Another glimpse at the state of film in Eastern Europe

Tenth film festival in Cottbus, Germany

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The film festival held in the German town of Cottbus near the Polish border is the only international festival dedicated to showing film from Eastern European countries. Once again this year the tenth Cottbus festival confirmed the enormous crisis which has enveloped film and culture in general in many of the states which were just over a decade ago part of the Stalinist Eastern bloc. While a number of countries—e.g., Czech Republic, Hungary, Russia—have been able to develop some sort of independent film production, often on the basis of co-productions with Western countries, many other countries and republics have experienced, and continue to undergo, a massive decline in filmmaking and cinema attendance.

The gravity of the crisis was highlighted by the special attention devoted by the festival to a handful of central Asian states—Kirghizstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—all of which acquired independence from the Soviet Union at the start of the nineties. All of these regions have a long history of filmmaking going back to the 1920s and 1930s.

The crisis of cinema and culture in such states is intimately bound up with the social and economic collapse which has taken place in central Asia over the past decade. The central Asian state reckoned by Western experts to have the best future prospects (due to substantial oil reserves) is Kazakhstan, which has borders with both Uzbekistan and Kirghizstan. A new report by the Red Cross states that 73 percent of the population of Kazakhstan live below the poverty level. Large areas of the country are regarded as regions of ecological catastrophe. The country, and indeed the entire region, is beset by an epidemic of virulent strains of tuberculosis—due to the lack of drinkable water—which has contributed to a dramatic decline in average life expectancy since the beginning of the 1990s.

According to official statistics, the three central Asian countries which provided films for the festival all have a lower income per head than Kazakhstan. At the festival I spoke with members of a small delegation including filmmakers and producers from Turkmenistan. Despite the hopes expressed by the members of the delegation that the bottom of the trough of decline had been reached and that things would soon pick up, their report on the current state of filmmaking in Turkmenistan was devastating.

Despite the fact that the head of the main independent film studio estimated the average cost for the production of a film in Turkmenistan to be only between $2,000 and 3,000, in the past five years just two films have been made in the republic, which has a population of around four and a half million. Since gaining independence in 1991 Turkmenistan has experienced a dramatic reduction in the technology and equipment needed to make films. Currently the republic lacks the facilities to handle 35mm film and has to send colour film out of the country due to the lack of a domestic laboratory which can develop colour film. The difficulties of making film in the region were apparent in many of the films shown at the festival—desperately old, grainy film-stock; on occasion films haphazardly switching from colour to black and white.

The few cinemas that have survived the economic collapse of the past 10 years show almost exclusively American films in video format. Collaboration and communication between countries in the region is minimal. Members of national delegations expressed their pleasure at being able to view for the first time in Cottbus cinema work by directors from countries which neighbour their own. All three countries represented at the festival are ruled by Muslim-influenced governments that impose a code of censorship preventing films from tackling issues or stories involving sex and violence.

I spoke with Ernest Abdyjaparov, a leading film director from Kirghizstan who is also active in the running of the main independent film studio of the region.

Stefan Steinberg: What are the differences in making films now compared with 10 years ago when Kirghizstan was still part of the Soviet Union?

Ernest Abdyjaparov: The changes have been very dramatic. As part of the Soviet Union, filmmaking in Kirghizstan was subsidised by the state and between 40 and 50 films were produced on an annual basis. This included documentaries, children's film, etc. In a normal year between three or four feature films were produced. Since independence in 1991 there has been no sponsorship on the part of the government and only a handful of films have been produced in total. In the years 1995-96, for example, no films were made in the country.

SS: What has happened to cinema attendance in Kirghizstan?

EA: There has been a huge decline. Formerly there were about 2,000 cinemas in the country. Film was a very important component of cultural life. Today there are perhaps 40 or 50 cinemas left. Most of these cinemas show American films in video format. We hope the situation will improve and that we can get some financing from the government.

SS: How would you sum up the differences between now and 10 years ago?

EA: As part of the Soviet Union we were able to send people to Moscow to the main film school to be trained who then returned to Kirghizstan to make films. Also through our relationship with the Soviet Union we were provided with equipment and sponsorship. The drawback was that everything we made went to Moscow and it was virtually impossible to get an international audience for our films.

Now we have no money, very little equipment but at least the chance to exchange experiences and show our films to an international audience. The difficulties which we are currently experiencing—and I am not just talking about film, but also the difficult economic situation in my country—mean that there is a great deal of nostalgia for the old system.

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Everybody realises there is no going back to former times, but nevertheless the nostalgia is there.

SS: There seems to be a real deficit of East European films that take up the issue of the experiences undergone under the Soviet Stalinist system. Are there any Kirghizstani films which take up such themes?

EA: Not really. Now that we are freed from the control from Moscow I regard our main task as filmmakers to be the revival of our specific culture and spirit.

A number of discussions with central Asian filmmakers revealed the extent of the continuing problems which confront much Eastern European cinema. At the same time, films are being made under the most difficult conditions and at the festival a total of over a hundred films were shown from a total of 26 countries. The final comment made by Ernest Abdyjaparov in the interview above pointed to a theme which recurred in conversations and was echoed in a number of films shown at the festival—the use of film to actively propagate national values and culture.

At a recent seminar in Berlin veteran Polish film director Andrzej Wajda emphasised the dangers of east European film being deliberately exploited by nationalist tendencies. He should know what he is talking about—his own last film epic *Pan Tadeusz* dealt with the liberation of Poland from the yoke of Russian tsarism, and just a year ago Wajda himself described the film as his own contribution to the establishing of a new Polish national identity.

A large proportion of Uzbekistan's total film budget in the 1990s was spent on producing its own national epic devoted to the adventures of the fourteenth century feudal leader Timur the Great—better known in the west as Tamerlane. Employing thousands of extras the film deals with Amir Timur's repulsion of the Mongolian hoards and the establishment of the city of Samarkand at the heart of the passage between Europe and Asia—the Silk Road.

A number of other films at the festival also took up the theme of national identity in a variety of ways. The opening film of the festival, *Milky Way*, was made in Kirghizstan in 1997. It is based on the novel by the country's most prominent author, Tchingis Aitmatov. The film centres on the fate of a peasant mother who as an old woman reflects back upon her tragic life. Through war she lost her husband and three sons. Her final remaining close contact is with her pregnant daughter-in-law who dies in the course of giving birth.

In the opening scene the elderly mother wanders through the wild countryside of Kirghizstan and it is apparent that she is sharing her recollections with the ground beneath her feet. Her fate is a parable for the sufferings of the entire country which, like her, draws its strength and resilience from the earth underfoot.

The film moves from one pathos-filled scene to the next. There is not the least sense that the filmmaker is seriously trying to develop his characters—above all the mother—as rounded, serious figures. Instead the emphasis is on drawing as much emotion as possible from every set-piece—the departure of the husband for the front, the return of a casualty from the war who fails to give the mother and other villagers any concrete information about their relatives, the robbery of the villagers' valuable seeds. In the figure of the daughter-in-law the director has found an actress capable of weeping on demand and she does at every available opportunity.

Everything in the film is black and white; there are no shades, no sense of social structure or anything human which could be combated. There are only honest peasants pitted against a relentless fate. The film does a disservice to the genuine tribulations of the people of Kirghizstan in the twentieth century and, whether the director is conscious of it or not, his film also encourages a sort of fatalism with regard to the current hardships being undergone by the people of the region.

Brother 2 from Russia is the follow-up to the original *Brother* film made in 1997, which dealt with the conflict between two Russian brothers and members of a Chechen band of gangsters. *Brother 2* is described as the most popular film with audiences in Russia at the moment. Irrespective of its popularity it is a contemptible piece of work. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union a number of east European films have taken up the issue of the migration from east to west and dealt with the experiences of people from the former Stalinist bloc countries in Europe and America. Increasingly such films now present an increasingly negative view of the west. One such film on show at the festival was the Netherlands-Uzbekistan co-production *Stowaway* —a worthy but limited treatment of the experiences of an Uzbekistan refugee in Holland. *Brother 2* takes up the same theme to propagate unbridled Russian chauvinism.

Two Russians travel to America to rescue the brother of the younger Russian, who is in the grip of the Mafia. The film does not miss an opportunity to crack off a stream of malicious comments and jokes about Rumanians, women, blacks, etc. The America portrayed in *Brother 2* is a country in the hands of black drug-dealers and pimps who turn honest Russian girls into prostitutes.

The youngest of the two brothers is played by Russia's most popular young actor, Sergei Bodrov Jr. His character in the film quietly recites classical Russian poetry before mowing down gangsters in the dreary shoot-out scenes which have become so much a staple of Hollywood productions. Americans are depicted as hysterical hoods (predominantly black) relying on high-tech weaponry; Russian gangsters (although at the start of the film the character played by Bodrov is described as a medical student!) are calm, cool and ruthless depending on their good old-fashioned Kalashnikovs and tsarist machine guns. All in all *Brother 2* is a despicable film, wallowing in nationalist and racial prejudices, which I was unable to sit through to the end.

Other films at the festival avoided the open chauvinism of *Brother 2*, but it was remarkable how many films, regardless of their subject, gave a nod and a wink towards the national political establishment. *I Wish* is a joint Japanese-Uzbekistan production from 1997 and deals with the life of a worker who discovers one day that he possesses magic powers. The film treats his attempts to reconcile himself to his new powers and, in the course of exercising them, to decide between good and evil. A basically confused film was made worse at the end by the main figure's articulation of his last wish—“that an inhabitant of Uzbekistan should be the first man to reach the planet Mars”. In an embarrassing final scene we see a weightless astronaut stumbling across a very fake Martian landscape to plant the national flag of Uzbekistan in a small mound.

Even the film *The Flight of the Bee* by Djamshed Usmonov, a genuinely engaging film currently on release in Germany that explores the mores of modern Tajikistan, begins with its principal figure, a teacher, leading his class of small children in a rendition of the country's national anthem.

A handful of films at the festival indicated the potential of eastern European film. Two fine films by the veteran Turkmenistan director Halmämmmet Kakabyev were on show at Cottbus. His latest film *Repentance* deals with the dangers arising out of the dissolution of family and social ties in modern day Turkmenistan. His work of 1988, *The Son*, takes up the story of a young boy, Batyr, whose father is drafted into the military.

The father was a masterful player of the dudar. While the latter was at home the boy ignored the instrument; now that his father is gone he feels drawn towards learning how to play the traditional and difficult balalaika-type instrument. In contrast to the mythical evocation of Mother Earth in the film *Milky Way*, *The Son* demonstrates how culture, in this case music, can provide a powerful foundation for confronting and overcoming life's hardships. In one particularly poignant scene we witness a jubilant Batyr, who has earned a few pieces of bread with his playing, rushing home to his mother grasping his round-bodied dudar. The shot is inter-cut with images of his father plodding forward in the opposite direction in a muddy, bloody and meaningless war, also armed with his round-bodied

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machine gun.

Finally *Divided We Fall*, by Czech director Jan Hrebejk, is a thoughtful and well-made exploration of the plight of Czech citizens subject to German occupation in the Second World War. The main figure of the piece is a curious, lackadaisical hero—Joseph prefers to vegetate on a sofa and read his books. Life in Bohemia under the Germans, however, demands some sort of conformism. In one comic scene Joseph is warned by his acquaintance Horst that he is not making enough effort to adapt. He shows Joseph how to pull his face into the mask of glassy "unyielding loyalty" which is so important for a quiet life under the new rulers. Life for Joseph and his wife becomes even more complicated when a Jewish survivor of the camps arrives and asks for refuge. *Divided We Fall* deals with the complexities of conformism and collaboration under the Nazis and demonstrates that human solidarity can take root under the most pressing circumstances.

Truly satisfying films were thinly spread at this year's Cottbus festival, with Kakabyev's films revealing the potential poetic vision of central Asian cinema in the strongest fashion. The festival once again highlighted the problems and hesitations experienced by filmmakers and scriptwriters in coming to terms with the heritage of Stalinism in the former Eastern bloc. It is of course not the job of filmmakers alone to clarify what took place following the betrayal of the 1917 Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy, but the fact that very few serious cinematic attempts are made to come to grips with what happened and the ease with which crude forms of nationalism seemingly influence cultural debate, indicates that layers of the intelligentsia in Russia and Eastern Europe have avoided so far a serious study of their own history and the social development of the twentieth century. This is not a small question with respect to the revival of aesthetic and moral values in East European and Soviet cinema.

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