of the genre was the Serbian gymnast and actor Gojko Mitić who played in eleven East German 'Eastern' productions. These *Indianerfilme* focused almost exclusively on the confrontations between expansionist white settlers and struggling Native American tribes facing subjugation, displacement, deportation or annihilation. The emergence of the genre testifies to the international ambitions of East Germany, as well as the usefulness of the genre to peddle a certain version of Marxist ideology (Decker 2021).



In particular, Red Westerns expressed German enthusiasm for Native American culture and worked as multidimensional allegories of Third World resistance movements, represented by morally pure Native Americans and the idealized GDR. They suggested that if America were to progress toward socialism, white characters would need to completely renounce their country's oppressive order and, crucially, offer a viable alternative system that could replace it.

The wider meaning of the 'Eastern' or 'Red Western' includes films set in different times and places, but using some basic conventions of Western film genre to heighten their entertainment value as well as to put their message across more easily. Some good examples are the Polish *Wolves' Echoes* (1968, Aleksander Ścibor-Rylski), the Soviet *At Home Among Strangers, a Stranger Among His Own* (1974, Nikita Mikhalkov) as well as the early Polish production *Law and Fist* (1964) by Jerzy Hoffman and Edward Skórzewski. The last film is set on the so-called Regained Territories in the new (wild) western parts of Poland after 1945. These territories along the river Oder were abandoned by Germans due to post-war border changes and expulsions. On this occasion, they act in the films as a new frontier, where law fights against lawlessness.

Criticism and scholarship

The criticism of Eastern European popular films under state socialism was generally negative. Reviews were scornful or, at best, condescending. When a specific film did well at the box office and the critics were obliged to acknowledge it, they often felt the need to mention that the film was good only in a specific national context: outside it would have no chance of success.

More serious examination was scarce. The bulk of books and serious articles were devoted to arthouse cinema, with a focus on individual directors. Hence, we have at least twenty books about Andrzej Wajda in Polish (and several in foreign languages), while there are none about the previously mentioned Marek Piestrak or Janusz Rzeszewski. The situation in other countries was no better. Popular cinema was also marginalised in the histories of national cinemas. In many Eastern European countries, there was an assumption that researching such a topic equals admission of having low-brow taste, hence, some research was conducted *a priori*, so to speak. A case in point is the opinion of Bolesław Michałek, probably the most respected critic of this period, who argued that production of popular films in Poland was incompatible with the communist system, because Poland had no chance to compete not just with Hollywood, but even with European producers of popular cinema such as France, therefore it was in the country's interest to stick to auteurist films (Michałek 2002, pp. 125–132).

Critics' hostility to popular cinema under the state socialist system, as Petra Hanáková argues in regard to Czechoslovak cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, resulted from the painful realisation that 'spectators quite easily fell for the "official" entertainment' (Hanáková 2008, p. 112). It was thus 'the cinema we feel ashamed of – the "we" here meaning intellectuals, film historians and critics' (*ibid.*, p. 112). Much of this approach survived into the first decade or so after the fall of the Iron Curtain. An example is the attitude to the above-mentioned Marek Piestrak. When during a conference about Polish cinema in a transnational context, which I co-organised in 2009, I spoke with Tadeusz Lubelski, probably by this point the most eminent historian of Polish cinema



writing in Polish. He admitted that he had never seen his films and it didn't occur to him to include them in his book-length history of Polish cinema.

Since then and even to some extent before, the situation has changed. Many volumes have been published about popular cinemas in national languages and several in English, such as *Via Transversa: Lost Cinema of the Former Eastern Bloc* (Näripea and Trossek 2008), *Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe* (Ostrowska, Pitassio and Varga 2017) and *Popular Music and the Moving Image in Eastern Europe* which I co-edited with Zsolt Györi (Mazierska and Györi 2018), in part devoted to Eastern European musicals. This shift can be explained by several factors. One is a greater emphasis on profitability in contemporary Eastern European cinema, which encourages one to look at films produced under state socialism from the same perspective. Another factor is an exhaustion of scholarship focused on film directors as auteurs with a specific political agenda, together with the emergence of new approaches which privilege the production and reception of films. Production and reception studies inevitably downgrade the director to just one link in a 'cinematic foodchain'. There is also a growing interest in 'paracinema' (films existing outside of canon or mainstream) and a sense that the Eastern European canon in general needs updating and revising, as demonstrated by the volumes mentioned above. That said, the arthouse approach can still be detected in scholarship on popular cinema. In particular, in Poland there are several volumes devoted to Stanislaw Bareja and Juliusz Machulski. This can be explained in large part by the perception that they were 'oppositional' directors during the period of state socialism.

Much still needs to be done to obtain a fuller picture of popular cinema in Eastern Europe. One of the most interesting issues is how filmmakers became 'popular' during the state socialist period, the role of television in this process and the mechanisms behind co-productions. This work is urgent, given that many insiders already have died and others are in the twilight years of their lives. What should help in such an investigation is the entrance of new film scholars, who are no longer ashamed of their popular cinemas, but more likely proud of them, given that many were produced in a 'hostile environment', succeeded in attracting audiences against the odds, and continue to attract audiences to this day.

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Paradoxes of Popularity

— Balázs Varga



Uncle Marin, Billionaire

We know that many popular films were made in Eastern Europe during the socialist era. Comedies, musicals, historical epics, and adventure films attracted millions of viewers. But *how* were they popular? How did they participate in shaping, discussing, and regulating the social imagination? What kind of values, stories, and heroes were used by and within socialist popular cinemas, making everyday experiences intelligible and familiar? Finally – how can we get closer to socialist popular cinemas, beyond friendly nostalgia and mocking laughter?

While popular film culture was rich and dynamic throughout the region, and memory of it is still powerful, this topic was rarely raised in film criticism and scholarly discussions prior to the early 2010s. Before that, films from the socialist decades were watched and interpreted almost exclusively from the perspective of politically committed art cinema. Ambiguous feelings regarding entertainment were as present in socialist cultural policy as in film criticism. Socialist cultural policy wanted to educate and enlighten the public. Entertainment was not rejected at all, but ‘aimless’ and ‘pointless’ entertainment was considered unnecessary. For the elitist critical perspective, which focused on artistic innovation and political commentary, there was either limited political and artistic curiosity in the films of the socialist era, or the political content of these films was too much and direct (many popular films were interpreted as supporters of the then current ideology). In short, as Maya Turovskaya (1993) put it, the state, the intelligentsia, and

the mass audience had different favorites; the ideological, the aesthetic, and the box-office values differed.

This essay seeks to transcend the binary oppositions (high vs low, political vs apolitical, subversive vs affirmative, innovative vs formulaic) within which the registers of Eastern European film cultures have been usually interpreted. These registers (especially art cinema and popular cinema, not to mention middle-brow film culture) are neither homogeneous, nor they are sharply distinct. My approach is thus based on the emphasis on the complexity, interaction, and paradoxical nature of the topic, as well as on the assumption that the complexities and contradictions of socialist popular cinemas should not be smoothed out but given special attention. Analyzing these complexities can also aid us substantially in understanding (the memory of) socialism. For a long time, it was thought that we could gain a relevant picture of socialism through critical representations of high culture. As many current studies have argued convincingly (see Beumers 2003; Năripea, Trossek 2008; Imre 2016; Ostrowska, Pitassio

and Varga 2017; Mihelj, Huxtable 2018 to name only a few), without denying this perspective, we can say that popular film culture can also provide an exciting and nuanced insight into socialism. In the following, I will discuss the questions of popularity and success (attendance numbers and statistics), and then focus on the problems of genre-based film culture and genre-oriented interpretation of Eastern European films.

Drowning by numbers

There were a good number of entertainment films and they were also very popular everywhere in the Soviet Bloc. Comedies, historical and adventure films, as well as spectacular prestige films were at the top of box office lists

to strengthen the infrastructure for showing films. Thanks to these Soviet-style campaigns of ‘cinefication’ and travelling cinema, dense networks of movie theatres (or at least projection facilities) were built not only in the cities but also in the countryside by the early 1950s. Thus, the 1950s represented the golden age of movie-going almost everywhere in the Soviet Bloc. Admission numbers hit unprecedented records. In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, with a population of around ten million, the yearly attendance numbers were highest in the late 1950s with 186 million ticket sales in 1957 in Czechoslovakia and 140 million ticket sales in 1960 in Hungary (over the next decade, this was followed by a sharp drop in the number of viewers). Not surprisingly, the most-viewed Eastern European



Lemonade Joe

everywhere. Polish and Hungarian historical epics and literary adaptations (*Knights of the Teutonic Order*, 1960, A. Ford, *Men and Banners*, 1965, Z. Várkonyi), Soviet “sad comedies” (*The Diamond Arm*, 1969, L. Gaidai, *The Irony of Fate*, 1975, E. Ryazanov), Czech and Slovak rural comedies (the *Sun, Hay..* series by Z. Troska from the 1980s), Czech and East-German fairy-tale films (*The Proud Princess*, 1952, B. Zeman, *Once Upon a Time There Was a King*, 1954, B. Zeman, *The Story of Little Mook*, 1953, W. Staudte), Romanian adventure and historical films (*Michael the Brave*, 1970, S. Nicolaescu) demonstrate the genre diversity and local/national variations of popular films.

Going to the cinema was one of the most popular forms of entertainment. As socialist cultural policies regarded film as an important tool of mass education, serious efforts were made

films are from this era. The fairy-tale *Proud Princess* leads the top list of Czechoslovak films with more than 8 million viewers. The total number of domestic viewers of the Hungarian operetta, *Mickey Magnate* (1946, M. Keleti) was well over 9 million. The most-viewed East German film, *The Story of Little Mook* (1953) had almost 13 million viewers (the population of East Germany was around 18 million at that time), and the Polish *Knights of the Teutonic Order* had 32 million viewers. There are also examples of domestic attendance records from later periods. The most-watched Romanian film is the comedy *Uncle Marin, Billionaire* (1979, S. Nicolaescu) with more than 14 million viewers. The Soviet adventure film, *Pirates of the 20th Century* (1980, B. Durov) had more than 87 million admissions (the population of the USSR was around 270 million at that time).



Needless to say, these statistics are not always accurate and reliable. Manipulating the number of viewers was not uncommon. Still, the trends are convincing. Of course, numbers are not everything. The outstanding numbers of the most popular Hungarian films, for example, are not from the months after the premiere. These films were screened for a long time after the premiere and had several re-runs, thus the millions of their admission numbers are cumulative numbers, marking the whole theatrical career of the given film. Prolongation of the time films were on the programs was an essential and common tool of distribution policy. In Hungary, for example, re-runs of formerly released films were always significant within the overall numbers of annual

of which were considered war booty) were the biggest hits. While there were rare American films in distribution in Budapest, Tarzan films filled Moscow cinemas in the early 1950s. Similarly, in the late 1940s, not a Soviet war film, but a German musical starring Marika Rökk, *The Girl of My Dreams* (1944, G. Jacoby), was the most-watched film in the USSR. The release of Western films was essential to satisfy the needs of an audience that wanted to be entertained. On the one hand, few Soviet films were made at that time, and even fewer spectacular and entertaining films. On the other hand, cinema revenues were a significant source for the film industry and cultural policy. While in the 1950s in many Eastern European countries, domestic films broke admission



The Story of Little Mook

cinema attendance. They could have accounted for half or even most of the attendance numbers for Hungarian films. In Hungary, a total of 70 million movie tickets were sold in 1982, but only less than half of that was sold for newly released films.

Furthermore, of the new premieres, Western movies made up the majority of the audience numbers. All this shows the importance of distribution policy: what films were shown, when and in what circles. In the early 1950s, keeping Western, mainly American, films away from the Eastern European markets contributed greatly to the success and popularity of domestic films. Yet it cannot be said that the limited distribution of Western films was always and everywhere the most important tool. After all, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, in the Soviet Union, Western films (some

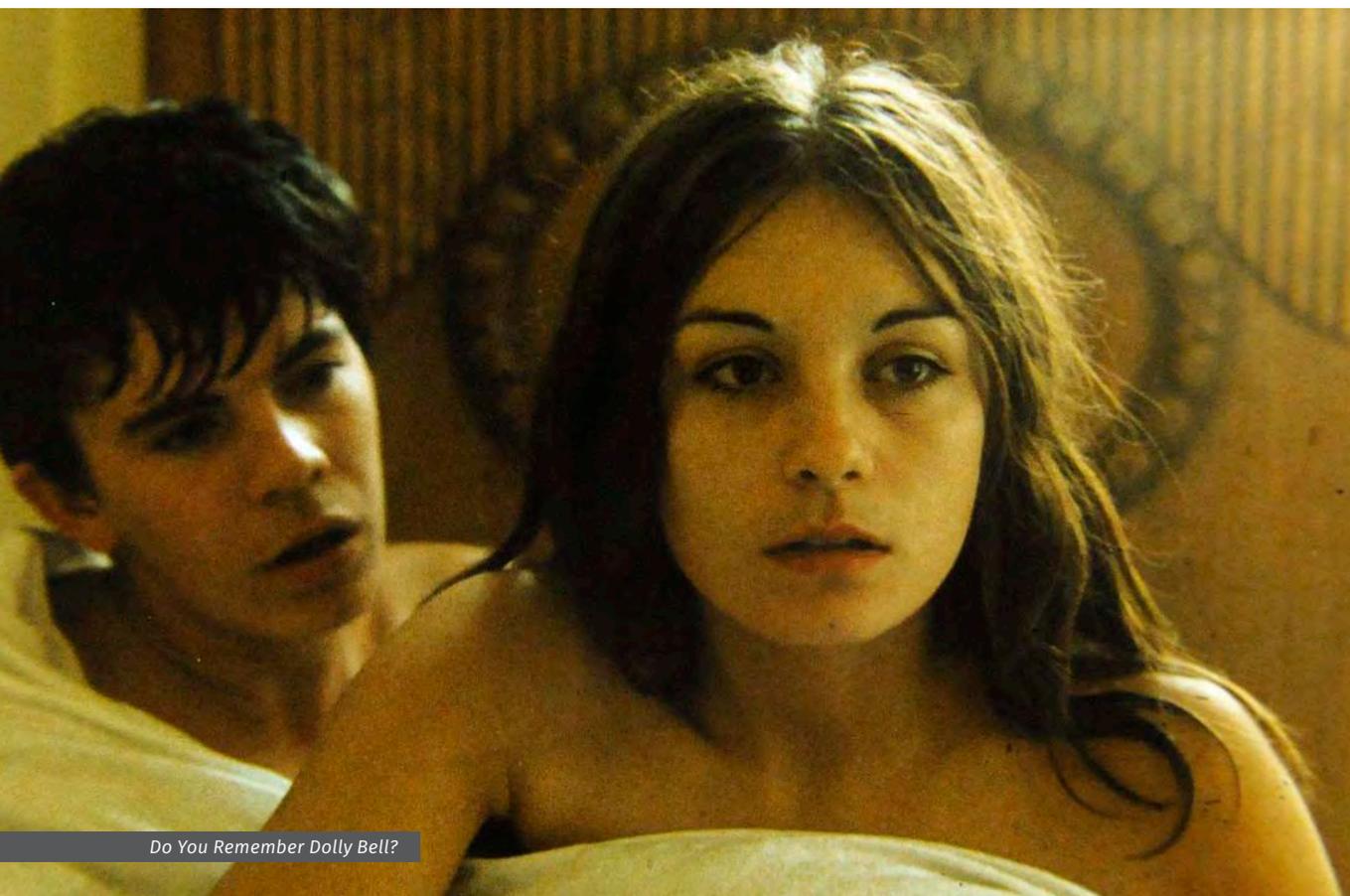
records, in the Soviet Union, Indian films were outstandingly successful: "In the post-Stalinist years of movie-going, Soviet audiences also enjoyed access to Hollywood productions and French, Italian and Mexican genre films (...) But of all the foreign genre films in the Soviet Union, the audience numbers were highest for Indian popular cinema. Statistics available for the years 1954-1989 reveal that 50 Indian films drew more than 20 million viewers in these years, making them the most successful of foreign films; these films led the way, followed by 41 American, 38 French and 12 Italian films." (Rajogopalan 2008: 30) The most popular film in the Soviet period was a Mexican melodrama, *Yesenia* (1971, A.B. Crevenna) with 91 million tickets sold. The first Soviet film to surpass the 50 million 'dream mark' was the science-fiction romance *Amphibian Man* (1961, V. Chebotaryov, G. Kazansky) with more than

65 million viewers. In terms of domestic hits, the records in Soviet cinemas are the aforementioned *Pirates of the 20th Century* and the Oscar-winning melodrama *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1980, V. Menshov) from the stagnation period. Thus, the popularity of domestic films and the issue of the presentation and popularity of rivals, especially Western, films do not follow a simple and one-dimensional logic.

Genre films without genre-based film culture

Any categorization, such as genre grouping, is a question of quantities and is based on a multitude of works to be classified. The Hollywood studio system (both in the classic and post-classic period) produced and still produces films in huge

Hollywood was and is the center of genre-based film culture because it developed and provided standard mechanisms of production, distribution, and exhibition. Genre analyses concentrated on Hollywood as an example of genre-based film culture because 1) films in the Hollywood system were made constantly and in huge numbers, 2) in a systematic production and marketing system, based on genre formulas from production to exhibition, which were met by 3) audience expectations and critical reception (i.e. were consumed and interpreted along with common schemes and categories). These pillars, i.e., production/industry, text/product/content, and reception/consumption are closely linked together. The scarcity of genre-based interpretation of non-Hollywood films



Do You Remember Dolly Bell?

numbers and varieties, providing a natural field of study. There are other influential and successful film industries (such as Bollywood, the Japanese, or South Korean) which are also based on mass production. However, the mere existence of genre films does not equal the existence of genre-based film culture. Mass production is only one of the necessary pre-conditions of genre-based film culture, but it alone is not sufficient. With some simplifications we can define three different elements of genre-based film culture: 1) mass production, 2) standardized mechanisms of production, distribution, and exhibition, and 3) genre-oriented discourses in the audience and critical reception. Thus, we should separate the question of genre films and genre-based film culture. Although socialist popular film cultures did not lack genres, it cannot be called a genre-based system.

and film cultures can thus be traced back to the deficiency of these factors: the lack of mass production; the shortcomings of genre standards in production, distribution, and exhibition; and the inadequacy or insufficiency of genre-oriented consumption and critical reception.

Socialist popular film cultures cannot be called genre-based film culture not only because of the lack of an industrial model of mass production. Equally lacking were the genre-oriented mechanisms of promotion, distribution, and exhibition. Knowledge about current trends and examples of contemporary (Western, Hollywood) film culture and the discourse of genre films was similarly limited. Nevertheless, it is more advisable to not look only to the “deficiencies” of Eastern European film cultures, because we do not want to understand socialist popular film culture only in relation



to a gold standard (that is, Hollywood), but to map its logic and operation – in all its complexity and contradictions. Thus, from the questions of genre-based film culture, we can turn (back) to the questions of Eastern European genre films (and genres).

Genres beyond Hollywood

There were plenty of genre films made in Eastern Europe during socialism. We can even distinguish socialist genres such as the partisan film, East German Indianerfilme and Czech(oslovak) “crazy comedies” of the 1960s, which can be called a genre version or generic cycle. These kinds of mass entertainment were not contrary to socialist film culture.

genres and their links to different cultural traditions (from penny stories to gothic horror novels, from commedia dell’arte to German Singspiel or Central-European operetta) and their variations. The interplay of transnational cultural transfers and local traditions continuously shapes film culture and genre structure, however, twentieth-century European popular culture and thus popular film culture was strongly tied to local cultural traditions. This is generally considered to be their strength and most important value, but it also often prevents European films from being internationally successful and reaching a wider audience, as Hollywood films succeed with their “universal” patterns (and with their political-cultural “soft power” in Cold War, but also in the post-Cold War environment).



Mickey Magnate

These genre films and genres were in many ways embedded in local socio-cultural traditions and contexts.

If we consider genres as special representations of culturally universal (narrative) meanings and forms their embeddedness into cultural-artistic traditions and socio-political contexts becomes even more important. Comedy, melodrama, crime, adventure, and fantastic narratives might be understood as broad formulas of popular culture – just as John Cawelti (1976) analyzed the cultural function of popular literary formulas. Therefore, if we want to examine genres and the generic specificities of socialist popular film cultures, Hollywood will not always and in every respect be our point of reference.

Film culture synthesizes different cultural traditions (be it high art or popular culture) from vaudeville to melodrama, folk tales to realist novels. It is enough to think of leading Western

We can illustrate the reciprocal horizontal/vertical (transnational connections/local traditions) interplays and exchanges with many examples. Variations of cinematic melodrama in different ages and cultural contexts may clearly show the distinctive features of these contexts – for example, American melodramas of the 1950s are heirs to the Victorian novel, while Italian melodramas from the same period are more related to the theatrical-opera tradition (not to mention Soviet melodramas and their cultural contexts). An interesting challenge might be the examination of (sub)genres that are usually related to one specific national/cultural context or a (politically) closed localized community. Such a genre, both historically and culturally important, was the German Heimatfilm, the Eastern European partisan film, or the socialist-realist sabotage or production narratives of the Stalinist years.

Genres and changes

So, how do genres change and dominate given periods in socialist popular cinemas? Hungarian sound film culture is usually described as having a narrow genre spectrum: it is dominated by comedy, melodrama, adventure, and historical films, but we can rarely find thrillers, horrors, or science-fiction. However, genres absent in Hungarian cinema often can be found in the popular culture of the period. This is the case with fantastic stories, since both high and mid-brow Hungarian literature are rich in these. Similarly, there is a widely accepted argument regarding the Hungarian film history that the highly successful adventure and historical films but also crime films of the 1960s disappeared from Hungarian film culture in the 1970s. Domestic popular cinema's positions undoubtedly weakened in the 1970s. One of the reasons for this was the disappearance of the old masters of entertainment cinema and the growing dominance of politically engaged arthouse/auteur films at the time. Yet those genres, vanishing from the cinemas, found their perfect place on television: the leading and highly popular TV programs of the 1970s were domestic crime and adventure series (such programs as the crime series *Kántor* or the Jules Verne adaptation, *The Danube Pilot*). This is why it is not enough to pay attention only to deficits and shortcomings. The dynamics of popular film culture are much more diverse, energetic, and varied than they can be described in fixed models and binary oppositions.

The late 1970s and early 1980s may be an important period in global popular film culture, perhaps not only because of (post) New Hollywood blockbusters but also as the beginning of a transformation in Eastern Europe. The early 1980s brought a generational change and a kind of generic restructuring in many film cultures in the Soviet bloc. Here are some memorable and iconic titles from the early 1980s: *Pirates of the 20th Century*, the aforementioned action-oriented modern adventure film from the Soviet Union with outstanding admission numbers; Machulski's debut retro crime film, *Vabank* (1981), and the first installments of the highly successful crime comedies by István Bujtor, the 'Hungarian Piedone' (*Pagan Madonna*, 1981, *Do not Panic*, 1982). Emblematic of this time is also the transnational trend of musical teen films, targeting the youth (sub)culture of the time (the Czechoslovak *Disco Story* or the Hungarian *Love Till First Blood*), Sixties nostalgia/retro pieces (the Polish *Yesterday*, the Hungarian *Cha-cha-cha* and *Time Stands Still* and the Yugoslav *Do You Remember Dolly Bell*), and the wave of genre experimentation (the Soviet melodrama-catastrophe film hybrid *Air Crew* from 1980 or the early films of Juliusz Machulski and the Hungarian Péter Tímár). The 1980s, be they the years of martial law, the period of Brezhnevite stagnation and Czechoslovak (post-1968) 'normalization', or the decade of slow Westernization and reforms in Kádár's Hungary, in short, despite the widely differing political and social conditions, brought serious changes to Eastern Europe's popular film cultures. New directors, new generations, old-new genres. In Eastern Europe, however, it did not become a Socialist New Hollywood.

Cultural meaning-making

This essay started with the assumption that we can separate questions of genre-based film culture and genre films. Eastern European popular cinemas are an example of how the latter might appear without the former. The conditions for genre-based film culture were not given (or were incomplete) over the long decades of socialism, even in the case of the Soviet film industry. As I have argued, generic cycles are based on the logic of repetition, seriality, and variation, and a critical mass of certain types of films is needed for the development and workflow of the genre-based film production. Regarding the process of cultural meaning-making, the key is whether it is possible to find topics that can be accepted and processed as materials of shared experiences for the given cultural environment and whether the multidisciplinary, collective interpretation and labeling of these topics and films occur. Genre film production and genre formation requires an effective and operating film industry, popular (film) culture, and the reflective gestures of cultural meaning-making. Together, these conditions were not present in Eastern Europe during the long decades of socialism.

However, we can outline some aspects along which Eastern European films can be interpreted within the genre framework. Given that the decisive condition for both genre formation and interpretation is to link a given film (formal, stylistic elements, story motifs, etc.) to other films or the characteristics of a given genre category when we place a film into a special class, we must also define its relationship with other members of the category. The more films in the group, the more pronounced the features which shape and form the genre. When we find only a small number of examples of a given genre (Hungarian sci-fi, Romanian horror, Soviet thriller, etc.), we have to compare the given film to some other corpus (in good cases to films with close relations and similarities from the Eastern bloc, but at other times to more distant groups – Western or Hollywood products). In this case, however, the explanatory power of the local cultural context often becomes uncertain, under- or overestimated, and the questions of auteurship and the director's stylistic markers will be even more important and uncertain. If met with a unique film, such as Hungarian teen musical film from the 1980s (György Dobray's *Love Till First Blood*), it is difficult to distinguish between the features of a 'typical' Hungarian teen movie and the characteristics of an early piece of a young Hungarian filmmaker-auteur. The danger or challenge of interpreting the given film as representative for the given local (culturally specific) genre is that the explanatory power of the local context suppresses the traits of the author's style. On the other hand, when we highlight the auteur's distinctive marks, we can easily suppress the explanatory potential of the local socio-cultural context. This is true for example in the case of Machulski's *Sex Mission* (1983)

So, how can we make relationships and connections? We usually compare the given film with an abstract system of genre characteristics and other (non-domestic) films. In this case, films that seem rare in the given cultural environment can be analyzed as genre films in a broader genre context. This strategy might be interesting for unique (local) examples of strong (global) genres with distinct features – such as Piestrak's *Curse*



of *Snakes Valley* (1988) in the context of Indiana Jones-style action-adventure films. Or we can compare the given film with other local films, which seem similar. This might be fruitful in the case of very broad, loosely defined genres (comedy, historical film, melodrama) with less definite features, but strong roots in the local cultural-artistic tradition. In such a case, however, it is not the closeness to abstract genre characteristics, but the difference (which might appear as a socio-cultural or authorial distinctiveness) that will be interesting.

As mentioned, a significant problem with socialist popular cinema was that the knowledge regarding the current international trends of (Western) popular cinemas and genre filmmaking was severely limited. From the 1940s until the early or mid-1980s, Western genre films were at a disadvantage in terms of distribution in Eastern Europe. Not even the most significant Hollywood films were distributed, or only with a significant delay. Two iconic films of the New Hollywood of the 1970s, *Jaws* (1975, S. Spielberg), and *The Godfather* (1972, F.F. Coppola), for example, arrived in Hungarian cinemas with a ten-year delay in the mid-1980s. (The reason for the delay was often not even political. That is, it was not censorship that forbade the premiere, but the copyright fee for a given film was too expensive. Hungarian film distribution often waited for years to buy “trendy” Hollywood movies because, after the first wave subsided, it was cheaper to buy distribution rights.) *Star Wars* (1977, G. Lucas) was released in Hungary and Poland with ‘only’ a few years delay – but, for example, it was not in distribution in the Soviet Union until the end of the regime. Distribution policies thus showed huge variety in the Soviet bloc (more American films were released in Poland and with shorter lead times than in Hungary, but Bulgarian or Soviet viewers were in an even worse position), so we can hardly speak of a shared ‘Eastern European’ knowledge regarding Western popular film culture under socialism – which might be an important factor, influencing the trends of local popular cinemas. Accordingly, the differences, limitations, and delays in distribution resulted in a strange asynchrony: certain influences hit local audiences (filmmakers, critics) at different times. Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) was withdrawn from Hungarian cinemas a few weeks after its premiere (which was more than ten years’ delay, only in the early 1970s). The ‘Hungarian version’ of *Psycho*, Lajos Fazekas’s *Defekt* was shot in 1977 but was only released in Hungarian cinemas in the mid-1980s.

Socialist popular film culture is therefore a unique and striking formation. Memory of it is very strong, and if we look at it closely, it existed in rather complex variations. There were important common features of and reciprocal connections between socialist popular cinemas, but the local social-political-cultural variances are also significant. Furthermore, socialist popular cinemas had their relationship with Western/Hollywood filmmaking. Connected to its time, yet it is here with us. Post-socialism brought sequels, remakes, or new variations of popular hits of the socialist period. We have *Teddy Bear* (1981) and *Rys* (2007), *Och, Karol 1* and *2* (1985 and 2011), *Love Till First, Second... and Last Blood* (1986–2002), *Air Crew* and *Flight Crew* (2016), *The Irony of Fate* (1975) and *The Irony of Fate 2* (2009). It is a sign of contemporary retromania and remix or re-culture, the turn

towards previously successful materials. However, this trend shows the power of post-socialist nostalgia and is a sign of cultural self-understanding. This is the phoenix-like power of popular culture. The cycles only keep going...

* * *

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Socialist Hits

All-time domestic viewership records in the Eastern Bloc

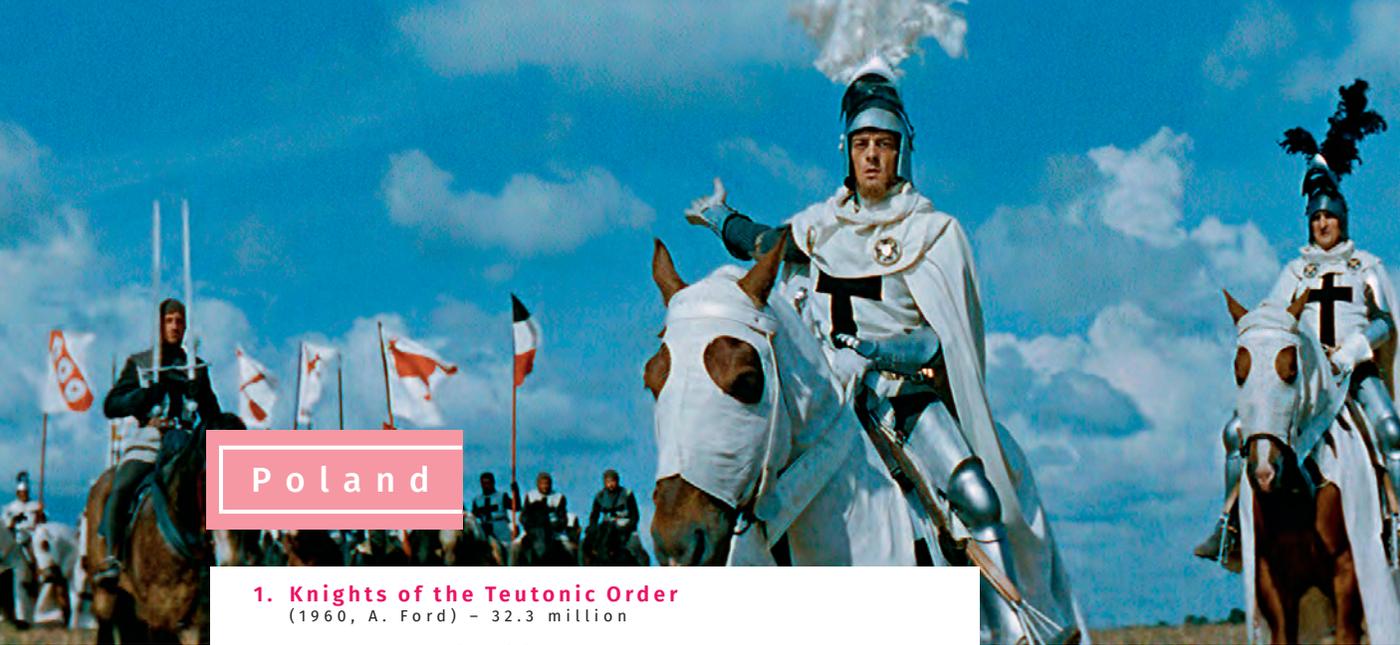
Film audiences in socialist countries, partially due to the limited supply of Western commercial cinema, were very fond of domestic productions by their respective film industries. Some of them became instant hits, seen by much of the nation and achieving box office results unimaginable today – a case in point for the general popularity of cinema back then. Compiled by the state institutions, viewership's statistics might not be fully reliable, due to many factors such as the multitude of special screenings excluded from ticketing or gathering data over a long period of time from unverified sources. Nevertheless, they clearly show general trends and fashions, so it is well-worth taking a look at them to see which films won the greatest popularity, to compare them with the prevailing canon, to try to discover any national peculiarities, or consider which of them have retained their cult status to this day.



Soviet Union

- 1. Pirates of the 20th Century**
(1980, B. Durov) – 87.6 million
- 2. Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears**
(1980, V. Menshov) – 84.4 million
- 3. The Diamond Arm**
(1969, L. Gaidai) – 76.7 million
- 4. Kidnapping, Caucasian Style**
(1967, L. Gaidai) – 76.5 million
- 5. Wedding in Malinovka**
(1967, A. Tutyshkin) – 74.6 million
- 6. Air Crew**
(1980, A. Mitta) – 71.1 million
- 7. Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures**
(1965, L. Gaidai) – 69.6 million
- 8. The Shield and the Sword**
(1968, V. Basov) – 68.3 million
- 9. The New Adventures of the Elusive Avengers**
(1968, E. Keosayan) – 66.2 million
- 10. The Dawns Here Are Quiet**
(1972, S. Rostotsky) – 66 million

source: <https://kinanet.livejournal.com/14172.html>



Poland

1. **Knights of the Teutonic Order**
(1960, A. Ford) – 32.3 million
2. **In Desert and Wilderness**
(1973, W. Ślesicki) – 31 million (two parts combined)
3. **Deluge**
(1974, J. Hoffman) – 27.6 million (two parts combined)
4. **Nights and Days**
(1975, J. Antczak) – 22.4 million (two parts combined)
5. **Forbidden Songs**
(1947, L. Buczkowski) – 15.2 million
6. **Mister Blot's Academy**
(1984, K. Gradowski) – 14.1 million (two parts combined)
7. **Sexmission**
(1984, J. Machulski) – 11.2 million
8. **Colonel Wolodyjowski**
(1969, J. Hoffman) – 10.9 million (two parts combined)
9. **The Leper**
(1976, J. Hoffman) – 9.8 million
10. **Pharaoh**
(1966, J. Kawalerowicz) – 9.5 million (two parts combined)

source: <http://boxoffice-bozg.pl/wszechczasow45-89/>



East Germany

(prior to 1949, the Soviet Occupation Zone in Germany)

1. **The Story of Little Mook**
(1953, W. Staudte) – 13 million
2. **Marriage in the Shadows**
(1947, K. Maetzig) – 12.9 million
3. **Heart of Stone**
(1950, P. Verhoeven) – 9.8 million
4. **The Sons of the Great Bear**
(1966, J. Mach) – 9.4 million
5. **Police Raid**
(1947, W. Klingler) – 8.1 million
6. **Snow White**
(1961, G. Kolditz) – 7.6 million
7. **Street Acquaintances**
(1948, P. Pewas) – 6.5 million
8. **Murderers Among Us**
(1946, W. Staudte) – 6.5 million
9. **The Merry Wives of Windsor**
(1950, G. Wildhagen) – 6.1 million
10. **My Wife Makes Music**
(1958, H. Heinrich) – 6.1 million

source: <http://www.insidekino.de/DJahr/DDRAlltimeDeutsch.htm>

Romania

- 1. Uncle Marin, the Billionaire**
(1979, S. Nicolaescu) – 14,6 mln
- 2. Pacala**
(1974, G. Saizescu) – 14,6 mln
- 3. Michael the Brave**
(1971, S. Nicolaescu) – 13,3 mln
- 4. The Dacians**
(1967, S. Nicolaescu) – 13,1 mln
- 5. The Soimaresti Clan**
(1965, M. Drăgan) – 13 mln
- 6. Tudor**
(1963, L. Bratu) – 11,4 mln
- 7. The Column**
(1968, M. Drăgan) – 10,5 mln
- 8. The Outlaws**
(1966, D. Cocea) – 8,9 mln
- 9. Seven Guys and a Gal**
(1967, B. Borderie, P. Popescu) – 7,5 mln
- 10. Stephen the Great: Vaslui 1475**
(1975, M. Drăgan) – 7,4 mln

source:

<http://cncold.gov.ro/wp-content/themes/cnc/pdf/fls-1164.pdf>

Czechoslovakia

- 1. The Proud Princess**
(1952, B. Zeman) – 8,2 mln
- 2. There Once Was a King**
(1955, B. Zeman) – 5,9 mln
- 3. The Wedding Ring**
(1945, M. Frič) – 5,3 mln
- 4. The Princess with the Golden Star**
(1959, M. Frič) – 5 mln
- 5. Wild Barbara**
(1949, V. Čech) – 4,9 mln
- 6. The Family Problems of Clerk Tříška**
(J. Mach) – 4,9 mln
- 7. A River Performs Magic**
(1945, V. Krška) – 4,8 mln
- 8. The Last of the Mohicans**
(1947, V. Slavínský) – 4,7 mln
- 9. The Strakonice Bagpiper**
(1955, K. Steklý) – 4,6 mln
- 10. Lemonade Joe**
(1964, O. Lipský) – 4,6 mln

source:

<https://kinomaniak.cz/navstevnost-filmu/historicka/vse/>

Bulgaria

- 1. Khan Asparuh**
(1981, L. Staikov) – 10,8 mln (three parts combined)
- 2. Boris I**
(1985, B. Sharaliev) – 10,5 mln (two parts combined)
- 3. Time of Violence**
(1988, L. Stajkov) – 9,8 mln (two parts combined)
- 4. Sly Peter**
(1960, S. Surchadzhiev) – 6,4 mln
- 5. Heroes of Shipka**
(1955, S. Vasilev) – 5,9 mln
- 6. Under the Yoke**
(1952, D. Dakovski) – 5 mln
- 7. Tobacco**
(1962, N. Korabov) – 4,3 mln
- 8. Alarm**
(1951, Z. Zhandov) – 3,9 mln
- 9. The Golden Tooth**
(1962, A. Marinovich) – 3,6 mln
- 10. The Goat Horn**
(1972, M. Andonov) – 3,4 mln

source:

<https://cinema.bg/зрители-по-филми/>





Hungary

1. **Mickey Magnate**
(1949, M. Keleti) – 9,9 mln
2. **Leila and Gábor**
(1956, L. Kalmár) – 7,3 mln
3. **Rákóczi's Lieutenant**
(1953, F. Bán) – 7,3 mln
4. **State Department Store**
(1953, V. Gertler) – 6,7 mln
5. **Liliomfi**
(1955, K. Makk) – 6,6 mln
6. **The Man of Gold**
(1962, V. Gertler) – 6,6 mln
7. **2 x 2 Are Sometimes 5**
(1955, G. Révész) – 6,4 mln
8. **Keep Your Chin Up!**
(1954, M. Keleti) – 6 mln
9. **Poor Rich**
(1959, F. Bán) – 5,9 mln
10. **Love Travelling a Coach**
(1955, L. Ranódy) – 5,4 mln

source:

Filmévkönyv 1987 A magyar film egy éve,
Magyar Filmintézet 1988, p. 270

Socialist Republic of Serbia

(part of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – attendance statistics for other constituent republics are unknown)

1. **A Tight Spot**
(1982, M. Milošević) – 1,3 mln
2. **The Battle of Neretva**
(1969, V. Bulajić) – 1,1 mln
3. **Guns of War**
(1974, Ž. Mitrović) – 1 mln
4. **The Battle of Sutjeska**
(1973, S. Delić) – 1 mln
5. **Žika's Dynasty**
(1985, Z. Calić) – 928 tys.
6. **Let's Fall in Love**
(1987, A. Djorđević) – 873 tys.
7. **Come to me and Go from me**
(1983, Z. Calić) – 752 tys.
8. **No problem**
(1984, M. Milošević) – 742 tys.
9. **Second Žika's Dynasty**
(1986, Z. Calić) – 739 tys.
10. **Balkan ekspres**
(1983, B. Baletić) – 683 tys.

source:

Kinematografija u Srbiji 1995,
Institut za film, Beograd 2001, s. 7



Hajduks, Indians, Partisans

Tracing the Change of Genres

— Jaromír Blažejovský



The Sons of Great Bear

The genre cinema of socialist countries occupies an important place in the memory of older film fans, alongside films imported from France, Italy and the United States. I myself remember being deeply moved when, on my eleventh birthday, on the Saturday of 16 March 1968, in the widescreen cinema Vesmír (the Universe) in the small town of Zastávka near Brno, I watched for the first time *The Dacians* – an exceptionally beautiful but at the same time cruel film presenting the history of Romania. Of course, the impulse to watch the film was the fact that it starred Pierre Brice (the actor who played Winnetou) – at least this is how the film was advertised to the Czech audience.

This experience illustrates important dimensions of socialist genre cinema. First of all, popular cinema was associated with the emancipatory ambitions of the states in our “camp”. Sergiu Nicolaescu’s debut was a brilliant example of *popeea națională cinematografică*, i.e. a national film epic, the purpose of which was to accentuate the independence of the Romanian state and the Romance nature of its culture. Awakening national awareness was also the goal of the historical cinema in Poland, founded on Henryk Sienkiewicz’s prose (*The Teutonic Knights* [1960, A. Ford], *Colonel Wołodyjowski* [1969] and *The Deluge* [1974] by Jerzy Hoffman), in Hungary, based on Mór Jókai’s novel (films by Zoltán Várkonyi: *The Sons of Magnate*, [1965], the diptych *Hungarian Magnate* and *Zoltán Kárpáthy* [1966]) or

in Bulgaria during the celebrations of the 1300th anniversary of founding of the Bulgarian State (*Khan Aszparuh* [1981, Ludmil Staikov]). In the Yugoslav cinema, state and party propaganda was transmitted through partisan films, such as *Battle of Neretva* (1969, V. Bulajić) or *The Fifth Enemy Offensive* (1973, S. Delić). Watching each other’s films suggested a community of values: when a viewer identified him or herself with foreign heroes, the Polish case became in a way the Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian... case and vice versa.

Secondly, regardless of the traditions of the local culture and history, films were modelled after Western hits. *The Dacians* (1967, S. Nicolaescu) was the Romanian equivalent of *Spartacus* (1960, Stanley Kubrick), *Battle of Neretva* was the Yugoslav variation of *The Battle of the Bulge* (1965, K. Annakin),



The Sons of Great Bear (1965, J. Mach) was a response to the West German-Yugoslav series with Winnetou, the leader of the Apache tribe, which was not shown in the GDR at that time, while *Captain Florian of the Mill* (1968, W.W. Wallroth) was produced in the East German DEFA studio and inspired by French swashbuckler films by Christian-Jaque, such as *Fanfan la Tulipe* (1952) or *The Black Tulip* (1964). In the case of *The Dacians*, in French co-production, there was even a personal link, as the film starred Pierre Brice, Georges Marchal and Marie-José Nat. In this way, the “Western” and “Eastern” genres strengthened each other’s positions on the market: before an American Western, the audience watched a trailer of an East German Western. Attractive photos and posters also simultaneously targeted potential audiences of the respective films.

Thirdly, state-owned film studios were able to use the technical innovations invented in Hollywood in the 1950s, such as widescreen (CinemaScope) or wide-format (70 mm) film, and sometimes even magnetic stereo sound. Even though *The Dacians* was filmed in 35 mm, it was screened from 70 mm film, at least in Paris. An excellent example of the use of widescreen is the sci-fi genre: the German-Polish *Silent Star* (1959, K. Maetzig), filmed in the Totalvision format (the GDR version of CinemaScope) and Agfacolor, the Czechoslovakian *Ikarie XB 1* (1963, J. Polák), shot in widescreen but on a black-and-white film, or the German-Polish *Signals: An Adventure in Space* (1969, G. Kolditz) in Orwocolour and 70 mm format. At the time of the greatest popularity of widescreen, between 1966 and 1970, approximately 30% of full-length films in Czechoslovakia were produced in this particular format; colour, however, was less frequently used: only two or three films per year were at the same time widescreen and in colour.

Fourthly, in the 1960s, world film production developed in two different directions. Artistic cinema, presented at festivals, in arthouses and film clubs contrasted with the spectacular colour and widescreen cinema. Socialist filmmakers were quite emotional about this division, and it was the topic of heated discussions. For example, the Czechoslovakian Film Festival for the Working People was divided into two parts in 1966: the summer edition presented carefully selected spectacular films in amphitheatres, while the autumn edition (similar to the Polish Confrontations) focused on films *d’auteur*, low-key and with high artistic values. *The Dacians* was screened during the summer edition of the Festival in 1967 alongside such hits as *The Hungarian Magnate* and *Zoltán Kárpáthy, Mary and Napoleon* (1966, L. Buczkowski), *Wedding Night in the Rain* (1967, H. Seemann) or *Viva Maria!* (1965, L. Malle). In subsequent months, those films were shown in ordinary cinemas.

Fifthly, the socialist genre cinema was produced for export. Selling a domestic film, as a national cultural treasure, to Western countries and the so-called Third World was considered a great success. The Czechoslovakian fairy-tale film *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (1973, V. Vorlíček) became iconic in Norway. Unfortunately, some socialist productions were remade in the West: their length was reduced, their scores were replaced, etc. (this especially happened to sci-fi films). Thanks to President Tito’s activity in the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslav films occupied a good position in the Third World.

Probably the most famous example is the partisan adventure movie *Walter Defends Sarajevo* (1972, H. Krvavac), which was screened in Chinese cinemas in the year of the official visit of the Yugoslav President to China (1977) as one of the first imported films after the cultural revolution. *Walter...* was re-screened many times and it was watched by hundreds of millions of Chinese, and the main-role actor, Velimir “Bata” Živojinović, became the most popular foreign actor in the Middle Country. However, the main destination of foreign film sales remained the huge and guaranteed market of allied countries.

Cowboys and Bolsheviks

Socialist genre cinema has a pre-war Soviet ancestry. Its beginnings go back the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s: the “father” of the montage school, Lev Kuleshov, created a model anthology of American action film themes in his film *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924). The avant-garde decade was, among other things, a laboratory for genre cinema that engaged old and new filmmakers (Yakov Protazanov, Vladimir Gardin, Boris Barnet, Ivan Perestiani, Abram Room).

The second stage is associated with the beginnings of sound films, under the direction of the new head of cinematography and distinguished Bolshevik Boris Shumyatsky, whose ambition was to transform the Soviet cinema Hollywood-style. Stalin’s support made it possible to produce, for example, Grigori Aleksandrov’s musicals and adventure movies containing certain features of socialist realism – *Chapaev* (1934) by the Vasilyev brothers and *The Maxim Trilogy* (1934–1938) by Grigori Koznitsev and Leonid Trauberg (which, by the way, was based on the memoirs of Shumyatsky). Shumyatsky’s execution in the Great Terror did not weaken the symbiosis of the “Hollywood” model and socialist realism with its propaganda goals: the typical genres in the last years of Stalin’s rule became so-called kolkhoz musicals, such as the *Cossacks of the Kuban* (1949, I. Pyryev), or the spy adventures à la *Secret Agent* (1947, B. Barnet).

Despite drastically reduced production, Soviet films of the late Stalinist era became the indispensable foundation of the repertoire in all of the Eastern Bloc in the first half of the 1950s. The radically reduced import of films from Western countries and the yet underdeveloped film production in “people’s democracy” states on the one hand and the growing appetite of audiences (the number of cinema goers continued to grow to 1957) on the other hand resulted in the huge popularity of the few Soviet genre films in the repertoire, such as the “western” *Brave People* (1950, K. Yudin) – five million viewers in Czechoslovakia alone. The shortage of films from the West was compensated by purchases made in so-called Third World countries, which is proven, for example by the success of the Brazilian adventure film *O Cangaceiro* (1953, L. Barreto) with 2.6 million viewers in Czechoslovakia, the Mexican road movie *800 Leagues Over the Amazon* (1958, E. Gómez Muriel, 4.6 million) based on Jules Verne’s novel or Indian musicals (*The Vagabond*, 1951, R. Kapur, 3.3 million).

The 1950s were also the time of local attempts at genre films in our countries. Professional experience from the



Proud Princess

interwar period was used by Czech artists – the fairytale *Proud Princess* (1952, B. Zeman) and the historical comedy with a contemporary appeal for the peaceful use of atomic energy, *The Emperor's Baker* (1952, M. Frič), were popular in the partner countries, and the Hussite trilogy by Otakar Vávra, inspired by Sergei Eisenstein's momentous *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), became an inspiration for Alexander Ford, Jerzy Hoffman, Sergio Nicolaescu, Mirceai Dragan, Ludmil Staikov and other creators of national epics. The craftsmanship of the Czech filmmakers of the “old school” was proven by the career of the director František Čáp, who, while in exile in Yugoslavia, directed the core masterpiece of Slovenian cinematography – the student comedy *Vesna* (1952).

In the late 1950s, there were also a couple of coproduced films: the Czech-Polish road movie *Call My Wife* (1958) by Jaroslav Mach and the Czech-Yugoslav musical comedy *The Star Goes to the South* (1958) by Oldřich Lipský. From a contemporary perspective, these have a surprisingly high level of product placement in the socialist version: the former offers a trip to the beautiful People's Poland with a theme of repeatedly broken and unfulfilled flirtation and the latter is an invitation to the Adriatic coast. The charming and optimistic picture of the blossoming “revisionist” Yugoslavia under the leadership of Comrade Tito, no longer a traitor but still not an ally in the full sense of the word (officially, the Federation never returned to the Eastern Bloc), resulted in the film being put away on a shelf: *The Star Goes to the South* made it to Czechoslovakian cinemas only in May 1964. The hit of 1958 was a completely different film: the science-fiction adventure movie *Invention for Destruction* by Karel Zeman, a showcase of creative energy and humanistic message despite limited production resources.

The time of the giants

The golden age of the popular cinema was the 1960s. At that time, a certain specificity developed: Czechs produced parodies of Western genres, Hungarians – costume movies, the German DEFA studio every year produced a Native

American western starring Gojko Mitić and many cheap crime films. Meanwhile, Yugoslavs focused on partisan Westerns and developed a special sub-genre of the Kosovo Western: Živorad Mitrović's diptych *Captain Leshi* (1960) and *Captain Leshi's Revenge* (1962), screened even before the American Western had returned to the repertoire and before the wave of the popularity of Winnetou. In Czech cinemas, its audience reached three million.

Polish and Bulgarian films were not very genre-specific – one season could be rich in comedies of manners and another in historical and adventure movies. One really great hit was produced, *Pharaoh* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz (1966) – serious, intellectual cinema worthy of the greatest respect, but at the same time hugely attractive, comparable to the finest American colossi, like *Cleopatra* (Cleopatra, 1960, J.L. Mankiewicz) or *Spartacus* shown in the same season in widescreen cinemas.

Soviet movies, despite the official, obtrusive promotional campaigns (or perhaps because of them) were mildly popular with audiences in satellite states. From 1967–1969, the Office for Central Dissemination of Films (ÚPF) in Czechoslovakia reintroduced 23 popular Czech films produced back in 1930–1948, in particular Vlasta Burian's comedies, to compensate for low attendance at Soviet movies. The only exceptions were the fantasy romance *Amphibian Man* (1961, V. Chebotaryov and G. Kazansky), the comedy *Striped Trip* (1960, V. Fetin) and, of course, the fairytale *Jack Frost* (1964, A. Rou), which later became a cult film in Czechia, thanks to excellent and somewhat ironic dubbing, and probably will always be broadcast on TV in the final days of the year.

Since the 1960s, the leader of the genre cinema was the Romanian Buftea city, modelled after the Roman Cinecittà, which, despite modest production of 20 films a year, managed to try probably all the spectacular genres of European and American filmmaking: peplum, swashbuckler, eccentric fairy tales for children, crime films, retro, comedy, war and catastrophic movies, musical for preschoolers, melodrama as well as several variations of Westerns: adventures from the



Wild West and “mămăligă westerns” from nineteenth-century Romania, modelled after Spaghetti Westerns. There were a couple sci-fi movies, one of them being *Steps to the Moon* (1963) by Ion Popescu-Gopo. There were no horror movies, though, which may come as a surprise to fans of Count Dracula. The only film about that iconic hero, produced in the times of Nicolae Ceaușescu, was the lengthy, hieratic and tiresome biography *Vlad the Impaler: The True Life of Dracula* (1979, D. Năstase), whose main ambition was to show Duke Vlad as a wise leader, when it came to internal policy and external relationships – just like the “conducător”.

The Romanian cinema also created its own national genre, the Hajduk movie, whose beginnings go back to the silent cinema. It was revived in the 1960s thanks to the screenwriter Eugen Barbu and director Dinu Cocea. Their Hajduk movies, similar to other films about outlaws (*Jánošík* [1935, M. Frič], *Jánošík* [1963, P. Bielik]), were influenced by French swashbuckler films and could compete with the Angelica series (c.f. *The Abduction of Virgins*, 1967), and even contained elements of “sea” films about pirates on the Danube River (*The Revenge of the Outlaws*, 1968).

The end of the decade was characterised by certain disharmony between Czechoslovakia and other countries of the Warsaw Pact, except Romania. The situation was similar to that of the late 1950s, when the masterpieces of the Polish school were not shown in Czechoslovakia. This time, the masterpieces of the Czech cinema, including “the best Czech film of all times” (according to Czech film critics), *Marketa Lazarová* (1967, F. Vlácil), did not make it to the cinemas in partner states. On the other hand, after the invasion by the armies of the Warsaw Pact on 21 August 1968,

Czechoslovakian cinemas boycotted films produced in the invading countries for the next nine months. Meanwhile, Romanian and Yugoslav films were more popular, such as the peplum *The Column* (1967, M. Drăgan) or the Kosovo western *Doctor Homer's Brother* (1968, Ž. Mitrović). The high-budget Czech-Bulgarian coproduction *Aesop* (1969, R. Vulchanov), an allegory of freedom and totalitarianism, suffered after the invasion because of the boycott by Czech actors who refused to dub the film. As soon as *Aesop* was released, it was stuck on a shelf in Czechia, while in Bulgaria, it was screened in an abbreviated version.

In the 1970s, the trends of the previous decade continued, sometimes with less success in partner countries. The most popular at that time were Romanian patriotic films, such as the two-part film *Michael the Brave* (1970, S. Nicolaescu), the second Hajduk series and later the six “mămăligă westerns” with the adventurer Mărgelatu, “true” Westerns about Transylvanians in the Wild West, the gangster (and political) retro series by Sergio Nicolaescu about Commissioner Moldovan, Native American westerns produced by the DEFA studio, *The Deluge* by Jerzy Hoffman, *Black Diamonds* (1976) by Zoltán Várkonyi or the fairytales and fantasy comedies by Václav Vorlíček: *Three Wishes for Cinderella* (1973), *The Girl on the Broomstick* (1971), *A Nice Plate of Spinach* (1977), etc.

In the Soviet Union, the eastern tradition was revived, i.e. an adventure movie from the times of the civil war with elements of the iconography (pistols, hats, horses) and themes (train attack, fight for gold, etc.) of the American Western. This genre was popular even among representatives of film *d'auteur*, such as Nikita Mikhalkov, Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, Bolot Shamshyev or Ali Khamraev, and *White Sun of the*



The Column

Desert (1969, V. Motyl) has the status of a cult film in Russia. In allied countries, those films were much less popular than in the USSR, because of their excessive propaganda. Films that were ideologically neutral became authentically commercially successful in our countries: *Robinson Crusoe* (1973, S. Govorukhin), *The Headless Rider* (1973, V. Vaynshtok) or *The Land of Sannikov* (1973, A. Mkrtychyan, L. Popov). Another hit was the musical *Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven* (1976, Emil Loteanu), an apotheosis of freedom on 70 mm, 35 mm and 16 mm film.

In that period, the admiration for partisan films from Yugoslavia gradually cooled down. Czechoslovakian authorities, in the times of so-called normalisation, preferred not to promote the heroic efforts of the resistance movement of Yugoslav nations under the leadership of Marshal Tito, because the example of “self-governing” Yugoslav communists bore too much resemblance to the political discussions of 1968. According to official propaganda, the only victor in World War II and the liberator of Europe was, as far as Czechs and Slovaks were concerned, the Soviet Union. The great *Battle of Neretva* was a box-office hit in the CSSR. However, another film representing the same trend, the war movie *The Fifth Enemy Offensive* with Richard Burton as Tito, whose premiere was scheduled for 1973, was postponed until 1984, four years after the death of the President of the SFRY, even though in Russia, it had been screened in cinemas since 1975 (albeit with Russian dubbing and in black and white). Yugoslav hits that “the whole world” except Czechoslovakia knew included the war movie *The Bridge* (1969, H. Krvavac), inspired by John Struges’ cult western *The Magnificent Seven* (1960).

The routine “division of labour” between cinematographies was manifested in the CSSR by the programme of the summer edition of the Film Festival for the Working People.

In 1971, 15 films were shown in amphitheatres, including the “red western” *Fatal Error* (1970, K. Petzold) from the GDR, *Michael the Brave* from Romania, the life of Franz Liszt *Dreams of Love* (1970, M. Keleti) from Hungary and the psychological costume drama *The Romantics* (1970, S. Rózewicz) from Poland. In 1972, there were the sixth western produced by the DEFA studio *The Chief of the Seminoles* (1971, Konrad Petzold), the fourth part of the Hajduk serial produced by the Buftea studio, *Captain Angelo’s Outlaws* (1970, D. Cocea), the unusual Croatian war film *The Pine Tree in the Mountain* (1971, A. Vrdoljak), the operetta adaptation *The Csárdás Princess* (1971, M. Szinetár) and the comedy *I don’t like Mondays* (1971, T. Chmielewski).

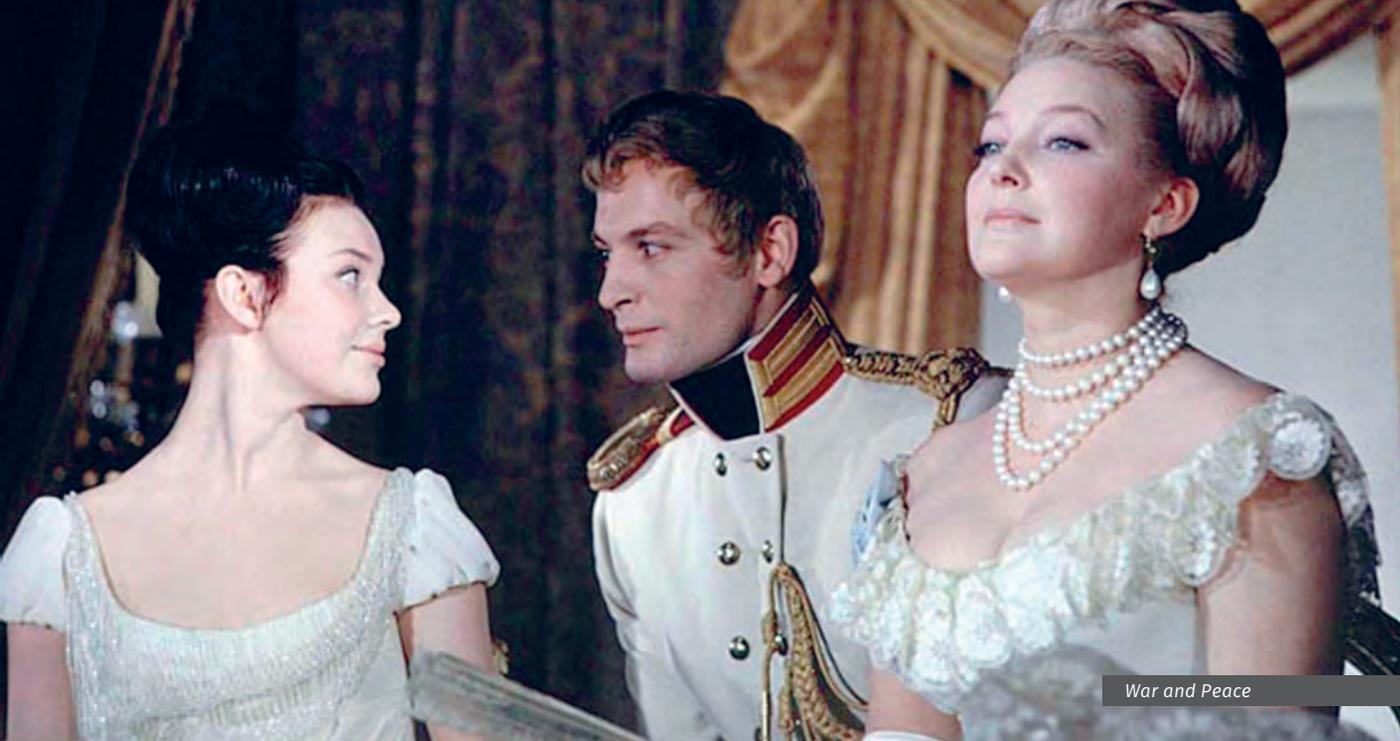
The 1980s brought quite a surprise: the momentum of the popular cinema in Poland after the period of Solidarity and martial law. In Czechoslovakia, *Sexmission* (1983, J. Machulski) had an audience of 3.7 million, and the horror *Wilczyca* (*She-Wolf*, 1983, M. Piestrak) nearly 700,000. Somewhat less popular were the two parts of *Vabank* (1981, 1984) by Machulski, which, although they had their audience, were not particularly admired. The hits of the 1980s were martial arts films. In the Eastern Bloc, it started with the huge success of the *Enter the Dragon* (1973, R. Clouse) with Bruce Lee in Poland, shattered by martial law, inflation and economic crisis. By the end of the decade, there were Chinese martial arts films, and even one from North Korea: *Hong Kil Dong* (1986, Kil-in Kim).

The whole world in cinema Vesmir

The popularity of individual hits of genre cinema is reflected in statistics and a review of cinema repertoires. Let us look at the example of three of the abovementioned spectacular films. The first GDR “red western”, *The Sons of Great Bear*,



Michael the Brave



War and Peace

directed by the Czech director Josef Mach at the request of the DEFA studio, was seen by 4.8 million people in the CSSR, i.e. every third citizen of the country. In Prague, its premiere screening lasted 10 weeks starting on 24 June 1966. *Pharaoh* had an audience of two million and seven weeks of premiere screening in the capital of Czechia. *The Dacians* attracted an audience of 1.9 million and stayed in zero-screen (premiere) cinemas for three weeks.

There were also small-town cinemas, like the abovementioned widescreen *Vesmír* cinema, the initiation place of the author of this text: two thousand residents, plus several hundred in nearby villages, 350 seats. Its manager, Hugo Hora, a man of the cinema, took great care of the place. Every Sunday, elegantly dressed, he would personally greet the local elite arriving to watch that weekend's film. He was proud every time (regularly, to our joy) that he managed to screen the greatest hits earlier than the cinema in the neighbouring town of Rosice.

Every month, the repertoire included 10-18 films, divided into weekend films (attractive American, French, Italian, British, West German, sometimes Spanish or Japanese movies and entertaining Czech films, usually comedies), working day films and Sunday programmes for children. The greatest hits were on for the whole week, from Friday or Saturday to Thursday, twice a day. The record was *Cleopatra*: two weeks, 18 shows.

Let us check which of the films imported from socialist countries in the summer of 1967 had weekend status in the *Vesmír* cinema: *Pharaoh* (six double shows – double ticket price and an intermission in the middle), *The Sons of Great Bear* (three shows with repetitions), *Mocne uderzenie* (Strong Blow, 1966, J. Passendorfer, six shows), *Wedding Night in the Rain* (four shows). 1968: *War and Peace I-II* (1965, S. Bondarchuk, tree double shows), *The Hungarian Magnate and Zoltán Kárpáthy* (three double shows), *The Dacians* (twelve shows), *Frozen Flashes* (1966, J. Veiczi, four double-shows), *Lot's Wife* (1964, E. Günther, four shows), *Legacy of the Incas* (1965, G. Marischka, twelve shows, presented as a Bulgarian, Austrian, Italian, Spanish and Peruvian coproduction), *Chingachgook, the Great Snake* (1966, R. Groschopp, twelve shows), *Hot Summer* (1967, J. Hasler, eight scheduled shows, cancelled due to the invasion on 21 August). 1969:

Heroin (1967, H.E. Brandt, H. Thiel, four shows), *The Column* (six shows), *War and Peace III* (S. Bondarchuk, four shows).

Apart from the Soviet films, whose mandatory inclusion in the weekend programme had nothing to do with their potential audience size, in 1970, several DEFA studio hits were screened: the third and fourth Native American western *The Trace of the Falcon* (1967, G. Kolditz, eight shows) and *White Wolves* (1968, K. Petzold, eight shows) or the action comedy *Not to me, Madam!* (1969, L. Warneke, Roland Oehme, six shows). Finally, the postponed *Hot Summer* was screened (only on Monday and Tuesday, four shows). Then, there was another colossus from the Buftea studio, this time the West German-Romanian *The Last Roman* (1968, R. Siodmak, eight double shows). GDR and Romanian films could compete in the repertoire with Western films, but only in typically Western genres (Western, action film, antique colossi) or thanks to coproduction.

As for the subsequent years, it is worth mentioning the Yugoslav partisan film *Battle of Neretva* (eight double shows), the French-Romanian western *Deerslayer* (1968, P. Gaspard-Huit, S. Nicolaescu, eight shows), a rescreening of the Western *White Wolves* (four shows), new episodes in *The Leatherstocking Tales* series based on James Fenimore Cooper (1970, J. Dréville, S. Nicolaescu, eight shows), *Michael the Brave* (the first part – six shows, the second part, one year later – four shows on Monday and Tuesday).

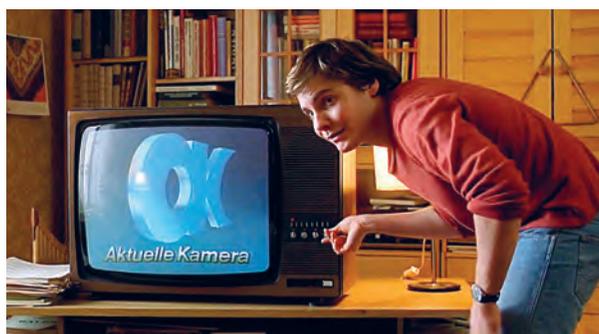
The era of the giants of socialist cinema gradually came to an end, from the perspective of a small town, in the 1970s. Weekend shows of films from partner states became an exception: six double shows of another Romanian-West German mini-series *The Sea Wolf* (1971, W. Staudte, S. Nicolaescu), the great success of *The Anatomy of Love* (1972, R. Załuski, six shows), which, for many years was the most exciting erotic film in Czechoslovakian cinemas (with a total audience of ca. 700,000), *Ulzana, The Apache Leader* (1973, G. Kolditz, eight shows) and the sci-fi *In the Dust of the Stars* (1975, G. Kolditz, six shows).

In 1995, the *Vesmír* cinema was closed down, the same as many other single screen theatres across the world. Later, the diversity of the film repertoire was promoted by festivals, where European genre cinema was no longer of any special significance.

Popular Socialist TV

Not a Contradiction in Terms

— Anikó Imre



Good Bye Lenin!

Recent accounts of popular media, particularly television, have given us a valuable record of the work of ideological persuasion under authoritarian socialist regimes. In these accounts, “propaganda” turns out to be an instrument with a far broader reach and far less predictable impact than we had assumed. Beyond propaganda, revisiting socialist TV also gives us an alternative view of socialism itself, which may make us question our assumptions about the roles of entertainment, consumerism, competition, work, collectivity, education and a host of other issues that have been oversimplified along a binary division between capitalism and socialism.

For the generations who remember the Cold War, these are strange times indeed. How did we get here from the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the universal elation over postcommunist countries’ (re)turn to democratic governance and to the capitalist economy? In the early 1990s, few people would have believed that thirty years later much of the world would be heading in the opposite direction, towards nationalistic isolation and political illiberalism.

As is always the case, popular media have registered these seismic geopolitical turns precociously, often before journalistic or academic experts have had a chance to offer reliable analyses with the requisite historical distance. We have seen a surge of popular film and TV content that revolves around socialism and the Cold War in search of interpretive frameworks to make sense of what often feels like living in an alternate reality today. Take for example *The Americans* (FX, 2013–2018), created by former CIA officer Joe Weisberg and based on a real-life Cold War-era

Russian spy program, which features a married couple of Russian spies who pose as ordinary Americans raising two children in a Washington D.C. suburb in the early 1980s. The very situation of Russians successfully passing as a pair of likable Americans, under the nose of their CIA agent neighbor, muddles the Cold War’s foundational construct of two essentially incompatible cultures, peoples, and value systems. Or take Amazon’s recent original series *Comrade Detective* (2017), which was inspired by writer-creator duo Brian Gatewood and Alessandro Tanaka’s discovery of actual late-Soviet propaganda television, namely the Czechoslovak serial *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* (1976–1979) and the long-running East German police show *Police Call 110* (1971–). While *Comrade Detective*’s vision of Romania is heavy-handed, lodged in Western stereotypes of communism, it is another attempt at revising Cold War history by drawing an implicit parallel between anti-communist propaganda in the United States and anti-capitalist propaganda in the Eastern Bloc.



Both of these shows, along with numerous similar recent popular TV and film representations, are symptoms of a growing curiosity about understanding how ideological persuasion operates under authoritarian regimes. This investment has also been matched by journalism and scholarship focused on the history of socialism and the Cold War. Studies of everyday cultures of socialism have particularly grown in strength in the past decade or two, diverting attention away from the usual concern with political systems and from the struggles between party-led dictatorships and dissident intellectuals. Popular media, especially TV, has played an essential role in mediating between and preserving memories of everyday and official cultures. Admittedly, it is impossible to generalize across the different places, phases and forms of television under socialism. I will therefore focus on three lingering misconceptions about socialist TV, which call for more subtle and accurate accounts of socialism and propaganda that are ripe with lessons for our current world of extreme divisions.

Socialist TV wasn't all propaganda and censorship

Propaganda and censorship are probably the first ideas that the casual observer would associate with socialist TV. And not without reason. "Agit-prop" departments and censors were active components of all socialist institutions. However, their activities did not necessarily translate into strict control or prohibition at all times and in all places. The actual extent of censorship varied greatly within the socialist region, from almost no direct censorship over TV in Hungary and Yugoslavia at one extreme to the heavily censored television of Ceaușescu's Romania at the other. In a similar vein, when it comes to "propaganda," by the 1970s, in much of the region, dramatic programming was recognized as a more effective vehicle for affirming the regimes' ideological directives than the news and other factual programming, which were hardly taken seriously by the public.

On the one hand, the immensely popular Czechoslovak serials were especially effective at wrapping socialist values in entertaining soap-opera formats. *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* was designed to shore up public support for the armed forces; *Women Behind the Counter* (1977) was supposed to rally viewers around the idea of the socialist lifestyle where women take on central roles as the emotional glue of the nation and the family; and *The Hospital at the Edge of Town* (1977–1981) painted an aspirational, utopian picture of socialist health care. On the other hand, comedic programs in less censored television regimes regularly provided subtle political criticism of the system – a strategically tolerated form of dissent that, in effect, functioned to prove the regime's tolerance and served its ideological interests as much as it undermined them.

Nor were propaganda and censorship unique to Soviet-type societies. Governments from Nazi Germany (Bignell, Fickers 2008, p. 24) and Greece under the military dictatorship to de Gaulle's France actively deployed television's potential for ideological influence and, conversely, tried to rein in the medium's impact through censorship. Even more broadly, Western and Eastern European broadcasters alike used televi-

sion to recruit citizen support for the state's goals and values. Socialist programming was highly influenced by the ethos of public service broadcasting (PSB), modeled on a common European ethical and ideological ideal that had originated in the prewar era. The main features, successes and difficulties of PSB were, indeed, embraced by all European television cultures. These included the state-led mission to inform and educate while promoting national culture – always under challenge by viewers demanding to be entertained – and the implied cultural hierarchy that assigned a low value to television in comparison with literature, cinema and other established arts.

The differences between Western European PSB systems and Eastern European state broadcast systems were less in the principles than in the degree of dogmatism with which they were put into practice. More precisely, while the letter of Marxist-Leninist imperatives continued to be rigidly repeated in the Soviet-controlled region well into the 1980s, its spirit operated much more closely to the ideological principles of Western European socialist democracies. This discrepancy between letter and spirit was particularly striking in television. The more ideological, elitist and educational television attempted to be, the more it was mocked and abandoned by viewers, who demanded fiction, humor and entertainment.

Some socialist TV was capitalist TV

Even though socialist televisions were centrally funded, they were integrally connected to the international market. Demand for programming exceeded what domestic production was able to supply from the 1960s, when TV established itself as a mass medium. This made socialist broadcast institutions heavily dependent on imported programs. It was also increasingly incumbent upon televisions to supplement state subsidies with commercial revenues. By the 1970s–80s, most states had their own more or less developed marketing departments, which also engaged in commercial activities. Slovenian TV Ljubljana and Croatian TV Zagreb established official cooperation with the Italian RAI in the early 1960s. This occurred despite protests from communist party authorities, who were anxious about the influence of Western news broadcasts and the consumerist values carried by dramatic programming.

Yugoslavia's relative ideological independence from the Warsaw Pact under Tito's leadership opened up greater financial independence for broadcasters in exchange for supplementing their decreasing state revenue. At first, this brought advertising blocks; later, commercials began to interrupt programs. Typical products advertised were food, cosmetics, chemical products, and services, such as sports and entertainment sponsorship. Federal revenue from advertising grew steadily in the 1960s and reached a peak of 23.1% of the total television budget by 1971 before it began falling throughout the 1970s (Mihelj and Huxtable 2018, p. 77). The growth of advertising to harness market competition went hand in hand with the emergence of niche markets and audience research.

Hungarian TV and Radio established their joint marketing department in 1968 and engaged in steadily growing domestic



Little Mole



Comrade Detective



The Hospital at the Edge of Town



and international marketing activities, including membership in the European Group of Television Advertising (EGTA). The first ads appeared in the late 1950s, just a few years after television's official 1956 launch. These first ads came out of an agreement between Hungarian Television and the advertising agency Magyar Hirdető ("Hungarian Advertiser"), which had been coordinating movie advertising since the 1940s. In the beginning, TV ads were run as text columns interspersed with pictures, before switching to film and later video. Television's marketing arm also produced ads for other large state institutions, including labor unions (Pócsik 2013).

Hungarian television's marketing activities included concert organization, film, video and record production and distribution, book publishing, and trading film rights. As in the case of Yugoslavian TV, they placed significant emphasis on interactions with viewers. Their "Public Information" department, launched in the 1970s, was in charge of gathering feedback from the public across the country, and responding to viewer letters and calls. Even though such outreach continued to run under the label of "propaganda," it more closely resembled public relations. In fact, such hybrid activities required the creation of hybrid categories such as "socially-oriented propaganda," which referred to providing free or inexpensive informational outlets for socialist institutions that catered to public health or education. From the 1970s, the sponsorship of programs was also allowed. While its extensive marketing activity sat uncomfortably with socialist ideology, it was also clear that Hungarian Television and Radio increasingly relied on the revenue it produced. According to a 1988 report on Hungarian Radio-TV's marketing activities, during its two decades it had increased its annual revenue more than 50-fold, from 3.9 million to 200 million Hungarian forints; and the number of its staff from five to eighty (source: "Az RTV...").

Advertising in itself did not constitute such a significant source of revenue in most other countries. However, it did exist in every socialist country, often in a contradictory,

hybrid ideological dimension between centrally planned and market economies. The presence of advertising in itself is not entirely surprising given that, as Heather Gumbert succinctly put it, "the entire system was geared towards advertising itself" (Gumbert 2013). Competition was inherent to the structure of Soviet-type socialism since the system was built on utopian principles that needed constant fortification, justification and adjustment on the domestic front, in the light of ongoing comparisons with Western European social democracies.

Socialist TV wasn't isolated from the rest of the world

Although national TV broadcasting was launched in most countries of the region in the late 1950s, it wasn't until the late 1960s that television as a mass medium entrenched itself most in socialist households. While programming was relatively scarce in the beginning, initially limited to one channel and only some parts of the day and days of the week, the line-up contained the full variety of genres recognizable from commercial and public service television elsewhere – from feature films, teleplays, serials, children's programs and documentaries to sports, variety shows, current affairs, and live broadcasts of cultural and political events. Eastern European broadcasters also actively participated in international television diplomacy, program trade and joint projects from the start.

Regional cooperation began almost immediately, within the OIRT's television network called Intervision, which included Czechoslovakia, Poland and the German Democratic Republic (Dunavölgyi). Cross-continental cooperation was shepherded by two main international, non-governmental broadcasting institutions established after the war: The European Broadcasting Union (EBU), heir to the pre-war International Broadcasting Union (IBU) for Western broadcasters and the Organisation Internationale de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision (OIRT), which became the dedicated "Eastern" network (Fickers and Bignell 2008, p. 27). The EBU and

Diffusion of TV Sets: Number of Inhabitants Per TV Set

	US	UK	France	Norway	Ireland	Italy	West Germany	East Germany	Czechoslovakia	Hungary	USSR	Yugoslavia	Bulgaria
1960	3.9	4.9	23.9	73.3	23.7	193.2	16.8	17.1	95.8	44.1	612.0	1577.0	
1965	3.6	4.0	7.4	7.6	9.7	8.6	5.1	5.3	6.6	12.2	14.4	34.3	44.5
1970	3.4	3.4	4.6	4.5	6.8	5.5	3.6	3.8	4.6	5.8	6.9	12.0	8.2
1975	3.1	3.0	3.5	3.8	5.6	4.6	3.4	3.2	4.0	4.4	4.6	7.7	5.8
1980	2.8	2.9	-	3.4	5.3	4.2	2.6	2.9	3.6	3.9	3.5	5.9	5.3

(source: Mihelj 2013, p. 22)

OIRT eventually merged in 1993 (ibid., p. 78–100). However, the channels between the two networks had remained open to traffic and collaboration and became increasingly active as the Cold War thawed. Program exchanges ensured that most of Europe was watching many of the same programs, often simultaneously.

Under increasing viewer demand for programming and worried about their populations' access to Western broadcasts, socialist governments embarked on the strategic domestic production of scripted programming in the 1960s. Unfortunately, by this time, viewers had already identified television as a medium of leisure, rather than indoctrination. Television had also absorbed "bourgeois" elements from radio, which, in turn, carried the legacy of stage variety entertainment. In addition, party authorities were also up against capitalist leakage, since broadcast signals could not be confined to state borders. Inhabitants of large regions in Yugoslavia, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Albania received either Austrian, Italian or West German programming; and Estonian viewers were able to watch Finnish TV along the border. Shared TV signals had the most profound effect in East Germany, where viewers – with the exception of the so-called "Valley of the Clueless" in the southeastern and northeastern parts of the country, where foreign signals didn't reach – were able to access West German broadcasting in a shared language, often specially directed at East German viewers. Perhaps more notoriously, the East German public affairs program *Prisma* (1963–1991), for instance, was created in competition against and was modeled after the West German *Panorama*, the longest-running current affairs show on German TV (1957-).

While the flow of European television exchanges was much more intense from West to East than vice versa, certain types of Eastern European programs circulated broadly. High quality children's programming, particularly animated shows without dialogue, for instance, faced few barriers on the international market. The Czech animated series *Krtek* (creator Zdenek Miler, 1957–2002) made the eponymous little mole a fixture in households well beyond Eastern Europe, in Scandinavia, the Middle East, India, China and Japan. Czech soap operas also traveled beyond the region. For instance, *Hospital at the Edge of Town* was broadcast in West Germany and served as an inspiration for the successful West German series *The Black Forest Clinic* (ZDF, 1985–1989).

The new mass medium thus consistently resisted party authorities' efforts at control and subordination. Prohibition, counter-programming, and hiding propaganda in entertainment only had limited effects. By the mid-1980s, with the rising availability of VCR recording technology, as well as the globalization of television thanks to cable and satellite delivery worldwide, only the shortage of electricity (as in Ceausescu's Romania) could impose some temporary restriction on television's capacity to provide a utopian window into better lives.

While television did not bring communism down (although in 1989 the revolution was televised in Romania and in Berlin), it was an institution that lived in the intersection of the public and domestic spheres, between top-down

attempts at influencing viewers and bottom-up demands for entertainment and consumerism. No wonder that it has been rediscovered as a valuable barometer of the political, economic and cultural life of socialism, which can provide us with an alternative historical view. Television gives us an image of life under socialism, even a surprisingly good life at times, which the bipolar vision of the Cold War occludes. Researching socialist TV gives us a sense of the real complexity of the relationships among the party leadership and the public that reaches well beyond popular historical narratives that previous histories of the Cold War have written.

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Sour But Ours?

Researching Socialist Popular Cinema

— Miłosz Stelmach

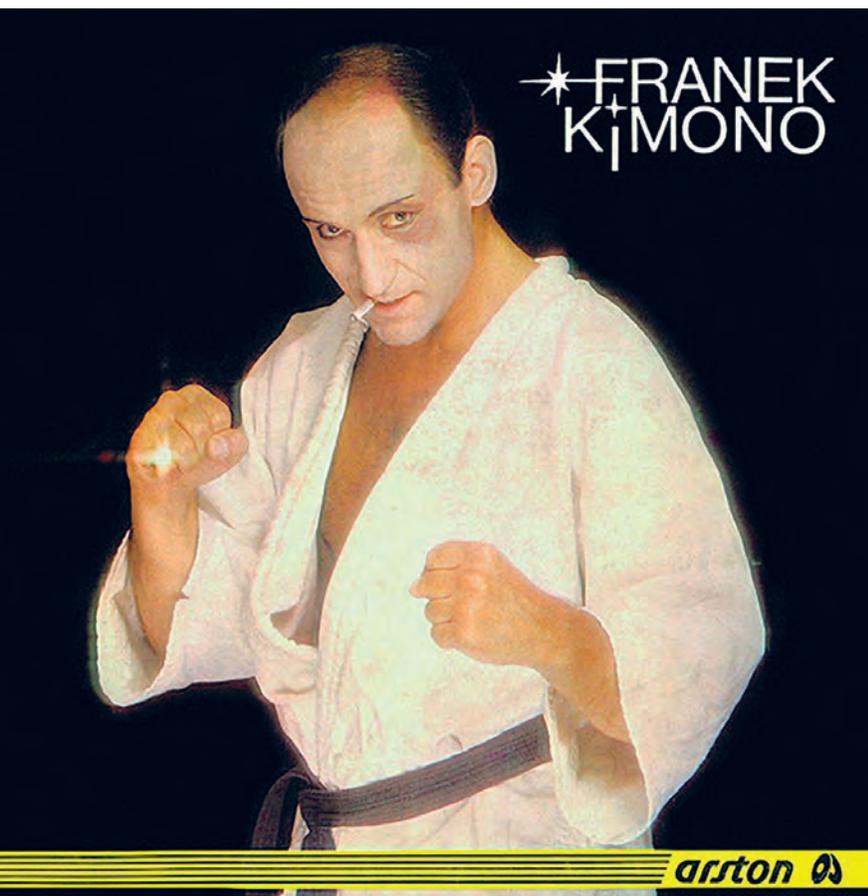


The Witness

The popular cinema of the communist bloc still awaits extensive and comprehensive, and yet, at the same time sufficiently nuanced analyses. Eastern European crime movies, comedies or musicals, often better remembered by viewers than by critics or film scholars, can tell us much about the times when they were made and about the people who created and watched them. It is worth pondering the possible directions of further research and the pitfalls that should be avoided along the way.

The phrase quoted in the title of this text should be familiar to every Hungarian – it is a cult line from the political satire *The Witness* (1969) by Peter Bacsó. Its titular hero, József Pelikán, a close relative of Jan Piszczyk from the Polish movie *Bad Luck* (1960, Andrzej Munk), finds himself fatally dragged into one political intrigue after another. Among others, he becomes the leader of a pilot programme of Hungarian orange farming and when his son eats the only fruit that his farm has grown, he presents to the proud official a lemon instead, and says: “This is a new Hungarian orange. It might be a little lighter and a little more sour, but at least, its ours”. It is hard to resist the impression that it is similar with Eastern European popular films, often regarded even by local researchers as “sour but ours”, dwarf versions of “real”, that is to say Western, genres. As second-rate product made in second-rate Europe, the popular cinema of the Eastern Bloc tends to be marginalised and is usually treated as merely a footnote to the “proper” history of cinema.

It would be a real challenge to try to introduce this footnote into the main text. Research on the cinemas of the region encounter numerous obstacles and they require methodological and metahistorical reflection, as Ewa Mazierska (2010) noted a decade ago. The priority is, of course, to conduct basic historical research, i.e. to provide an elaborate and reliable presentation of the various phenomena, figures and cultural or geopolitical conditions that shaped the film industries in the Eastern Bloc. Many of them – despite the efforts of numerous dedicated researchers – still lack comprehensive studies, and the vast majority of materials are available in local languages only, which makes it difficult to conduct broader, international research of artistic trends. Some of these, including those discussed in this issue, still wait to be discovered – the Romanian “mămăligă westerns” (mentioned by Jaromír Blažejovský), early communist musicals (discussed by Ewa Mazierska) or Czechoslovakian series of the 1970s (whose popularity is mentioned by Anikó Imre) literally ask for an expert description.



At the same time, we should already start planning subsequent steps and further stages of research that go beyond simple (re)presentation of history – the “gap-filling” imperative is as treacherous as it is just, because it may lead to mechanical multiplication of historical sketches and quasi-encyclopaedic enumeration. The latter not only obscures the position from which we look at the past, but also tends to disregard the broader conditions of making the film culture that we are trying to get to know. To avoid this, we must constantly expand the methodological reach so as to capture the wealth of the discussed area and not to limit it to a few stereotypical images of Eastern Europe and its (film) culture. Possibilities are manifold and the following gestures of transgression are just a few proposals.

Postulate 1: Beyond simple dualism

Despite their inevitable reductionism, binary oppositions are appealingly simple and persuasive and still affect our thinking about Eastern European filmmaking, founded on such contrasting alternatives as the East/the West, entertainment/art, authorities/artists, public/private, propaganda/commerce or subversion/opportunism. These pairs of concepts still largely define the diversified phenomena that changed in time and space, conveniently omitting all the intermediate states, tensions and fluctuations, and more complex relations that in fact drove them. Moreover, they are very often founded not so much on the intention to neutrally describe the facts but rather on thinly veiled sympathies or evaluative judgments that help divide phenomena, films or figures into

good, interesting and valuable ones vs. bad, trivial and un-noteworthy ones.

A convincing disassembly of each of these dichotomies would require a separate and detailed explanation, for which there is no space here. Let us analyse then just one model example, namely the paradigmatic division into the commercial filmmaking of Western countries and the state-owned, non-commercial one of the Eastern Bloc. It is true that in France, the UK or West Germany, films were produced by private companies, while in East Germany, Czechoslovakia or the Soviet Union, there were state-owned film studios with their teams of filmmakers. However, this major difference does not reflect the real situation of different film production companies in both systems. Western European countries in many ways supported their local filmmaking industries (especially their certain sectors – e.g. artistic films, debuts or productions of educational value) through elaborate systems of subsidies, loans, tax relief, mandatory quotas or institutions promoting the national cinema. Meanwhile, in the post-thaw period, practically all

state-owned and centrally controlled film industries of the Eastern Bloc introduced a market logic, aware of the important role of the economic factor in planning the organisation of the extremely cost-consuming film industry.

Ever since then, the postulate of economic self-efficiency, although never entirely fulfilled, repeatedly returned in the rhetoric and activities of the managers of the respective industries. The milestones in this direction were organisational and financial separation of production, distribution and screening, shared financial liability of state-owned companies (e.g. subsidies based on box office income – such a system functioned, for example, in Poland and Yugoslavia), the distribution and promotion of a film dependent on its commercial potential, and the rates of royalties of the main artists conditioned by the turnout. Thus, many film producers in fact functioned as quasi-commercial enterprises that – despite common stereotypes – sometimes had to worry about their finances, relationships with business partners or image. This translated into the status of workers in the filmmaking industry – in the context of socialist societies, they had relatively comfortable lives.

Of course, this reorganisation of the production system towards more commercial practices did not eliminate political pressures – some films continued to be made not for profit but for propaganda or didactic purposes, and even the more commercially inclined ones had to pay at least symbolic ideological tribute. Also, there was continued supervision and, consequently, a protective umbrella over state film production companies, which meant that even those that



chronically generated losses could not go bankrupt (the only exception was the more market-oriented Yugoslavia, where in fact, the Croatian Zora Film went out of business for economic reasons). Nonetheless, since the 1960s, popular cinema was regarded to be a necessary foundation of socialist film industries – not only for political reasons (as a “safety valve” or “soft propaganda”) but, more importantly, for economic reasons, which brought it closer to its Western equivalent.

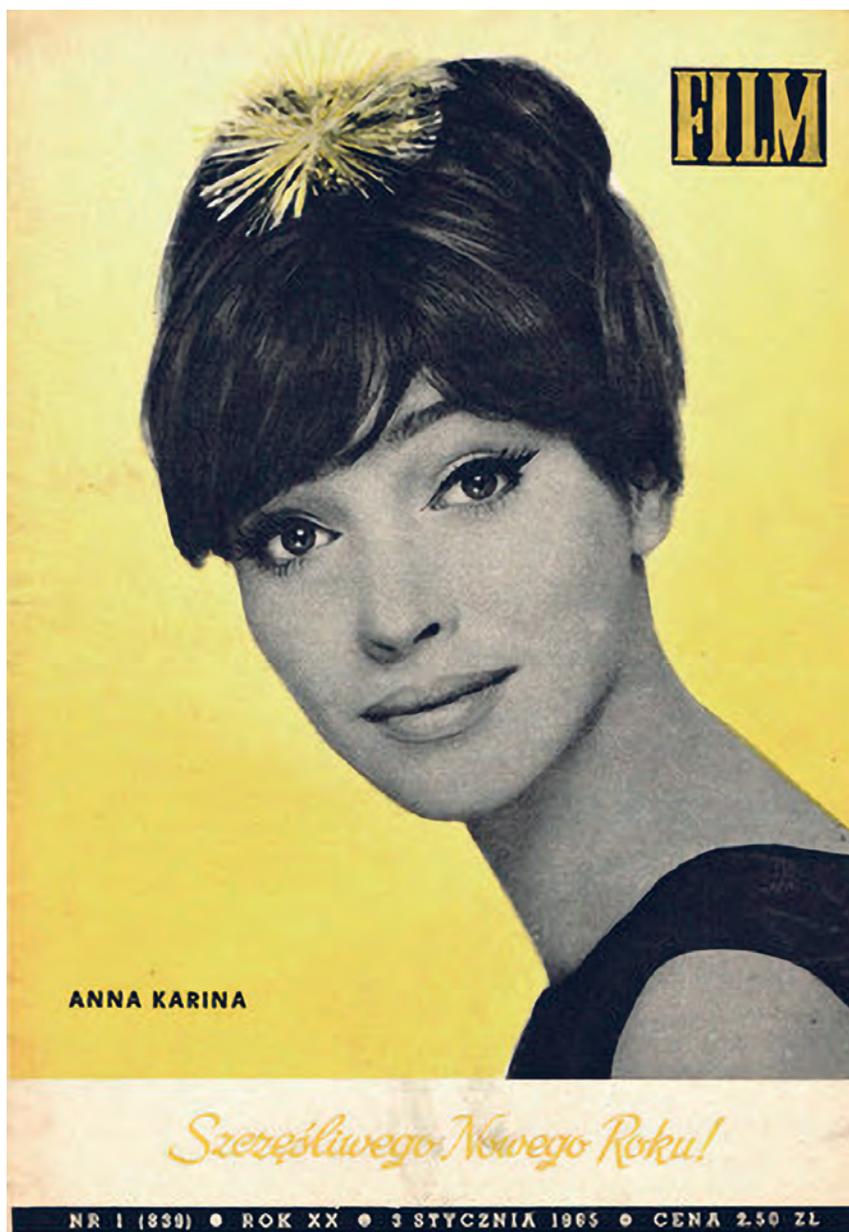
Similar doubts are associated with all of the abovementioned oppositions – closer analysis leads to the conclusion that there were more co-productions between capitalist and socialist countries than could be expected (for example, the first five co-productions made in East Germany between 1954 and 1957 were joint projects with Sweden and France). Similarly, strong division between “subversive” and “politically correct” cinema is usually a contemporary projection of our own perception of communism and it does not reflect either the reactions of viewers and critics at the time or the intentions of the authors, whose motivation was not only to affirm or to criticise the system, but who had many other ambitions as well: entertaining, didactic, technical, personal, etc. Even the relationship between respective filmmakers and their social and political environments could be self-contradictory, change over time or depend on their personal position or pure chance, rather than a top-down, static doctrine that could be summarised in a couple of sentences, governing all the aspects of film culture.

Postulate 2: Beyond the national perspective

Another basic gesture that should help prevent the ossification and atomisation of research into the Eastern European cinema is resignation from the dominant national framework. Attempts to identify the “national spirit” in a given work of art or genre, which have their roots in nineteenth-century idealist philosophy, may, of course, highlight important cultural factors that shaped that work or genre, but equally frequently, they become a tool of stereotyping and ahistorical oversimplification. Similar is the case with local political contexts that are quite often fetishized, since the cinema of the Eastern Bloc is regarded as a state-controlled tool of an authoritarian system or, to the contrary, as a cultural bastion resisting that system. Of course, the fact is that genre films were regularly used as distraction or soft propaganda, and they flourished whenever artistic freedoms were being suppressed – this was the case in 1960 Poland, when the government wanted to put an end to the critical trend identified with so-called Polish School, or

in Czechoslovakia after the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, when the abrupt end of the New Wave was at the same time the beginning of a whole new wave of popular productions. It is impossible, however, to explain all the stylistic, thematic or production transformations by the ascendance of a new First Secretary of a local communist party, which would bring culture down to the role of a barometer of domestic politics. What are the alternatives to a nation-state-oriented perspective?

Of all the possible paths, the one most worth following is the change of scale – to a larger or smaller one than the borders of a given country. The former is associated with a transnational perspective, which places the analysed phenomena in the context of the communist bloc or (in Kundera’s spirit) of the culture and heritage of Central Europe, and even more broadly, of global and European cinema. Of course, major differences existed between the respective film industries of the region – they had different systems of production, local



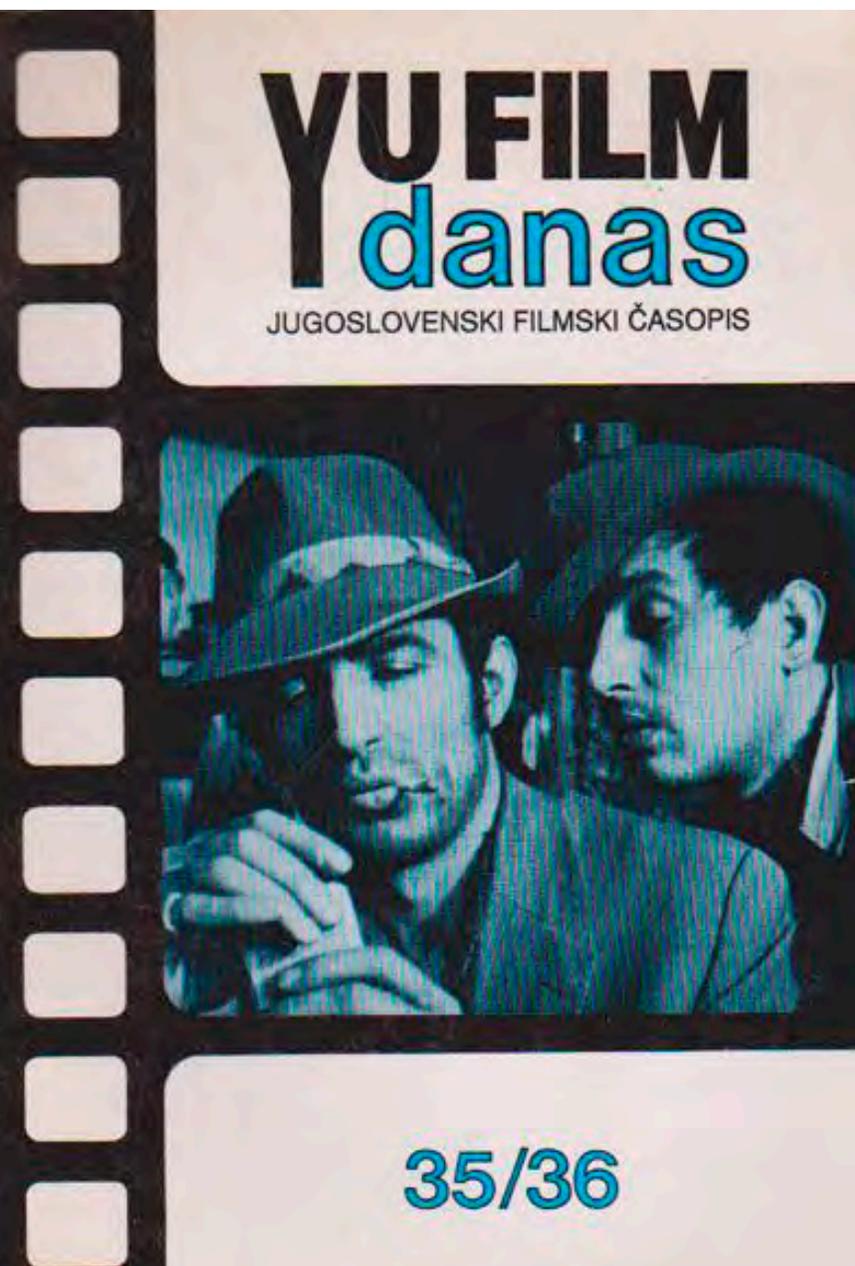
filmmaking traditions and cultural models. Nonetheless, there also existed significant similarities. For example, Petr Szczepanik describes the “state-socialist mode of production” in communist countries, taking into account the internal diversity of the respective industries but also situating them in a more general organisational and economic configuration (cf. Szczepanik 2013).

Moreover, the Eastern Bloc cinema constituted, after all, a part of the global cultural system, and in its own unique way it approached the eternal and omnipresent tension between national characteristics and transnational connections. As Jaromír Blažejovský noted, popular cinema in Eastern Europe often developed at the intersection of current sociopolitical needs and fascination with Hollywood movies – Commissioner Roman, known from a cycle of five Romanian police movies (1972–1974) would never have come into existence if it was not for the American film noir and its French variety à la Jean-Pierre Melville, just as there would

be no East German-Polish *Signals* (1970, Gottfried Kolditz) without the *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968, Stanley Kubrick) and the broader context of space race, played out not only within the hangars of space agencies but also on film sets.

International impact was not limited to the level of inspirations reflected in local productions. The works of foreign culture, in subsequent years more and more frequently making their way to the Eastern Bloc, were not just a foreign element hermetically separated from the domestic culture – to the contrary, they entered into complicated relationships with the domestic culture, resulting in localisation and hybridisation of the content. For example, in the Eastern European context, American adventure movies of 1970s and 1980s acquired new meaning, not intended by the producers, and even new labels (such as the Cinema of the New Adventure in Poland). It is impossible to describe the popular cultures of Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia without showing how imported elements functioned in that culture.

A good example is the popularity of the *Enter the Dragon* (1973, Robert Clouse) film and its star, Bruce Lee in The Polish People’s Republic. Even though the film was first screened in Poland in June 1982, nine years after the American premiere and under the conditions of martial law, it became a massive hit. It attracted an incredible audience of 17.3 million in Poland (out of total population of 36.4 million), which was more than the American audience during the film’s first run, where box office proceeds amounted to 25 million dollars, which, given the average ticket price at that time, corresponds to ca. 14.2 million viewers. Minding the American population and the size of the American movie market, this shows the scale of the phenomenon of Bruce Lee in Poland. This was not a one-time event: the popularity of karate clubs exploded; the Hong Kong star (already dead by then) was everywhere in Polish papers in the 1980s, and not only in film magazines; karate films were extremely popular (with the *Shaolin Temple* [1982, Hsin Yan-chang] starring Jet Li on top of the list, with an audience of nearly 12.8 million in 1985) and had their Polish equivalents (such as *Karate Polish Style* [1983, Wojciech Wójcik], which was produced under the title of *Splinters*, but the title was changed before the premiere) and parodies (in 1984, the karate-themed *Franek Kimono* musical spoof album became a hit). This type of phenomena also formed part of the history of Polish cinema and popular culture and, in a bizarre way, Bruce Lee became an indispensable element of it, too.





However, the change of the scale of perception does not necessarily mean reaching only for broader, transnational regularities. The same may apply to the lower level – that, which is regional, local, momentary or personal. Especially in the case of such heterogeneous, federal countries as the USSR or Yugoslavia, it is worth asking whether for example there existed in the 1960s and 1970s an Estonian or Slovenian popular cinema that stood out in the standardised panorama of the film industries of the multinational countries where it developed. Similar questions may be posed regarding respective regions, production companies, cycles or types of characters.

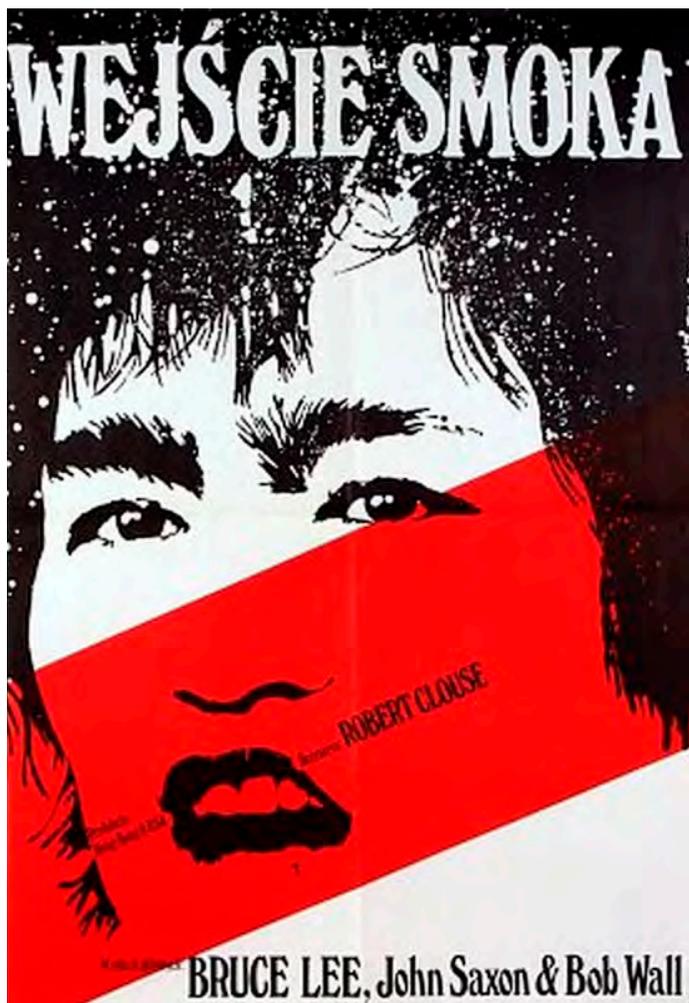
Finally, Eastern European cinema should also be regarded simply as cinema, without the geographic determiner or other conditional adjective – one should try to find in it traces of postcolonial, queer and gender discourse, affect theory or post-secular tendencies, just as in films made anywhere else in the world. A misguided sensitivity to historical and geographical specificity may easily transform into the labelling of the cinema of socialist countries as a perpetual “other” within Europe, mainly determined by the socialist political system, which becomes a convenient and all-encompassing interpretation framework that occludes any other possible readings.

Postulate 3: Beyond the film

Sometimes it is important to not only look in a different way but also at different things. A consequence of this is the need to go beyond the film itself, which in this case may entail two distinct but complementary issues: reaching beyond a specific work and beyond the cinema in general. The first outreach – although obvious in contemporary film studies and yet worth recalling – means that not only the narrative, stylistic and technical dimensions of the examined phenomena are taken into consideration, but also the background of the film culture, in the broad meaning of the term. They comprise, on the one hand, the production contexts that condition filmmaking (e.g. the system of censorship, culture of work on the film set, social and political expectations) and, on the other hand, what happens later, especially the reception and the accompanying artefacts.

The latter may be surprisingly rich. We reach for film magazines mainly to reconstruct the critical reception, to verify what the commentators of cultural life had to say about the respective works. However, it may be equally interesting to look at colour magazines from the period, including interviews, covers, letters to editors, fan clubs and other manifestations of popular reception. Especially phenomena of a more social than artistic kind, such as stardom or fashion, reveal their fuller image only through unofficial sources – memoirs, letters, private photos and albums, and in particular oral history. This issue is the more urgent, given that, as a given period becomes more distant in time, the people who remember it inevitably pass away – both filmmakers and casual participants of daily cultural activities.

Sometimes, this outreach must be bolder and transgress the entire system of film production, which, after all, has never been an autarchy separated from the rest of the soci-



ety. To understand it better, it is necessary to examine the broader ecosystem of East European pop culture, which comprised various audiovisual forms (especially the TV, alongside the cinema) as well as music, stage variety, fashion, radio or popular magazines. Oftentimes, those media inspired and supported one another through both the flow of content and the presence of stars in various fields of art and this way creating transmedia phenomena (as was the case with Manfred Krug in the GDR, in the 1960s and 1970s and the contestatory Viktor Tsoi in the late USSR). This is also reflected in increasingly frequent studies on the TV in the Eastern Bloc (Imre 2016; Imre, Havens, Lustyik 2013) or relationships between the cinema and pop music (Mazierska, Györi 2018).

Going beyond film, it is also worth asking what was the role of popular cinema in social life and changing patterns of leisure time activities, encompassing not only other works of culture but also mass events, clubs, sport events, etc. Simply speaking – was moviegoing an alternative to buying a record (and if so, what kind of record), listening to a popular radio play or an outing to a bar or football match? How much time did audiovisual culture occupy in a day/week/month and how much did it vary, depending on age, education or place of residence? These are questions not only for sociologists but also for film historians who would like to learn about the role of the cinema in a socialist society.

Timelessness of Polish comedies

It is hard to estimate precisely the contemporary popularity of socialist productions, but one indicator may be the activity of the users of online film databases. Comparing the number of users who watch (and rank) socialist films with the historical audience numbers, we can roughly determine which films are more (or less) popular now than at the time of their premiere. These calculations are very simplistic and imprecise, but their results are quite unequivocal. At the Polish filmweb.pl site (the second largest film database in the world), of the twenty most frequently rated Polish films made from 1946 to 1989, seventeen are comedies, the first three being *Sexmission* (1983, Juliusz Machulski, ca. 650,000 votes), *Teddy Bear* (1980, Stanisław Bareja, ca. 330,000 votes) and *How I Unleashed World War II* (1969, Tadeusz Chmielewski, ca. 270,000 votes). Meanwhile, only four of those films were among the top twenty box office hits in communist Poland, dominated by historical and adventure films. Especially the films by Stanisław Bareja have lived to see their reevaluation, with the *Teddy Bear* in the lead, which – today a cult film – in the year of its premiere had an audience of 626,000. This put the film in fifth place among Polish premieres of the season, but it was far behind not only such leaders of the ranking as *Man of Iron* by Andrzej Wajda (an audience of over five million) but also the long forgotten post-apocalyptic film *Tender Spots* by Piotr Andrejew. Similar disproportions may be found the other way round – *In the Desert and in the Wilderness* by Ślesicki, whose two parts were watched by a total of 31 million viewers in Poland (the second-highest result in history) was rated only by 13,000 or so users on filmweb.pl – eighty other films of the socialist epoch attracted more interest. Other box office hits of the Polish People's Republic also experienced a gigantic drop in popularity – films such as *Nights and Days* (1973, Jerzy Antczak – 22.4 million audience for the two parts), *The Leper* (1976, Jerzy Hoffman – 9.9 million audience) or *Argument About Basia* (1959, Maria Kaniewska – an audience of 8.2 million) are viewed quite rarely today.

Postulate 4: Beyond history

Finally, it is worth mentioning one more issue that would be hard to omit. Research on Eastern Bloc cinema is obviously historical, as it concerns events and works from several decades ago, which does not mean, however, that the bygone phenomena have no influence in the present. Despite the fact (or perhaps partly thanks to it) that the companies, economic systems and even some of the states that produced them have ceased to exist, films made from the 1950s to the 1980s continue to enrich the popular culture of the region – sometimes through lasting personal and institutional relationships (many of the production companies established in the socialist period

continue to exist and many filmmakers who worked in the 1970s and 1980s are still active), but, most importantly, as an object of cult, a point of reference, a tradition that can be referred to and that, for a major part of viewers, still represents an unattainable level.

Cinema from the socialist period represents, in many ways, the period of impressive production values and audience numbers, and it is often fondly remembered as the “golden age” of respective national cinemas. This is particularly manifested in the phenomenon of cult films, characters or dialogues that, in the popular perception, are often detached from the circumstances of their origin, as if functioning outside of time. Especially comedy characters such as József Pelikán (*The Witness*), Josef Švejk (*The Good Soldier Švejk*, 1957, Karel Steklý) or Franek Dolas (*How I Unleashed World War II*, 1969, Tadeusz Chmielewski) have become not only screen icons but also exponents of national (self)stereotypes and a testimony to how Hungarians, Czechs and Poles, respectively, think about themselves and their role in history. This impact is still visible today, proving that the popular cinema of Eastern Europe is a living organism and a widely available reservoir of cultural attitudes and experiences that comprise the national community.

This also concerns the abovementioned imported entertainment that was absorbed and naturalised by local pop culture. It is worth mentioning once again the unusual status of *Enter the Dragon*, this time in Yugoslavia. In the multi-ethnic Mostar, the city that, during the civil war of 1991–1995, became the symbol of the deep division of society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the first monument of Bruce Lee in the world was erected in 2005 as a symbol of peace and healing the wounds. It turned out that for the residents it was he, rather than heroes of the local partisan cinema or one of the cult comedies, who best symbolised the cultural community of the former Yugoslavia. As Veselin Gatalo, one of the leaders of the social movement that led to the erection of the monument said: “We will always be Muslims, Serbs or Croats, but one thing we all have in common is Bruce Lee” (BBC 2005).

This type of anecdotal observations automatically trigger questions about whether reception studies should only concern the premiere audience of a given work of art, or what makes certain works endure across subsequent decades and epochs. It is worth pondering how the reputation of certain titles or artists is consolidated, while others gradually drop out of public awareness, and yet others are rediscovered years later. It is particularly worth examining the phenomenon of the cultural timelessness of comedies that usually did not attract such large audiences during their premiers as spectacular, high-budget historical or adventure productions, but nonetheless have survived in the collective memory of viewers. In the history of the Soviet Union, an unprecedented box office hit was the film *Pirates of the 20th Century* (1980, Boris Durow), which had the audience of nearly 90 million, and in Poland, the film adaptation of Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *In the Desert and in the Wilderness* (1973, Władysław Ślesicki; an audience of 31 million!). Today, however, these films are not so well remembered in their respective countries

of origin, unlike the cult comedies by Leonid Gaidai in the USSR or Stanisław Bareja in Poland.

This is not only about tracing individual and collective cultural memory, but also the more or less institutionalised forms of its development. They might be, in particular, the broadly understood contemporary cultural and historical polices encompassing the activities of public authorities at various levels and also independent institutions and organisations, media and scholarly and professional discourse. The litmus test and at the same time catalyst for those processes are such specific activities as strategies and functions of archiving, restoration, research, promotion or curatorial care of film and film-related resources.

This case for awareness of contemporaneity is consequently also an encouragement for (self)reflection on the research-related inclinations of film and culture scholars. It seems that every historian since the poststructuralist turn is aware that historical narratives – even those pretending to be possibly neutral and objective – are shaped in the process of renegotiating the past for the sake of the presence. Thus, it is up to us what perspective we assume. It also depends on us how the popular cinema of the Eastern Bloc will be remembered – whether we will lock it in a drawer tagged as relics of communist cultural propaganda or open it to contemporary interpretation, demonstrating its continued relevance to the viewers and to our understanding of historical and contemporary debates.

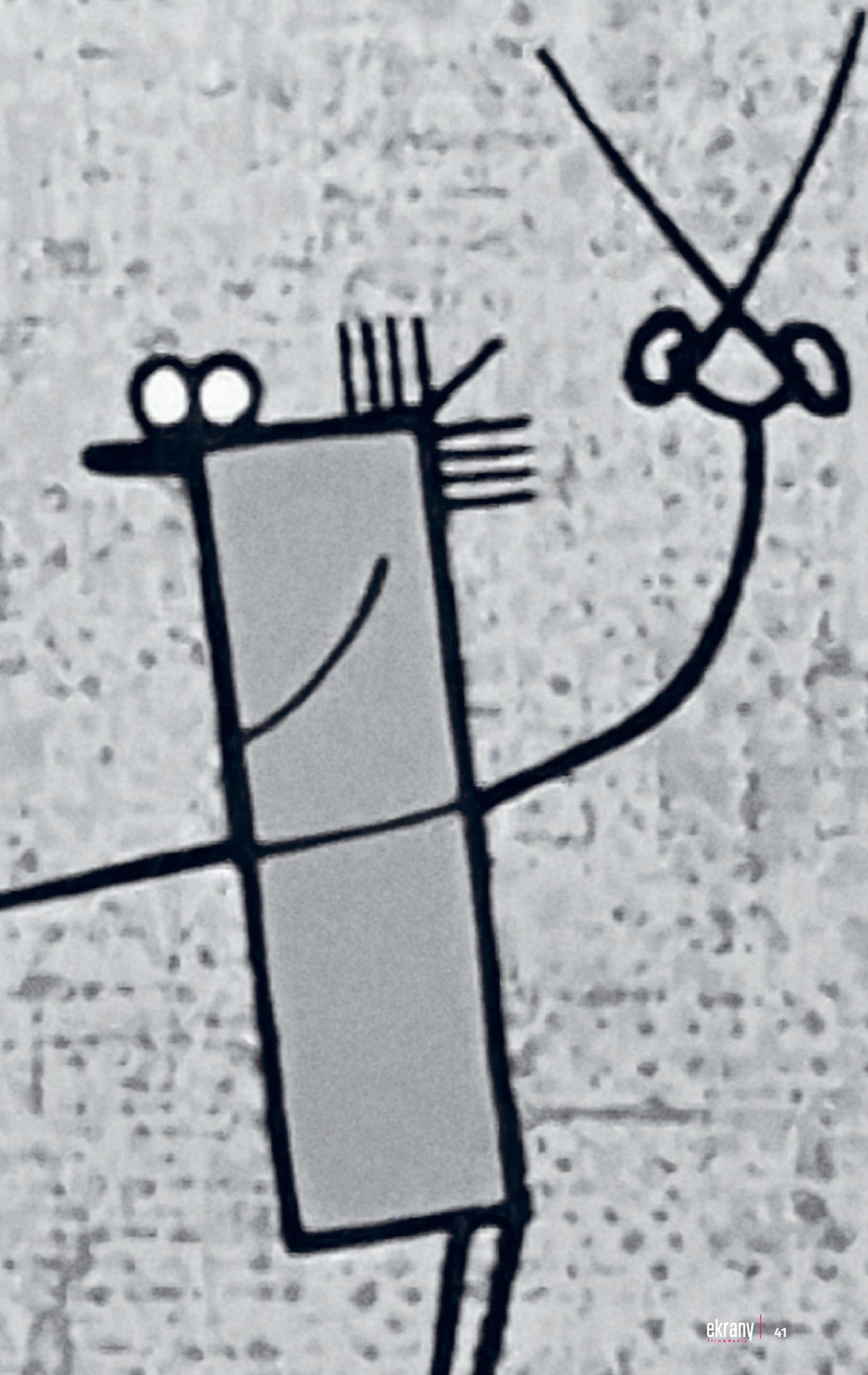
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**Eastern
European
Genres**





Rumcajs

Animation: Parallel Worlds

— Paweł Sitkiewicz

From the perspective of Western Europe, animation in the Eastern Bloc may seem a monolith: a coherent phenomenon with explicit identity, built on uniform foundations and similar ideals. In reality, it is a collection of different film industries with certain similarities and historical experiences in common. There is, however, a unifying tradition, despite the differences arising from geopolitical location and different scales of success and failure. The subset of similarities includes, among other things, production culture and distribution mechanisms, the goals of the art of filmmaking, artistic freedom licensed by the state and the cultural community of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe comprising the communist system.

The image of socialist animation of the popular and genre kind is generally overshadowed by the artistic successes of films that were outside the influence of commercial pressure. In the collective imagination a number of masters reign, such as Jurij Norstein, Jiří Trnka,

Jan Lenica, Ion Popescu-Gopo, Todor Dinow or Dušan Vukotić, regarded as the grand reformers of the art of animation of the second half of the twentieth century. Most frequently discussed are their engaged films, which use Aesopian language or try to challenge the problems of the century of war, totalitarianism and the atomic energy. However, if we made a couple of changes in the pantheon or shifted the attention from films that are *appreciated* to ones that are actually *watched*, we would obtain a somewhat different image. Artistic and festival achievements, usually addressed to adult connoisseur audiences, constituted a minor fraction of the film production then and did not always reflect the interests of mass audiences. The popular cinema had to earn money for the experimental cinema.

Animated stars

In the Eastern Bloc countries, true heroes of the mass imagination were created in cinema as well as in television: in Czechoslovakia – for example

Krteček (Little Mole), Rumcajs, Pat and Mat, in Poland – Bolek and Lolek, Reksio, Miś Uszatek (Floppy Bear), in the USSR – Cheburashka, Wolf and Hare, in the GDR – Sandmann, and in Hungary – Frakk, the cats' nightmare. Popular (cinema and TV) series not only circulated among the communist countries, as part of the exchange of goods and culture, but were also distributed to the West, where they were often hugely popular.

It is hard to bring the commercial and artistic success of films representing such completely different film cultures to a common denominator. Some of them portrayed the reality in a creative and censorship-free way (like the Cheburashka cycle [1969–1983] by Roman Kachanov, *Just you wait!* [also known as *A Wolf and a Hare*; 1969–2006] directed by Vyacheslav Kotynochkin, or the Hungarian satirical series for adults, *Gustav* [1964–1977], created by József Nepp. Others engaged in wise and non-obtrusive didactics, tailored to the interests and cognitive



possibilities of children (e.g. the Polish series *Bolek and Lolek* [1962–1983] or *Uszatek* [1975–1987]). Some had beautiful graphics, based on stylisation or unusual animation techniques (e.g. the yarn series *From the Diary of Tomcat Blue Eyes* [1974–1976] by Hermína Týrlova or the puppet *Moomins* [1977–1982] by Se-Ma-For). Some adapted folk culture or classical literature in a contemporary way (e.g. *The Gallant Robber Rumcajs* [1967–1974] by Ladislav Čapek, the East German series *Our Sandman* [1959–] of the TV production company DFF, and especially three screen adaptations of *Winnie-the-Pooh* [1969–1972]). Others simply entertained with their genre conventions, humour and adventures of the protagonists who children found it easy to identify with (e.g. the series about the adventures of Colargol Bear [1968–1974] by Tadeusz Wilkosz, *Krteček* [1957–2002] by Zdenek Miler or the Hungarian *Frakk, the Cats' Nightmare* [1972–1987] by Pannónia Filmstúdió).

The female animators who stood behind the many excellent and very popular films often remained underappreciated. Women more often than men engaged in art for children, introducing new artistic elements, a different sensitivity and original fictional plots. Among them were Hermína Týrlová and Vlasta Pospíšilová in Czechoslovakia, Teresa Badzian and Zofia Oraczewska in Poland, Zinaida and Valentina Brumberg in the USSR, Radka Bachvarova and Zdenka Doicheva in Bulgaria.

Art and science

Compared to commercial films from Western Europe, Japan and the USA, East European animations – especially between the mid-1950s and the early 1980s – displayed a wealth of techniques and conventions, ambitious scripts (often based on the texts by distinguished writers), skillful use of pantomime and an old-fashioned approach to entertainment, which was supposed to educate through fun and excitement. This was linked to a specific culture of production, based on permanent employment, reduced commercial pressure and more freedom compared to live-action films.

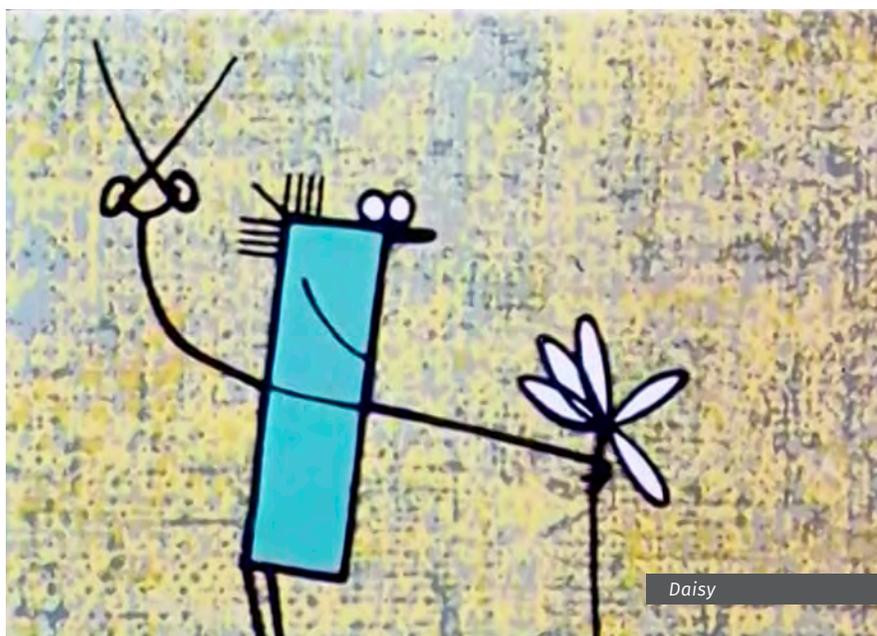
Another characteristic feature of socialist animation is the fact that it is difficult to distinguish between commercial vs. artistic films, “normal” vs. experimental films or children vs. adult animation. The didactic function of the animated film was very important in the Eastern Bloc, and didacticism was understood in a broad sense: not only as transfer of educational content, but also as impulse to arouse the interest of the viewers through unusual form. Meritocracy often ruled in the domain of visual arts, especially in terms of selecting the means of expression or literary inspiration. The artist decided

what his or her work would be like, and the officials made sure that public money was not spent on artistically mediocre films. This applied not only to films sent to international festivals but also to cartoons for children and commercial TV series.

Artists famous for their auteurist animations for adults, such as Witold Giersz in Poland, Fyodor Chytruk and Yuri Norstein in the USSR or Jiří Trnka in Czechoslovakia, engaged in children’s, genre or commercial (by principle, addressed to wider audiences) film projects without violating their artistic conscience or the ideals



Cheburashka



Daisy

of the *cinema d'auteur*. This is how the *Winnie-the-Pooh* trilogy, based on A.A. Milne's book, was made in the USSR. The director, Fyodor Chytruk, disregarded the canon illustrations by E.H. Shepard or the Disney film (which he did not even know while starting the project) in his own adaptation. At times, he even departed from the literary original, although he remained faithful to its spirit. He and Vladimir Zuykov designed Winnie-the-Pooh's world from scratch, inspired by children's drawings, Russian (rather than British) iconography and the style of so-called limited animation. Chytruk's artistic ambitions did not hinder the distribution and popularity of his films. Each and every citizen of the USSR was familiar with them.

For children, for adults, for all

Many films of this type are regarded today as model examples of animation for children. What is more, the commercial animated films of the Eastern Bloc is often considered to be equal to animation for the youngest, as opposed to ambitious films for adults, whose authors did not care to become popular. But this characterization is imprecise. In socialist animation – both the festival and the commercial – the boundaries between age groups were often blurred. On the one hand, films with such an experimental form or narrative structure as *Once There Was* (1957) by Jan Lenica and Walerian Borowczyk or *The Tale of Tales* (1979) by Yuri Norstein were nominally made as films for children, but at the same time they seem to be a creative reinterpretation of the techniques and conventions known from children's animation. On the other hand, many actual films for children, such as *Little Western* (1960) by Giersz, *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975) by Norstein or *Daisy* (1965) by Todor Dinov could highlight their experimental form or sophisticated message and yet be popular with audiences of all ages. *Daisy*, the most popular short film from Bulgaria, is both a comic cartoon, a very smart film for children about the stupidity and cruelty of adults and an attempt at reducing the graphic form to the limits of abstraction for connoisseurs to appreciate.

Equally problematic is the category of popular or commercial animation from the socialist bloc. Some films were intentionally produced for entertainment and financial gain. These included, in particular, TV series, with their entire spectrum of genres, as well as regular medium- and full-length films. The ones that were the most widely distributed were produced at the Soyuzmultfilm studio, e.g. *The Snow Maiden* (1952) by Ivan Ivanov-Vano or *Flight to the Moon* (1953) by the Brumberg sisters – both quite realistic and modelled after Disney's art, yet using style and themes typical of Eastern Europe. Few of the film industries of the Eastern Bloc had sufficient technical and human resources to focus on feature-length production. The only exception was Czechoslovakia, where Jiří Trnka directed as many as six feature-length films in the puppet technique (three of which were compiled from shorter forms) in the period from 1947 to 1959. One of them was *Midsummer Night's Dream* after Shakespeare. In the other countries, the first feature-length animations that were not compilations of series' episodes were produced relatively late. In Poland, the first such film was made only in 1977 (*The Great Voyage of Bolek and Lolek* by Władysław Nehrebecki and Stanisław Dülz) and in Bulgaria – in 1985 (*We Call Them Montagues and Capulets* by Donyo Donev, a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*). Most such films (and there were quite many of them by 1980s) were popular and some of them became real hits – such as the abovementioned *Great Voyage...*, which had the audience of nearly 8,5 million in Poland.

Short films intended for cinema distribution were also popular. In the Eastern Bloc countries, each animated film could become commercial. The cinema programming of short films functioned somewhat differently than in Western countries. There were matinees for young children and cinemas screening only short films. Short films were also regularly shown before the main live-action films in cinemas. Thus, an artistic short film could reach millions of viewers, if screened before a big hit. This happened, for example, to *Gena the Crocodile* (1969) by Kachanov or

Daisy by Dinov. The spontaneous popularity of some short films often led to the production of a TV series featuring their heroes. This was the case, for example, with *Reksio* and *Bolek and Lolek*.

This mirrored the rank of the animated cinema, which was not a trivial or marginal phenomenon. Influential magazines (such as „Film”, „Soviet Screen” or „Film and Day”) publicised even the smallest festival successes and discussed the possibilities for future development. In certain periods – different for the respective countries – animation was even regarded as a staple of the national culture.

Where to begin?

- Cycle of films about the adventures of Cheburashka by Roman Kachanov: *Gena the Crocodile* (1969), *Cheburashka* (1971), *Chapeauclaque* (1974) and *Cheburashka Goes to School* (1983).
- *Krteček* (Little Mole) by Zdenek Miler. From 1957 to 2002, 49 films about the adventures of Krteček, who became the Czech counterpart of Mickey Mouse, were produced (29 in the socialist era).
- *Reksio* by Lechośław Marszałek. 65 episodes were produced from 1967 to 1990.
- Winnie-the-Pooh trilogy by Fyodor Chytruk. *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1969), *Winnie-the-Pooh Pays a Visit* (1971), *Winnie-the-Pooh and a Day of Troubles* (1971).
- The cycle *From the Diary of Tomcat Blue Eyes* by Hermína Týrlova (1974–1976).



Stars of Eger

Historical Epics: Rewriting the Past

— Nikolina Dobreva

Notoriously obsessed with the past, Eastern European communist-era cinema abounds in historical references, characters, and events. History is examined, written, and rewritten across all genres, including dramas, war movies, and even comedies. Historical epic films also have a strong presence, albeit with features that often deviate from the Hollywood model that is seen as the golden standard of the genre with its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, when the advent of television forced the Hollywood industry to go bigger and more spectacular in films such as *Ben Hur* (1959, W. Wyler).

The characteristics of the historical epic are perhaps best summarized by Vivian Sobchack, who points to the spectacle and its large-scale production details (including the employment of numerous extras, elaborate

costumes, and monumental sets) as the defining feature of the genre. No less important, however, is centering the narrative around the idea that “select individuals” make History while being involved in an “exceptional human romance.” Specific aesthetic devices include the use of maps to signal the grand scope of events, a “Voice of God” narration that legitimizes the version of history presented in the film, as well as “over-scoring” the events on screen with dramatic music. Eastern European historical epics shared most of the features of the Hollywood epic outlined above, but also displayed unique characteristics stemming from their adherence to Marxist ideology, the organization of state production studios, and the geo-politically aligned distribution systems.

Specificity of the Genre in Eastern Europe

It is difficult to generalize the regional characteristics of the genre across so many countries, since each one of their film industries was impacted by unique important events (Stalinism and its renunciation, the Hungarian Revolution, the Prague Spring, etc.) as well as by various phases of aesthetic innovation. Yet, just like Hollywood, Eastern Europe saw an uptick in historical epic productions in the 1950s and 60s. In that time period, history was addressed more often than not as a people’s movement, e.g., Otakar Vávra’s *Hussite Revolutionary Trilogy* (Czechoslovakia, 1954-56) and, occasionally in confrontation with the official party line, served as a site for experimentation, as in Miklós Jancsó’s widely acclaimed *The Red and The White* (Hungary-USSR, 1967).

Just like the Hollywood historical epics, Eastern European films of this genre turned to the past to establish national origin myths, as well as to contextualize and reevaluate history in order to place it in the service of the present and the future. In contrast to the Christian and capitalist ideology promoted by Hollywood features, however, these epic films typically embraced an atheist state socialist ideology. An interesting example in this respect is the early East German DEFA film *Ernst Thälmann, Son of His Class* (1954) and its sequel, *Ernst Thälmann, Leader of His Class* (1955), both directed by Kurt Maetzig. Constructed as a historical epic set between the two world wars and complete with a charismatic central hero who changed history, the film serves as a visualization of the national origin myth of the young East German state. Thälmann was canonized as the

epitome of the communist hero who fights fascism to the end and the film itself gained legendary status as it became required viewing for generations of East German youth.

When it comes to communist-era filmmaking, Soviet auteur Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) undoubtedly laid the genre's foundations. The film renders the national myth as an invasion story (thirteenth-century Teutonic Knights at the gates of Novgorod), in which a nobleman must rally the common people in defense of the motherland. Eisenstein's thinly veiled attack on the imperial ambitions of Nazi Germany became the blueprint for representing history in communist-era Eastern European epics. Regardless of the time period they were set in, these films, especially after the 1960s, inevitably focus on a larger-than-life historical figure, a hero (almost always

a man) who cares more about the people than about his own well-being or material wealth. The films typically include a foreign enemy, as well as an "internal enemy" working out of misguided self-interest to subvert the efforts of the protagonist.

Some examples of historical epics from different communist countries that adhere to these particular generic conventions are *The Great Warrior Skanderbeg* (Albania, USSR 1953, S. Yutkevich), *Stars of Eger* (Hungary, 1968, Zoltán Várkonyi), *Colonel Wolodyjowski* (Poland, 1969, J. Hoffman), *Mihai Viteazul* (Romania, 1970, S. Nicolaescu), and *Battle of Kosovo* (Yugoslavia, 1989, Z. Šotra). In all of these films, the hero-protagonist not only must stand up for his homeland and its people but is also the last line of defense against the advance of the Ottoman Empire in Europe. This results



War and Peace



in an interesting version of history in which Western Europe is represented as weak, decadent, and too preoccupied with petty concerns to care about the invasion on their doorstep.

Unique Aesthetic Techniques

A set of atypical aesthetic devices further distinguishes these films from their Hollywood or Western European counterparts. For instance, they rely on unusual narrative structures. Lavish battle scenes are punctuated with quiet contemplative moments. The main plotline is often interrupted by small scenes that provide audiences with “the voice of the people,” far removed from the Hollywood focus on just a handful of individuals who make history (e.g., a fish seller loudly shares her opinion at the market in *Battle of Kosovo*). Surrealist moments (dreams, mysterious appearances, etc.) abound while family scenes and other traditionally melodramatic devices are subdued (e.g., in the Bulgarian *Measure for Measure*, G. Djulgerov, 1981). Thus, despite their featuring famous lead actors and astounding visuals, the films often draw attention to their own artificiality, urging viewers not to be caught in personal stories, but to think of the larger political and ideological picture instead.

Many of the Eastern European epics are based on canonical nineteenth-century historical novels that promote national pride, e.g., the Hungarian film *Stars of Eger* (based on Géza Gárdonyi’s book), the 1952 Dako Dakovski’s Bulgarian production *Under the Yoke* (based on Ivan Vazov’s canonical novel), etc. Poland is perhaps the country with the largest number of these superproductions, many based on the novels of Henryk Sienkiewicz. Aleksander Ford’s *Knights of the Teutonic Order* (1960), an instant blockbuster garnering over 32 million viewers, remains one of the most popular films in Polish film history. The astounding success of another Sienkiewicz adaptation, *Colonel Wolodyjowski*, prompted its director to continue his adaptation of the Trilogy with *Deluge* (1974). A massive undertaking, this third film took over 500 days to shoot in several different countries and included a special cavalry regiment of the Soviet army along with hundreds of

volunteer extras. Ultimately released as a five-hour film, *Deluge* yet again swept audiences in Poland and abroad, even securing an Academy Award nomination. This mind-boggling scope of production is second only to Sergei Bondarchuk’s classic *War and Peace* (1966-67), adapted from Leo Tolstoy’s novel. This film, the most expensive in Soviet history, took five years and thousands of army extras to complete. The resulting production, released in four parts with a total running time of 431 minutes, became an instant classic, even in the West, where it received an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film among other accolades.

Historical Epics and the Dissolution of the Eastern Bloc

As Soviet influence began to wane in the early 1980s, national epics again began to resurge in the Eastern Bloc, with each country reaffirming its national identity and history of resistance against foreign powers. In the first part of the decade, Bulgaria made at least five superproductions, glorifying the establishment and development of the Bulgarian state in the Middle Ages, perhaps most notably in one of the most-widely viewed domestic productions of all time, *Boris I: Baptism* (1985, B. Sharaliev). Romania similarly celebrated its alleged 2050th anniversary with *Burebista* (1980, G. Vitanidis). Poland released two epics based on early twentieth-century events related to Polish independence (e.g., B. Poręba’s 1981 *Polonia Restituta*). Even Yugoslavia, where historical epics were typically partisan films portraying the resistance against Nazi occupation in WWII (e.g., Veljko Bulajić’s *The Battle of Neretva*, 1969), turned to foundational national narratives in *The Battle of Kosovo* (1989), released to coincide with the 600th anniversary of the historical event that defined Serbian nationalism. One cannot overstate the popularity of historical epics in Eastern Europe under communism. These films drained studio resources, but attracted devoted audiences. They remain among the highest grossing movies in their respective countries of origin to this day, and are fondly remembered by older audiences across the region. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the

Eastern European state-sponsored film industries collapsed, as did distribution channels that allowed historical epics to circulate more freely among Soviet-aligned states. While historical epics continue to be made (e.g., *With Fire and Sword* (Poland, 1999), *The Bridgeman* (Hungary, 2002), *Mongol* (Russia/Kazakhstan, 2007), *1612* (Russia, 2007), etc.), the pre-1989 production channels, industrial structures, and distribution networks have been completely reconfigured. The new epics no longer share the distinct regional characteristics that would allow Eastern European viewers (even if they have access to the films) to fully appreciate them without knowing the historical particulars of each production. Hopefully, as streaming services expand, both the communist and post-communist historical epics can reach wider viewership and create a new fandom within the region.

Where to begin?

- *Pharaoh* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz (Poland, 1966)
- *War and Peace* by Sergei Bondarchuk (Soviet Union, 1966-67)
- *The Dacians* by Sergiu Nicolaescu (Romania, 1967)
- *The Weddings of King Ioan Assen* by Vili Tzankov (Bulgaria, 1975)
- *Anno Domini 1573* by Vatroslav Mimica (Yugoslavia, 1975)



Valerie and Her Week of Wonders

Horror: the Scares of Communism

— Magdalena Kamińska, Maja Mikołajczyk

Horror film did not exist as a separate genre in the Eastern Bloc. There were no organisational solutions in the state-owned socialist film industries to promote the development of classic genre cinema. However, judging by the contemporary circulation of films produced in communist countries, it seems that viewers recognise certain genre conventions in those films and label them accordingly, even though those labels have little to do with the original intentions. Such a change in

the perception of socialist films may lead to the situation where viewers accustomed to classic examples of the genre may feel disappointed after watching Eastern European productions recommended as horror films, since their plot lines or narration styles do not meet their expectations. They may come to the wrong conclusion that socialist horror film genre is but a poor copy of the movies produced in Western countries.

Another obstacle for the development of socialist horror films were the

ideological and propaganda purposes that the film industry was supposed to serve. The existence of magical, surreal and religious elements that often inspire horror films did not fit with communist ideology. In the realm of socialist society – a reality governed by the principles of dialectical materialism – there was no room for stories about the dead rising from their graves or about people turning into animals with the help of black magic. Moreover, “scary movies” were associated with capitalist entertain-



ment culture, which was supposed to stupefy viewers by flooding them with sensational content for purely commercial reasons.

Nonetheless, films using horror aesthetics were produced in socialist countries much more frequently than is believed, but they were modified in order to distract the attention of the censors. The censorship could lend a sympathetic ear to a horror film only in three cases: firstly, if it was an adaptation of classic literature; secondly, if it used folklore motifs; and thirdly, if it presented supernatural elements in a figurative, ironic or metaphorical manner. Such films were made e.g. in Yugoslavia (*Leptirica*, 1973, Đ. Kadijević), but it is especially worth looking for them in the film cultures of Poland, Czechoslovakia or the USSR.

Polish People's Republic: the sophisticated horror

Polish productions that came close to horror genre standards were mostly adaptations of nineteenth-century classical literature by Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, Prosper Mérimée, or later Polish writers, e.g. Stefan Grabiński. The majority of these were TV costume productions. Especially worth mentioning are two short-feature series: the five-episode *Amazing Tales* (1967-1968) and the seven-episode *Mystery Tales* (1967). Other works in a similar style were *Avatar, or Exchange of Souls* (1964), *The Cask of Amontillado* (1971, L. Jeannot), *Wiktoryna, or Do You Come from Beauvais?* (1971, J. Rutkiewicz) and *Professor Czelawa's Problem* (1985, Z. Lech).

The vast majority of Polish filmmakers treated horror elements as a way to historicise the film. This served as an alibi to introduce such ideologically dangerous issues as spiritualism, black magic or vampirism. Best feature-length horror films from Poland were *Lokis. A Manuscript of Professor Wittembach* (1970, J. Majewski), *Magic in the Moonlight* (1972, W. Orzechowski), *The Inn on Swamps* (1982, Z. Lech), *The She Wolf* (1983, M. Piestrak), *Sara's House* (1985, Z. Lech) and *The Medium* (1985, J.

Koprowicz). A production that especially stood out was *I Like Bats* (1985, G. Warchoł) – a vampire tale set in the contemporary world.

Czechoslovakia – critique and surrealism

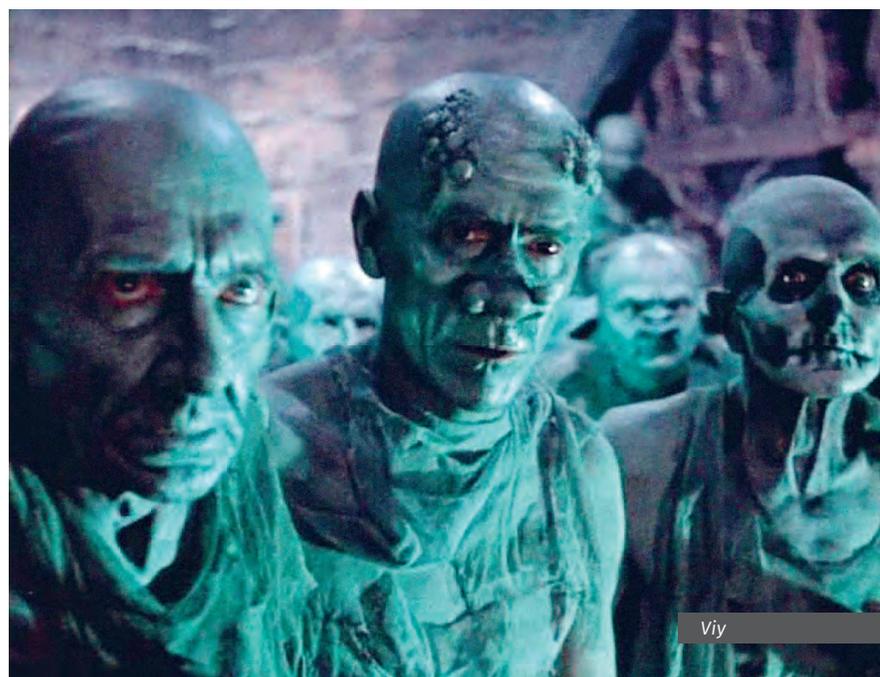
The development of the Czechoslovak horror genre in the late 1960s and after was conditioned by the intensified censorship of the “normalisation” period. After loosing the possibility to discuss political or social issues, artists took recourse to convention, stylisation and fantasy. At the same, because of other limitations, the Czechoslovak horror film was raised to the rank of artistic film. Its critical

potential revealed the absurdities of the communist reality.

Most Czechoslovak creators of horror films were directors associated with the New Wave of early and mid 1960s. Although their main goal was not to cause fear and anxiety (although they could do this very well!), some of the Czech and Slovak productions from that period can be described as films inspired by the horror genre conventions. A typical feature of the New Wave horror film was its symbiosis with other genres (psychological drama, fairy tale, science-fiction) and additional styles or tropes (surrealist, grotesque, pastiche, parody). Consequently, the Czechoslovak horror film resists the



Ferat Vampire



Viy

simple classification as a typical entertainment genre phenomenon.

Juraj Herz was the New Wave director who is most typically associated with Czechoslovak horror film. Herz successfully combined the horror genre with other conventions. His most acclaimed work, *The Cremator* (1968), was produced in the year of the Prague Spring and banned for many years thereafter. It was only rediscovered in the twenty-first century and became a cult film among cinephiles. Its horror element is based mainly on portraying an individual who falls into insanity, which leads him to brutal and pointless crimes.

A very different and less known production by Herz is the *Ferat Vampire* (1981), a combination of vampire horror film and science-fiction. In terms of subject and style, this movie about a bloodthirsty race car seems to be inspired by the American entertainment cinema – especially the technophobic body horrors by David Cronenberg. In many ways, the film draws on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (e.g. the vampire automobile as Dracula and the main protagonist, Doctor Mark, as Jonathan Harker) and its adaptations from the silent film era, which is suggested by the name in title (*Ferat/Nosferatu*).

In his 1978 production *Beauty and the Beast*, a retelling of the popular folk tale, Herz combined fairy-tale genre with horror conventions. The same year he also produced *The Ninth Heart*, which merges both genres in a similar way. Turning to spooky folklore, foreign as well as domestic, was a noticeable trend in the Czechoslovak film industry at the end of the 1960s. Another good example of that phenomenon was Jaromil Jireš's film *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (1970) – a surrealist vampire tale about fear, religion and the awakening sexuality of a young woman.

Vera Chytilová, author of the cult New Wave classic *Daisies* (1966), also experimented with the horror genre. In 1987, Chytilová surprised the audience with the film *Wolf's Hole*. Combining fear and science-fiction, *Wolf's Hole* tells the story of mysterious skiing camp during which the group of young attendees start to suspect their instructors of vile intentions. Although at first glance the

film gives an impression of being naive and moralistic, some scholars suggest that the story of isolated and harassed teenagers could be an allegory of the Czechoslovak “normalisation” period.

USSR: between fairy tale and science-fiction

First Soviet horror films were produced during the New Economic Policy period before World War II. Most interesting examples of that early development of the genre were the silent productions *A Spectre Haunts Europe* (1923, V. Gardin) and *The Bear's Wedding* (1925, K. Eggert, V. Gardin). The most acclaimed Soviet horror film of the postwar period is *Viy* (1967, K. Yershov, G. Kropachyov). Little known at the time of its production and distribution, this adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's novella surprises with its folkloric elements, fairy-tale atmosphere and original special effects. Other Soviet films that draw on folk beliefs were *The Wild Hunt of King Stakh* (1979, V. Rubinczik), *Werewolf Tom* (1984, Ē. Lācis), *The Witch of Yatrin* (1991, B. Shadursky) and *Bloodsuckers* (1991, Y. Tatarsky).

In late USSR, many horror films were set in the contemporary world, mirroring the dark era of the final years of socialism: *The Haunted House* (1987, S. Lungin), *Stray Dogs* (1989, D. Svetozarov), *The Vampire Family* (1990, I. Shavlak, G. Klimov), *The Time of the Werewolf* (1990, I. Shevchenko), *Dina* (1990, F. Pietrukhin), *Breath* (1989, A. Mkrtchyan), *Dad, Father Frost Is Dead* (1991, Y. Yufit) and *Lyumi* (1991, V. Bragin). Other defining feature of Soviet horror genre in the 1980s is its frequent merging with science fiction. Good examples of that phenomenon were productions such as *The Day of Wrath* (1985, S. Mamilov), *Veld* (1987, N. Tulyahodzayev), *Mister Designer* (1988, O. Teptsov) or *Dominus* (1990, A. Khvan, M. Tsurtsumia). During the the period of their official distribution, most of these esoteric, aesthetically sophisticated and sometimes comic films about ghosts, mad scientists, werewolves, upirs and wurdulacs did not attract big audiences. Today, they are rediscovered by fans of the genre who, with a dose of nostalgia, appreciate their otherworldly character.

Where to begin?

- *Viy* by Konstantin Yershov and Georgiy Kropachyov (1967, Soviet Union)
- *The Cremator* by Juraj Herz (1968, Czechoslovakia)
- *Lokis. A Manuscript of Professor Wittembach* by Janusz Majewski (1970, Poland)
- *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* by Jaromil Jireš (1970, Czechoslovakia)
- *Carmilla* by Janusz Kondratiuk (1980, Poland)



The Good Soldier Švejk

Comedy: The Merriest Barracks in the Camp

— Krzysztof Siwoń

Comedies in socialist countries are a mosaic of genre conventions, national stereotypes and folk topoi. They are also a testimony to nearly half a century of complicated history that left its cruel imprint on this part of Europe. Is there anything that links, despite their differences, the cult comedies of Stanisław Bareja, the improvised films of the Czech New Wave and the bitter satires produced in the orbit of Soviet film industry? Everywhere in the world, humour helps the audience forget about the distress of life, laugh at the absurdities of social reality and mock human vices. However, there is even more to Polish, Czechoslovakian and Yugoslav comedies: the specifically Eastern European touch, manifested in a combination of satire and populism, which either idealised or distorted the

image of the province and its kind-hearted residents.

Bricklayer's waltz or fairy-tale cat?

The earliest manifestation of the comedic genre in the post-war Eastern Bloc was the socialist realist comedy. During this short (except in the USSR) episode, which lasted more or less until the mid-1950s, filmmakers had to include propagandist ideological message in the comical plots, like in *Carnival in Moscow* (1956, E. Ryazanov) or *Adventure in Marienstadt* (1953, L. Buczkowski), where the romantic story of two bricklayers and a number of gags on the construction site are interwoven with hyper-optimistic propaganda on the reconstruction of Warsaw after the war. The popularity of *Adventure...* was of course due to the escapist tone of the

scenes in which the characters sang to the tune of a bourgeois waltz, rather than to the socialist realist character of the film. Although the protagonists sang about the capital of Polish People's Republic getting more and more beautiful under the socialist regime, the music in 3/4 metre seemed to elude political connotations.

In subsequent decades, cultural policies became more liberal, which also resulted in new ideas to improve the formula of the genre. In contrast to the West, where farce and romantic comedy were most popular, the Eastern Bloc preferred the satire on social life. Still fascinating today are films that seemingly distanced themselves from the socio-political reality, instead taking the audience into an imagined fairy-tale world, like the comedy by Tadeusz Chmielewski *Eve Wants to Sleep* from

1958. But even here, one night in the life of a police station in an unnamed country gives many opportunities to associate the funny conversations of officers with socialist newspeak, which is clearly mocked in the scene where the commander instructs his team: “The enemy overhears, overcomes, overpowers, over...” and an excessively eager officer adds “overalls!”. The stiff official language of the authorities is also ridiculed in the Czechoslovak comedy *The Cassandra Cat* (1963, V. Jasný). The arrival of a magic cat unexpectedly destroys the apparent idyll of a small-town community. Fairy-tale motifs are interwoven with vicious observations on human flaws, such as insincerity or infidelity. Today, the most “exotic” and escapist genre fusions seem to be the science fiction comedies *Sexmission* (1984, J. Machulski) or *Kin-dza-dza!* (1987, G. Daneliya) – a satire only apparently detached from earthly matters.

Historiosophy à la Švejk

Political reality constantly informed the style and narrations of socialist comedies. In *Who’s Singin’ Over There?* (1980), Slobodan Šijan presents an image of Balkan societies during German occupation. The film tells the story of a journey in a ramshackle bus

heading to Belgrade. Seemingly trivial, the episodic structure of road movie offers a confrontation with stereotypical characters: hot-blooded Serbs, Croatian nationalists or a proud old man from Montenegro. The characters are so absorbed in their petty disputes that they fail to notice the drama of the “grand history” happening just above their heads. The message is simple: when ideologies clash and when superpowers are at war, ordinary citizens suffer the most. In the Polish comedy *Sami swoi* (*All Friends Here*, 1967, S. Chęciński), two farming families continue their neighbourly disputes, oblivious even to the Yalta Conference and post-war border changes in Europe.

This tragicomic refrain – the wheels of great history ruthlessly rolling over the lives of film characters – returns in many comedies from the Eastern Bloc. A reflection on the conflict between an individual and the history is central also for the story of Švejk, the protagonist of the novel by Jaroslav Hašek *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk During the World War* and its famous 1957 adaptation by Karel Steklý. Hašek’s irony, combined with the stoic-hedonic attitude of Bohumil Hrabal’s characters, seems to have inspired quite a numerous group of socialist comedy characters who, despite everything, try to live their

lives alongside politics. However, for many of them, including for the characters of the film *All My Compatriots* (1968, V. Jasný), this is not easy at all. The film, created during the time of the Prague Spring, presents the new power in a critical light, revealing how devastating the oppressive political mechanisms may be for a provincial town.

The Hungarian production *The Witness* (1969, P. Bacsó) presents the miserable and absurd fate of a simple dikereev on the Danube River, József Pelikán. His numerous problems with the law and the authorities are as much the consequence of his own passivity as they are of the winds of history and the inscrutable decisions of the Communist Party. Someone with Pelikán’s misfortune could find himself in one prison cell with the good citizen Piszczyk from *Bad Luck* (1960, A. Munk), who also suffered the consequences of his encounters with the authorities. The participation of “the little people” in the affairs of the great world is mockingly referred to in the title of one of the greatest box office hits of Polish People’s Republic, *How I Unleashed World War II* (1970, T. Chmielewski).

In houses made of concrete

Another common denominator of the comedies from the Eastern Bloc is the





realm of everyday images and sounds of the socialist society. High-rise housing developments bustling with urban noise, a modernist embodiment of the vision of socialist architects, proved to be a grateful object of satire which exposed the social mechanisms of coping with the absurd reality. Large panel system buildings were the site of comedies of errors and slapstick sketches in the spirit of Harold Lloyd (*A Jungle Book of Regulations*, 1974, S. Bareja), presenting mechanical, everyday activities of people unaware of how ridiculous they are. The motif of farcical errors appears in many films, whose authors play with the striking similarity of blocks of flats in Warsaw, Moscow or Budapest – their rough greyness was, after all, a common feature of all socialist countries. In the Soviet production *The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath!* (1975, E. Ryazanov), a resident of Moscow, after a boozy party, by mistake boards a plane to Leningrad, where he arrives at the same street address as his own in Moscow, and even his key fits the door there. Farcical slapstick mode was also cultivated in the Soviet cinema by Leonid Gaidai. His comedy of errors *The Diamond Arm* (1969) was one of the greatest box office hits in the Eastern Bloc. In the first year after release it attracted an audience of almost 77 millions.

Another comedy, *Behold Homolka* (1969, J. Papoušek), which was known in Poland under the meaningful title *The Terrible Consequences of Television Failure*, is a model satire of society in the era of modernisation. The multi-generational Homolka family from Prague suffer a crisis when their TV set, the centre of their family life, suddenly breaks down (this time, the film is set in an old townhouse). A trip to the nature does them little good, because it is interrupted by an unpleasant incident: dozens of strollers run away, instead of rushing to help, when they hear a cry for help from somewhere deep in the forest. Prying into the private lives in a manner similar to the style of the French New Wave became the trademark of the Czechoslovakian film in the 1960s. Social situations that overwhelmed the individual and reduced their ability to think rationally were filmed, among



Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures

others, by Miloš Forman. The hero of *Black Peter* (1963), watching the customers of a grocery store, becomes a wheel in the social machinery based on surveillance and oppression.

The amusing consequences of a breakdown

The slogan popular in the final years of Polish People's Republic – saying that Poland was the “merriest barrack in the camp” – expressed the common opinion that laughter served as an antidote for the absurdities of the socialist system, the newspeak and the feeling that the reality went off track every so often. Something always breaks down on the Yugoslav bus (*Who's Singin' Over There*), in the Czech TV set (*Behold Homolka*), or in the elevator in the Polish comedy *I Hate Mondays* (1971, T. Chmielewski). The breakdowns may have been funny but the fact that they happened repeatedly was an expression of criticism of the political reality. The apartment of the protagonist in *A Jungle Book of Regulations* is one huge defect, which triggers an avalanche of events showing the dualism of the world presented in the film: there was indeed the “official” way to fix the defects, but it itself was faulty. As a consequence, a second “private” unofficial path was implemented by the entrepreneurial characters. The protagonist of Ladislav Smoljak's *Waiter, Scarper!* (1980) decided to profit from a similar “error” in the system. Pretending to be a waiter, he collected payments from restaurant customers, because the real waiters were too slow to serve them.

Nonetheless, the heroes of the immanently faulty socialist world often accepted its shortcomings with good-natured cheerfulness. A good illustration of this attitude is the final scene in *Intimate Lighting* (1965) by Ivan Passer, in which the characters, on a sunny lazy Sunday, try to drink eggnog, but the liquid is so thick that nothing gets out of their glasses. Suddenly a broken alarm clock goes off and someone comments: “It rings nicely, just too late”.

Where to begin?

- *Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures* by Leonid Gaidai (1965, Soviet Union)
- *The Firemen's Ball* by Miloš Forman (1967, Czechoslovakia)
- *The Cruise* by Marek Piwowski (1970, Poland)
- *Teddy Bear* by Stanisław Bareja (1980, Poland)
- *Cutting It Short* by Jiří Menzel (1981, Czechoslovakia)



Thirty Cases of Major Zeman

The Crime Film: Comrade Detective on Screen

— Robert Dudziński

The post-war history of socialist crime film was as turbulent as it was complicated. In the 1940s and 1950s, the genre was treated with suspicion – in an attempt to legitimise their authority, communist party leaders liked to appear as the defenders of culture. Thus, they claimed that the Western popularity of brutal crime stories was a sign

of the disintegration and fall of the bourgeois society. Accordingly, crime films were frequently attacked in loyal and ideologically correct journalism and satire. Such was the intention of the irreverent poem *Terrific Film* by Józef Prutowski published in 1950, in which a Hollywood actor walks out of the cinema screen and addresses the indignant audience:

I cannot go on living like this,
With all the massacre and
horrible violence!
I've had enough of all the
applause and fights,
The spies, the bandits, the
drunkards, the knockouts!

However, it quickly turned out that the new socialist man liked to watch



films with spies, bandits and fights ending in a knockout. The authorities tried to react to that demand by allowing the production of suspense films – in the USSR, on the wave of the transformations of the Thaw, the crime film *Case No. 306* (1956, A. Rybakov) was produced. Subsequent years saw the premiere of more socialist crime thrillers: *105% alibi* (1959, V. Čech), *The Touch of Night* (1962, S. Bareja) or *713 Requests Permission to Land* (1962, G. Nikulin).

However, a real wave of interesting titles came only in the 1970s – the decade of socialist consumerism. Today, the films and series produced at that time, which are still rebroadcast and watched (and sometimes even continued), have the status of cult movies. Those productions were the consequence of the new cultural policy that promoted consumption and entertainment. In that decade, the media landscape of socialist countries was transformed – viewers gained access to many Western productions and television became a true mass medium. The authorities started focusing on popular culture. Significantly, Erich Honecker, the new First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, said in 1971 that the East German television was boring. This was supposed to be changed by, among other things, crime films.

The crime film on duty

The decision-makers realised that genre cinema could constitute a great medium for ideological and propaganda content. Accordingly, socialist ministries of internal affairs offered assistance and material support to the creators of crime films, organised conferences for them and gave them special awards. Consultants were delegated to work on films and series and they not only commented on issues related to criminology but, more importantly, made sure that functionaries were shown in the proper way on the screen.

The best-known example of the impact of Party ideology on the criminal plot is the Czechoslovak series *Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* (1976–1979, J. Sequens), set in 1945 to 1973. The vision of the past presented was in line with the official historical narrative. In the 1940s and 1950s, Zeman fought

against Nazi collaborators and reactionary clergy, and the Prague Spring was presented as a period of chaos and anarchy with greedy and cynical decision-makers, influenced by foreign intelligence, harassing worthy members of the governing authorities (including the main protagonist).

The open engagement of propaganda distinguished this production from other socialist crime films of the 1970s. The creators of such series as *Police Call 110* (GDR 1971–), *Investigation Held by ZnaToKi* (USSR 1971–2003) or *The Adventures of Cywil the Dog* (Poland 1968–1970, K. Szmagier) usually abstained from addressing current political affairs, but made sure that law enforcement authorities were presented as modern professionals.

In order to avoid the need to pay an ideological tribute, filmmakers often put their stories in the inverted commas of conventionality. One example is the Hungarian film *The Murderer Is in the House* (1971, R. Bána), whose plot construction draws on the best traditions of the classic crime movie. The body of a murdered woman is found in the lift of a townhouse in Budapest. The perpetrator must still be inside the building and Captain Tímár (Stanisław Mikulski) immediately begins his meticulous investigation. Such a story must, of course, take place in the right environment – the townhouse is inhabited by the financial elite; one apartment is occupied by a popular singer and another by a young girl whose parents have just left for Paris. The body is but a catalyst for complex, multi-layered intrigue and a pretext to conduct an investigation that reveals the secrets of the residents. In Poland, a similar strategy was adopted a few years earlier by Ryszard Ber in his film *Where Is the Third King?* (1967).

The greatest hit of the Soviet cinemas in 1980, *Pirates of the 20th Century* (B. Durov), was equally strongly dependent on Western genre models. This time, the audience's attention was supposed to be attracted by spectacular action scenes and the dynamic narration. Durov's film tells the story of the crew of a Soviet ship transporting opium for a pharmaceutical factory. The characters have to confront pirates who

plan to seize the drug and sell it on the black market. The film offers a number of attractions to an audience craving entertainment: shooting and fighting scenes, a romance, brave men and women in trouble, exotic settings and underwater images. A similar sensation and adventure convention is used in the series *Hot Life* (1979, A. Konic) about a Polish journalist tracking ex-Nazis across several continents.

Socialism noir

In the Eastern Bloc, there was also a lively tradition of film noir, treated by some artists as an inexhaustible source of attractive stories and visual styles. In *07 Come In* (1976–1987), Krzysztof Szmagier put a police lieutenant in the role of the archetypal noir tough guy and had him protect order in a world full of killers, fraudsters and prostitutes. Meanwhile, Juliusz Machulski, in the two parts of his *Vabank* (1981), presented attractive retro aesthetics and a pastiche approach to the formula of the gangster movie.

However, some artists were interested not only in the aesthetics of film noir but also in its characteristic moral ambivalence that was hard to contain within the narrow limits of socialist cultural policy. A year before the premiere of *Pirates of the 20th Century*, Soviet television broadcast the retro-noir series *Where Is the Black Cat?* (1979, S. Govorukhin), which takes place in Moscow shortly after the war. The story begins with Vladimir Sharapov, a young war hero, joining a militia team tracking an elusive gang. The film shows the dark side of the capital city of the Soviet Union, full of shrewd thieves, cynical prostitutes and ruthless killers. One member of the militia team is stabbed to death on a crowded sunny boulevard already in the first episode, and the rest of the series is full of spectacular shootings and chases. The chief investigator Gleb Zheglov (Vladimir Vysotsky) is a protagonist suspended between the world of normal people and that of criminals, and – in his fight for justice – he himself is not always fair. The attitude to law and order in the end becomes a bone of contention between the experienced officer and the idealistic Sharapov.

Where Is the Black Cat? not only uses narrative structures and aesthetics typical of film noir but it also creates its characteristic atmosphere of ethical uncertainty. In Poland, the audience was challenged with similar dilemmas by Sylwester Chęciński in *Only the Dead Can Answer* (1969) and Marek Piwowski in *Excuse Me, Is It Here They Beat Up People?* (1976). Obviously, both the Soviet series and the Polish films end with the capture of the criminal and the triumph of the law enforcement authorities. Nonetheless, the very fact of presenting moral dilemmas associated with the work of the police and their potential abuse of power subverted the immaculate image of the authorities and their representatives.

Didactics and crime

Socialist crime films could also be a response to current issues – sometimes, the creators tried to use a sensational story to draw attention to a pending social problem. One example are productions dedicated to sexual violence, e.g. *The Golden Wheel* (1971, S. Wohl) or *Leprosy* (1971, A. Trzos-

Rastawiecki). The same trend is represented by the Czechoslovak *The Death of Hitch-Hikers* (1979, J. Polák) – the story of a serial rapist who attacked young hitch-hiking women. In the end, the bodies of two victims discovered at a landfill help the police catch the perpetrator.

The Death of Hitch-Hikers has an evident didactic tone to it – the film is a warning against recklessness and naivety addressed to young people and their parents. Even though the killer is caught, the story ends with an image of young hitch-hiking women standing by the side of a road and showing their charms to the passing drivers. The scene is accompanied by ominous music that we also heard when we first saw the rapist on the screen.

Socialist suspense productions are an evidence of both the East European community of imagination and the ironies of audiovisual culture entangled in ideological dependencies. However, we should not think that they were only works of propaganda. Many of them manifest the creativity of their authors who, limited by the principles of the

cultural policy, looked for new ways to reconcile local reality with Western genre conventions. The effect were films and series that can surprise and interest even contemporary viewers.

Where to begin?

- *Leprosy* by A. Trzos-Rastawiecki (1971, Poland)
- *S.O.S.* by Janusz Morgenstern (1975, Poland)
- *Where Is the Black Cat?* by Stanislav Goworuchin (1979, Soviet Union)
- *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* by Grigori Kromanov (1979, Soviet Union)
- *Death of Hitch-Hikers* by Jindřich Polák (1979, Czechoslovakia)



Pirates of the Twentieth Century



POLSKIEJ

Ikarie XB 1

Science Fiction: Communists in Space

— Maciej Peplinski

The genre that is known today as science fiction was rarely called by this name in Central and Eastern Europe in the socialist era. In almost all countries of the region, the local equivalents of the term “scientific fantasy” (derived from the Russian generic label “nauchnaya fantastika”) were used. The English name of the genre, which is common today, started to be used in the Eastern Bloc only towards the end of its existence due to the growing Americanisation of pop culture, increasing import of films and novels from the West as well as the parallel process of gradual decomposition of socialist culture and ideology (which also involved a departure from the terminology connoted with socialism). Being very costly and challenging in terms of production, science fiction films were relatively rarely made in the Eastern Bloc – especially com-

pared to crime movies, historical epic films or comedies. However, with its impressive visual effects and a broad thematic range SF succeeded in becoming popular not only in the area of feature films but also in other registers of the socialist audiovisual cultures and often merged into peculiar genre hybrids with popular science films, comedy productions and educational films for children. In the four post-war decades, Eastern European science fiction underwent numerous thematic and aesthetic metamorphoses – from the propagandist cosmic enthusiasm of the 1950s to the dystopian pessimism of the 1980s.

To the stars!

Everything started with Sputnik. Construction of the first artificial satellite and its triumphant flight in 1957 not only began a surprising run of success of the Soviet space programme but

also translated – first in the USSR and later in other people’s republics – into regular investments in propaganda-saturated films about conquering the universe and developing futuristic technologies. Prior to that, in the USSR ruled by Stalin with an iron fist, the production of speculative films that went too far into the future, violating the principles of socialist realism and breaking the sacrosanct rhythm of five-year plans, was rarely and reluctantly allowed. Apart from the famous *Aelita* (1924, Y. Protazanov), the only distinct example of pre-war socialist SF was *The Space Voyage* (1935, V. Zhuravlov) about a pioneer journey to the Moon.

In terms of the more immediate cultural and political influences, the genre could develop after the war due to liberalisation during the several years of the so-called Thaw in the Eastern Bloc following the death of Stalin and the coming to power of Nikita Khrushchev

in the USSR. Not only Khrushchev but also other leaders of communist regimes in mid 1950s understood that the boring and didactic socialist realism would probably never attract large audiences and ensure the profitability of state-owned film studios. Audiences, tired of the hardships of post-war reconstruction and longing for audiovisual joys and an escape from everyday reality, were more inclined to watch classical entertainment films – films that charmed the senses, kept the viewer in suspense and incorporated simple, positive humour. The first SF productions, on the one hand, built on the success of Sputnik (also as an important element of the Cold War) for propaganda purposes. On the other hand, they became a form of a compromise in the field of film entertainment, in which ideologically correct content was “wrapped” in a spectacular form – colourful pictures, experimental special effects, modern electronic music and rich intriguing settings. This way, science fiction films could attract bigger audiences, and at the same time feed them with a “doctrinally correct” vision of the future.

The bravery of the communist conquerors of space, the wisdom of scientists and engineers, and the progress of East European space technology were for the first time glorified in a series of Soviet movies – a popular science production *The Road to the Stars* (1956, P. Klushantsev) and feature films *The Sky Is Calling* (1959, M. Karyukov, A. Kozyr), *I was a Sputnik of the Sun* (1959, V. Morgenstern) and *A Dream Come True* (1962, M. Karyukov and O. Koberidze). The late 1950s and early 1960s were also a turning point for science fiction production in other people’s republics. In 1959, the Polish-East German superproduction *The Silent Star* (K. Maetzig, premiere: 1960) was created and in 1963 Czech cinemas screened the film *Ikarie XB 1* (J. Polák).

The first transformation

The first signs of a metamorphosis of the genre occurred very quickly, already in the first half of the tumultuous 1960s. Officials responsible for culture in the respective people’s republics had to

react wisely to the increasingly frequent political and financial crises, which left the Eastern Bloc far behind the economically developing and culturally transforming West. The reasons behind those crises included, among other things, the weakness of the domestic culture and the uncontrollably growing popularity of its Western equivalent, mass protests by workers and intellectuals, the fear of escalation in the Cold War, turbulence in the central committees and replacement of the leaders of most communist parties. Another signal that the political and cultural trajectory had turned downward was the fact the USSR lost the Space Race with Americans landing on the Moon in 1969. In terms of SF, the most important response strategies in those critical times were trivialisation of stories and attempts to increase the impact of films on audiences by mixing various popular conventions and investing in all-star casts and the technical aspects of films (special effects, new image and sound formats, more elaborate sets, etc.). These measures were supposed to not only help divert the audience’s attention from current problems but also hint at the prestige and impetus of socialist cinematographies, in order to gain greater recognition domestically as well as internationally and to produce better box office results.

The most significant novelty in the 1960s in the area of science fiction were comedies enriched, for better entertainment effect, with SF motifs: apart from space travel, other popular topics were time travel, first contact and all sorts of conflicts between humans and technology. Czechs and Slovaks led the field with many productions infused with satire and absurdity, such as *The Man from the First Century* (1961, O. Lipský), *Lost Face* (1965, P. Hobl), *I Killed Einstein, Gentlemen* (1969, O. Lipský) or *You Are a Widow, Sir* (1970, M. Macourek). In 1962, Ion Popescu-Gopo, the only Romanian SF expert, made the silent science fiction slapstick comedy *A Bomb Was Stolen*, which was even entered into the Cannes Film Festival. Another interesting conglomerate of genres is the East German musical comedy of errors *The Man with the Lens* (1962, F. Vogel) which

tells the story of an accidental jump back in time to the present day by a man from an ideal communist society of the year 2222.

In that period, the space travel motif was used less frequently and quite differently. Instead of the promotion of Soviet conquest of the cosmos, productions about space focused more on the incredible adventures of brave astronauts and impressive sequences of spaceships flying into meteor storms or landing on new planets. The emblematic productions of that trend include the East German-Polish *Signals: A Space Adventure* (1970, G. Kolditz) and the Soviet *Storm Planet* (1962, P. Klushantsev) and *The Andromeda Nebula* (1967, Y. Shersobitov).

Another important indication of the transformation within the genre was the transfer of the educational and didactic component (previously incorporated in films about space flights) to the popular science productions as well as films for children and youth. This shifting of didacticism to the lesser genre domains had a clear reason. Firstly, the demand for educational and entertainment films for young people





was inexhaustible. Secondly, the youth, as the generation of future builders of the communism, required constant ideological formation.

The Soviet visionary of the genre, Pavel Klushantsev, shot his unique, visually hypnotic educational movies about *The Moon* (1965) and *Mars* (1968), freely moving between science and speculation. In 1965, Czechs and Slovaks released the adventure children's film *The Wishing Machine* (1965, J. Pinkava) about a machine that could fulfill all wishes. In the Polish People's Republic, the *The Great Big World and Little Children* (A. Sokolowska) was produced in 1963 – an adaptation of the popular novel by Jerzy Broszkiewicz, which was the first independently produced full-length Polish SF film. One of the most peculiar educational productions of that time was the East German-Polish popular science film *The Travel to Kosmatom* (1961, M. Gussmann, J. Star) about Gulliver's trip across the Universe. The hero of Swift's famous novel becomes an assistant to a school teacher who has no idea how to make his science lessons more interesting. Gulliver's scientific per-

egrination through time and space is of course accompanied by an elaborate commentary in line with the theories of materialism.

Stagnation and limitation

The 1970s were for the socialist bloc a phase of brief financial stability which was achieved mainly through risky economic reforms and loans from the West. Meanwhile, the societies of the people's democracies were drowning in sociopolitical and cultural stagnation. In terms of the development of science fiction entertainment, that particular decade was definitely the least spectacular – in contrast to the slowly blossoming East European auteurist SF, which I will discuss at the end of this article.

In the 1970s, the repertoire of the cinemas in the socialist republics slowly filled with US and Western European commercial entertainment films. Although these productions were often ideologically inconsistent with the socialist doctrine, their distribution was grudgingly approved by state decision-makers, because they ensured the profitability of cinemas and helped finance the national film industry. In

East Germany, for example, domestic filmmaking was to a large extent financed from box office proceeds from American and Western European films. It was, of course, a vicious circle, since domestic productions could not compete with US and Western European films in terms of box office, and it was impossible to reduce the import of the latter, because the films from capitalist countries were what the audiences wanted to see the most once they were able to.

In the case of science fiction films, the availability of Western entertainment intensified the trend which has already started back in the 1960s. In order to attract audiences to cinemas and to keep up in the competition with American and Western European productions, the underfunded state-owned film studios not only pragmatically copied some well-used formulas, but they also imitated the stylistic and narrative solutions known from US and Western European productions.

One of the Polish film studios made an ambitious attempt to adapt the prose of the world-famous SF writer Stanisław Lem. The premiere of Marek Piestrak's



Eolomea

superproduction *Inquest of Pilot Pirx*, co-financed by the USSR, took place in 1979. Czechoslovakia confirmed in the 1970s that it specialised in absurd SF comedies. The most distinct example of this Czechoslovakian subgenre was the cult film *Tomorrow I'll Wake Up and Scald Myself with Tea* (1977, J. Polák). In the USSR, the hit Soviet SF comedy of the period was *Ivan Vasilievich: Back to the Future* (1973, L. Gaidai) about the discovery of a time machine and the accidental "import" of Ivan the Terrible to contemporary Moscow. A very popular Soviet phenomenon in the 1970s were also the films about the teenage cosmonauts – *The Great Space Voyage* (1975, V. Selivanov) and the two-part production by Richad Viktorov *Moscow: Cassiopeia* (1974) and *Children in the Universe* (1975).

Also the GDR focused strongly on its youngest audiences and offered them in the 1970s e.g. *Adventures with Blasius* (1975, E. Schlegel) about two boys chasing an unruly android and its crazy inventor. The East German SF repertoire for adults included the campy space opera *Eolomea* (1972, H. Zschoche) as well as the very peculiar production *In the Dust of the Stars* (1976, G. Kolditz), which applied the narrative formula of the very popular East German *Indianerfilme* to the story about space travel and first contact with an alien civilization.

The second transformation

The final metamorphosis of the genre was triggered by numerous internal crises which the socialist bloc encountered in the last fifteen years of its existence. East European science fiction of the late 1970s and 1980s almost completely abandoned the topic of space travel and instead reacted strongly to the decline of the socialist system which ideologically as well as financially was on a slippery slope and could no longer generate an explicit concept of its own future. The growing hypocrisy of the party authorities, the economic crises, the political tensions caused by the formation of opposition movements, and the mediocrity of the domestic culture (compared to films and books imported from the West) turned the life in the socialist republics into a miserable

existence in poverty and a frustrating sense of confinement. The science fiction genre reacted to the apocalyptic nature of that historical moment with two new trends: the no longer concealed skepticism and the sharp satire of socialist ideology.

The most intriguing non-comedy productions made in the final phase of socialism were *To the Stars by Hard Ways* (1981, R. Viktorov), *Aquanuts* (1980, I. Voznesensky), *Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* (1979, G. Kromanov), *The Day of Wrath* (1985, S. Mamilov), *The End of Eternity* (1987, A. Ermash) and *Wolf's Hole* (1987, V. Chytilová). Some of these films can be perceived as horror movies as they were introducing such themes and topics as, for example, the motif of Space Mowgli or the topic of the mysterious influences of technology or alien civilisations on humanity.

Of the SF comedies of the 1980s noteworthy are the cult Polish production *Sexmission* (1984, J. Machulski), the Soviet dystopia *Kin-Dza-Dza!* (1986, G. Danielia) and the Barrandov studio productions *A Heartfelt Greeting from Earth* (1983, O. Lipský), *Where Is the Courier* (1981, O. Fuka) and *The Mysterious Castle in the Carpathians* (1981, O. Lipský). The latter group did not significantly differ from the films of the previous decade, but the first two movies commented on the totalitarianism of the Eastern Bloc in an unusual way and incorporated environmental and post-apocalyptic themes.

Lonely galaxies

The turn to skepticism and dark themes in the East European science fiction would not be so explicit if it was not for the films by several non-conformist outsiders, such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Piotr Szulkin, Andrzej Żuławski or Konstantin Lopushansky. Their films, such as *Stalker* (1979, A. Tarkovsky), *O-bi, O-ba: The End of Civilisation* (1984, P. Szulkin) or *Dead Man's Letters* (1986 K. Lopushansky), turned East European science fiction into a sophisticated tool of historical reflection and social criticism. The mentioned productions did not belong to the entertainment register but only used the very popular genre as a cover in order to

skillfully smuggle into the narrations the private – aesthetic, philosophical and, most importantly, political – ambitions and frustrations of their creators. Today, fans of the genre classify these films as masterpieces of the SF genre in its Eastern European version. It is worth noting however, that, after their domestic premieres, those productions did not achieve high audience ratings and could not in any way compete for viewers' attention with American and Western European films or domestic satirical comedies. Only later, thanks to the international recognition by SF fans, film critics, distributors and festival programmers, did they become acclaimed classics.

Where to begin?

- *Road to the Stars* by Pavel Klushantsev (1957, Soviet Union)
- *Ikarie XB-1* by Jindřich Polák (1963, Czechoslovakia)
- *Eolomea* by Herrmann Zschoche (1972, Bułgaria, GDR, Soviet Union)
- *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979, Soviet Union)
- *O-bi, O-ba. The End of Civilisation* by Piotr Szulkin (1985, Poland)