

A review of recent east European cinema

Film festival in Cottbus, Germany—November 11-15

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A visit to the annual festival of young east European film in the German city of Cottbus provides a glimpse of the enormous problems confronting cinema and filmmakers in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe following the restoration of capitalism. Cottbus is a small town in the eastern part of Germany lying on the border with Poland. Since 1990 it has held an annual festival dedicated to new east European film and is the only festival of its kind that provides an overview of the film world in the former Stalinist-bloc countries.

At the recent festival 100 films were shown in a number of categories: short films, children's film and features—including some of the most popular domestically produced films. On the basis of past experience the vast majority of the films shown in Cottbus will never obtain a Western distributor and therefore cannot be seen by a wider audience in the West. The audiences for the films are primarily young Germans and young people from a wide selection of east European countries.

Each year the festival emphasises the cinema production of a particular country or cluster of east European countries. This year the festival focused on films from the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which prior to 1990 were part of the USSR. Each of the three nations has a long tradition of filmmaking going back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

A brief overview of cinema statistics makes clear the extent of the changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Stalinist regimes. In 1980 35 million Latvians went to the cinema. By 1996 this figure had dropped to less than a million. Or to put it another way, in 1980 the average Latvian went to the cinema once a month; now, according to recent statistics, he or she goes to the cinema only once every three years. Over the same period the number of cinemas has dropped from 1,212 to 137.

The figures for the Lithuanian cinema are even more dramatic: the number of those going to the cinema in 1996 equalled 1 percent of the 1985 total. The situation is similar in Estonia and, on the whole, typical of the East bloc countries with the exception of Poland, the Czech Republic and Russia itself, where closer links with Western European countries have meant that the general decline in cinema is not so pronounced.

Generally speaking, the film markets and movie houses are swamped by American films, and to obtain proper finance and find sponsors films are required to adapt heavily to Hollywood-type criteria. The number of films being made in each country has also declined. On average just three or four full-length films are produced every year in each of the three Baltic states, with a combination of government and private funding.

The problems confronting filmmakers were highlighted at a meeting held at the festival to discuss the development of Baltic film. The

principal speaker was the vice minister of culture for Latvia. He was first asked what were the common elements and strongest qualities of Baltic cinema. In reply he announced that, in his opinion, there was no such thing as Baltic cinema. It was necessary, he continued, to emphasise the differences between the respective national cinemas and not dwell on common ground. He let the cat out of the bag when he admitted that the financing of a film is virtually impossible without the collaboration of a "rich" neighbour from the West, in other words America film companies (which actually invest very little in new east European film) or companies in France and Germany. Latvia is therefore in a race with its neighbours to obtain the necessary finance. The alternative for independent cinema makers is to reduce their budget to a minimum and often shoot in black and white.

Films from both categories—flashily made high-budget and humble black and white—were on display in Cottbus. A prime example of the first category is the film *Good Bye, Twentieth Century*, written and directed by two young Macedonians, Alexander Popovski and Darko Mitrevski. The film starts with a doom-laden biblical quotation and flashes between the Balkans of the future and the past to communicate its message: "The future is as screwed up as the past". Technically very well made, the film draws heavily on comic strip genres which have been bled to death in recent times by Hollywood, i.e., kung fu movies, Judge Dredd, etc. The influence of Tarantino in the snappy dialogue interspersing scenes of sudden violence is very evident.

In introducing the film at the festival Darko Mitrevski declared that, with respect to the problems confronting the people of his country, what was necessary was the creation of new fairy stories. He expressed confidence that his film would become a role model for the development of new east European film. A healthy indicator that this would not be the case came from the very cool reception the film received from the primarily young audience at Cottbus.

A number of other films featured at the festival sought to rehabilitate old national myths and fairy stories, while others expressly turned their backs on civilisation and the twentieth century altogether and openly meandered into the realm of mysticism and the esoteric. *Silverheads*, a film in black and white made by the Russian director Yevgeny Yufit, features scientists with long white beards whose main concern is to imbue human flesh with the qualities of wood. In a secluded house in the countryside they build a container, somewhat resembling a Reichian organ-chamber, embedded with wooden spikes. A volunteer scientist is strapped inside the machine which then proceeds to bombard his body with the sharpened wooden stakes. At the same time, unidentified secret police patrol the woods to wipe out members of a heathen sect who prance among the trees. Frustrated by the efforts to become more wooden the scientists commit or attempt to commit suicide. Needless to say the film does

not have a happy ending.

The Shoe demonstrates that it is possible to use a fairytale theme to make a worthwhile and interesting picture. Made in black and white by the young Latvian director Laila Pakalnina, the story is simple. Set in Latvia under Stalinist rule at the end of the fifties, a Soviet tractor sweeps clean a beach which serves both as a border and a prohibited area. One day a footprint and then a women's shoe are found in the sand. Someone from the nearby village has transgressed the forbidden zone!

Immediately a squad of soldiers is sent out with the offending shoe to find the culprit. The village must be combed and all females apprehended and forced to try on the shoe. Posters for an upcoming concert by Paul Robeson adorn the walls of the village and a portrait of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev hangs in the local school. The film relies less on dialogue and heavily on visual images, and Pakalnina's background in documentary film is very apparent. For part of the film the squad of three soldiers and a dog are shown only in shadow—two larger soldiers to the fore while a smaller younger soldier is being dragged along by a large, panting Alsatian dog. The work is exhausting. Their commanding officer demands that every corner and female be checked. The work is not easy—the soldiers discover that amongst the various pockets and pouches of their uniform there is no place to put the woman's shoe.

The film takes up the more absurd aspects of Stalinist rule, but at the same time, and in contradistinction to many of the films at the festival, makes clear the pride and (passive) resistance of the ordinary village people. I spoke with Laila Pakalnina and said I was struck by the way in which she had portrayed ordinary people in such a sympathetic and optimistic fashion. She replied that this was her prime intention in the film, but at the same time she had not done this from political considerations. She based the story on the reminiscences of her parents: "It was the time of the political 'thaw' in Russia following Stalin's death. Despite the occupation, in many respects life went on as normal—people were smiling, making jokes. Each time has its problems, but I did not want to make a film necessarily about how hard everything is. The pride and defiance of the people is also important."

In discussions with those active in east European film at the festival much could be heard of the absurdity and the surrealism of the period under Stalinist political domination. Another film which takes up this theme, but at the same time makes clear the limitations of such a standpoint, is the work by the Rumanian director, Bogdan-Christian Drăgan, *The Tent*. The action of the film takes place in Timisoara on December 21, 1989, a day of mass mobilisations by the people, which was decisive in bringing down the despised Ceausescu dictatorship.

Three workers are called to the grounds of a foreign embassy to repair a suspected leak. They are joined by a fourth worker, who from the beginning acts suspiciously. The activities of the workers in setting up their work tent and of the single guard patrolling the grounds are under continual observation by the omnipresent cameras of Ceausescu's dreaded secret police—the Securitate. The film follows the workers through the maze of tunnels under the embassy, their every step observed by two boorish members of the Securitate. Meanwhile popular riots are raging above ground. Tanks are on the move and the exchange of fire can be heard.

In the absence of his three work mates, the suspicious fourth worker rapes the young girlfriend of one of the other workers as the action on the street intensifies. At this point surreal and unidentifiable images are projected onto the surface of the tent where the rape is taking

place. Coming towards the end of the film the sudden switch to abstract images is disjointed and merely irritating. The scene serves to dissipate any conclusion towards which the film had appeared to be drawing.

The credits at the end state that the film is dedicated to the 1,300 civilian victims of the uprising against the Ceausescu regime. It is widely assumed that the 1,300 were the victims of a Securitate provocation. In discussion, the director defended his use of the projected images, declaring that the Stalinist domination in Rumania was itself surreal and dream-like. At the same time he pointed towards some of the political problems confronting anyone who tackles this theme, even after a decade has passed. Bogdan acknowledged that the main businessman in Rumania today is a well-known member of the old Securitate apparatus, and that all parties in the Rumanian parliament have opposed any measures to open an investigation into what took place during the mass movements against Ceausescu.

An additional theme of the films from Eastern Europe are police and crime movies. Three films—*Mama, Don't Cry!*, *Killer* and *Kiler*—all from the Soviet Union portray the domination of mafia-type elements in current Russian society and how any attempt to make an honest living is frustrated at every turn. An amusing variation of this theme was the Yugoslav comedy film, *Three Palms for Two Punks and a Babe*. The film takes place in 1993, a time of war and hyperinflation—monthly salaries at that time were enough to buy two eggs. A whole number of pyramid-scheme banking concerns emerged overnight offering loans for a monthly interest rate of 30 percent. A group of three, the above named two punks and a babe, decide they are fed up with being robbed by the banks. They will turn the tables and rob their own bank. The story obviously struck a chord and was Yugoslavia's most popular film of last year, even outstripping *Titanic*.

Further interesting films at the festival included *The Adopted Son* by Aktan Abdikalikov from the Soviet region of Kyrgyzstan, a visually captivating and very assured treatment of the problems of adolescence encountered by a young village boy. And *Susie Washington*, directed by the Austrian Florian Flicker, is one of the few films at the moment dealing with the fate of illegal immigrants in Europe following the passing of the European Schengener Treaty. A Russian woman seeking to flee to the West makes very clear the tribulations awaiting those who attempt to enter Europe without a proper passport. The film begins its German release on 31 December.

A second part of this review concentrates on a film by the Rumanian director Radu Mihaileanu, *Train of Life*.

Postscript: The German town of Cottbus has itself not been exempt from sweeping changes in the cinematic landscape. Last year saw the closure of the only remaining cinema in the town centre. The only alternative for Cottbus inhabitants is to travel to a newly opened multiplex cinema, well removed from the town centre.



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