

# Film festivals in Cottbus and Neubrandenburg

## Part 2—Feature films

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*This is the second article on recent film festivals in Cottbus and Neubrandenburg, which focus on new works produced ineastern Europe. The first article was posted December 1.*

Particular themes recurring in feature films at this year's Cottbus festival included the consequences of increasing social mobility and polarisation, together with growing alienation within various layers of society.

For many millions, the thoroughly venal forms of "free market" economy that predominate in the countries constituting the former Soviet bloc have meant an unprecedented decline in living standards. While a tiny elite has amassed enormous wealth, a relatively small middle class has also been able to profit—but at a price. Their lives are often plagued by extreme insecurity and a bad conscience.

Mobility—socioeconomic as well as physical—is a key issue in one of the better feature films at the festival, the Hungarian production *Dallas*.

Following the death of his father, Radu, a schoolteacher and Romanian city-dweller, returns home after a 12-year absence to the gypsy village where he grew up. The village of Dallas—named by its inhabitants after the US television series—is located on a municipal rubbish dump, which provides villagers with their meagre source of income.

Fishing around in rubbish dumps to eke out a living and the accompanying appalling levels of poverty have been dealt with in recent films from South American countries. *Dallas* reveals that such forms of existence are also increasingly commonplace in eastern Europe. The Russian short film *Flies (Muchi)*, shown in Neubrandenburg, also centers on a character who has spent a large part of his life sifting through a Russian rubbish tip.

The trade in recyclable materials in *Dallas* is controlled by the mafia-like character JR—a middleman who creams off what little margin exists in the transportation and sale of these materials.

Radu is one of the few members of his community who, thanks to the efforts of his mother, received an education. This enabled him to escape the village and find employment in the city.

Having decided to make a brief trip back to Dallas, he finds it increasingly difficult to leave. The rekindling of a relationship with a former childhood friend slows Radu's departure, and he also has physical difficulties in leaving. Although he arrived by his own means, his car is gradually stripped of its component parts, so that he is left with no option but to accept a lift out of the village in a stolen vehicle. His attempt to leave Dallas ends in a shoot-out with local police and his flight back to the village.

Back in his gypsy community, Radu attempts to address some of the issues that are destroying it. By donating what is left of his car—lost component parts quickly materialise—Radu provides the community with the means to cut out the parasitic middlemen who up to this point have controlled the livelihood of the village. Radu's success means that the inhabitants of Dallas can control their own environment and workplace. A hollow victory: They are lords of their own rubbish dump.

*Dallas* graphically portrays the particular forms of discrimination that predominate in Romania against the gypsy community, while at the same time avoiding the romantic and idealised depiction of Sinti and Roma life that, for example, characterises the films of the Yugoslav director Emir Kusturica. In the final analysis, however, director Robert Adrain Pejo packs too much pathos into his film. A young boy dies in an explosion on the chemical-ridden heap, Radu's childhood friend is stabbed by her jealous husband—as if the director felt somewhat obliged to distract from, or even apologise for, the central theme in his film, the appalling poverty and lack of perspective that confronts the dwellers of Dallas.

For their part, the Romanian authorities were obviously not happy with the filmmaker's efforts to capture this aspect of everyday life in their country, and ordered Pejo (himself born in Romania) to leave the country during the shooting of the film.

*Dallas* tells its story against a background of poverty and extreme forms of exploitation. Other features dealt with some of the winners in modern East European society. These are social layers with good incomes and jobs. Nevertheless, their lives are plagued by moral qualms and instability. The main characters lack any sort of long-term perspective other than an attachment to work and material acquisition.

While some filmmakers were capable of portraying the lives of such layers "lost at sea," they also tended to introduce artificial elements into their stories that indicate that the lack of any broader social perspective is not just limited to their film characters.

*The Third* begins at sea. It tells the story of a young "upwardly mobile" Polish couple whose sailing trip is brought to an end when they collide with the rowboat of an old man. Evidently influenced by Renoir's *Boudu Saved from Drowning* and Polanski's *Knife in the Water*, the film deals with the way in which the couple's lives are transformed by the company of the man they drag from the water.

The mobility of these Polish "yuppies" is apparent not only in terms of their own private transportation (big yacht, big car) but also in relation to their socioeconomic status (the husband manages a small software company). However, within their relationship, there is a

profound sense of alienation, amplified by the loss of their child at birth and the husband's slavish devotion to his company. They live their lives as though they were role-playing. As they tell the old man, not wearing their wedding rings adds a "touch of spice" to their relationship.

The old man, meanwhile, has plenty to teach them about genuine human relations and a "joie de vivre" divorced from the slavish acquisition of material goods. The problems arise for director Jan Hryniak in fleshing out the character of the old man, whose identity remains ambiguous. What could be the source of a positive attitude towards life and people that is not based on mere consumerism and egoism? Here the director fails and is evidently unable to envisage such an outlook based on an alternate vision of a new society.

First, the film hints that the old man has criminal connections. This is replaced later in the film by messianic symbolism. Neither is convincing as a potential source for the old man's evident superiority over the young couple. As a result, the guidance given by this idiosyncratic representative of an older generation remains problematic and unconvincing.

*Needing a Nanny* also features a young upwardly mobile couple—so called "New Russians." Living in a villa on the outskirts of town, this couple has all the "mod cons": large car, cell phones and a swimming pool, built by illegal Uzbeki labourers. Into this setting comes Galya, a schoolteacher, taken on by the couple to look after their daughter.

Once again we witness a new socioeconomic group (he manages a bottling plant and she edits a magazine) struggling to come to terms with unfamiliar roles. In terms of the conflict between work and parenthood, for example, the couple entangle themselves in the ineffective subcontracting out of the role of parent to the unemployed Galya.

The upward mobility experienced by the principal couple contrasts with that of the nanny and the Uzbek labourers, all of whom, when not in the service of their employers, are confined to shacks erected in the couple's garden. Any social mobility on the part of foreign labourers and the unemployed is possible only by entry into an illicit black economy—working without permits in the case of the Uzbeki labourers and, on the part of the nanny, a desperate attempt at blackmail.

The film begins by depicting the stark social and economic contrasts between the New Russians and their employees, but as it develops, it shifts attention to the malevolence of the nanny against her employers. As a result, we are left with a static portrayal of modern Russian society. The arrogance of the couple, the greed and duplicity of the nanny are all merely general features of the human spirit that find their "natural" reflection in Russian society today.

Films at the Cottbus festival repeatedly displayed the disillusionment of characters from different social layers with their day-to-day lives. Critical of the current situation, the response of some filmmakers was to cast a nostalgic and hazy look back at the past.

A popular reaction that says "things are so bad now, what we had before was better" is understandable, but under conditions where national political leaders are cynically distorting the past in order to pragmatically justify their current politics, such an uncritical view of history only obscures the links between previous social development and present-day reality.

Symptomatic in this respect is the Czech director Petr Zeleka, whose films are usually described by critics as "zany, bizarre comedies," generally situated among the young, better-off layers of Czech society. His new film *Wrong SideUp* falls into the same mould, but the director also reaches back tentatively into the Czech Republic's

Stalinist past. In his mild satire on the emotional problems facing young Czechs today, he includes the figure of David, the father of the main character Petr. David's only claim to fame is that 30 years previously, he was the official voice for Czech radio government broadcasts.

In utterly improbable fashion, the pensioner forms a relationship with a younger woman artist, Sylvie, who thrills her petty-bourgeois friends by featuring David as a living sculpture in a modern Czech gallery, with him delivering the monotonous broadcasts that he has learnt by rote. In outing his past, David recovers his pride and sense of purpose, and Sylvie's friends have a sense of linking up with a mysterious but intriguing period of Czech history.

The attempt to find some sort of nostalgic access to the past through indirect or allegorical measures is repeated in the Russian film *First People on the Moon*. Director Alexey Fedortschenko declared at the festival that he was fascinated by what took place in Russia in the 1930s, the decade in which most of his film takes place.

Fedortschenko has trawled through state security archives for footage from the 1930s, which he painstakingly incorporates into what is described as "docu-fiction"—a film combining archival footage selected by the director with newly shot scenes featuring actors.

The thesis of the film is that Russian scientists began work on a space mission to reach the moon in 1928. In "docu-fiction" fashion, we see grainy footage of the preparation of the space ship and the training of the astronauts, who eventually take off on their mission in 1937.

In his search for suitable footage, Fedortschenko is certainly able to draw from Russian movies made in the first decade after the Russian Revolution. Inspired by the revolution and convinced of the potential for scientific advance on the basis of new forms of production, a number of post-October novels and films directly took up science fiction themes (such as Iakov Protazanov's 1924 film *Aelita*)—even the possibility of exporting socialism to other planets!

However, the increasing stranglehold of Stalinism in politics and the arts effectively eliminated this utopian strain in Russian culture by the early 1930s. There is an abiding sense of longing in Fedortschenko's film for a return to such "utopian" times, but the fact remains that in 1937 the Stalinist bureaucracy was already deeply involved in a new round of mass repression and preparations for its second major trial aimed at liquidating the leadership of the Russian Revolution.

The space ship launched in 1937 in Fedortschenko's film may have gone missing in space, but in sifting through the archives, Fedortschenko has managed to avoid anything that recalls the truly repressive character of Stalinism during that period. One is simply left with a nasty taste resulting from the "whimsical" treatment of history so popular in modern currents of thought.



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