

# *So Bright is the View: A serious film from Romania*

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*Written and directed by Michaël and Joël Florescu*

The restoration of capitalism in Russia and Eastern Europe in 1989-91 produced a social, cultural and intellectual regression of almost historically unprecedented dimensions.

The decades of Stalinist crimes and the confusion they generated in the population about socialism, combined with the greed, ambition and stupidity of the newly “liberated” bourgeois and petty bourgeois layers, produced a culture that was largely as backward and empty as it was ignorant and unfeeling.

As if they had stepped off the moon, former Soviet and Eastern European artists and intellectuals praised Ronald Reagan and George Bush as “friends of freedom.” Once “dissident” filmmakers from Russia and Poland went to Hollywood, or if they were not so fortunate, Paris or London, and turned out mostly commercial rubbish in which they buried their artistic pretensions in the service of giant conglomerates.

Let us remind ourselves what the circumstances were like in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s.

Marxist sociologist Vadim Rogovin, in his 1994 article, “Why There Are No Strong Left Socio-Political Movements in Russia,” provided a vivid picture of the conditions in the former USSR. Here are a few excerpts:

“Insofar as the elemental nature of primitive capitalist accumulation unleashes the basest sides of human nature, the catastrophic collapse of the economy is accompanied by a catastrophic decline in culture and social morality, by an unprecedented outburst of common and everyday crime. ...

“Ever new socially active elements are being lumpenized and drawn into the ranks of the mafia ... The more deeply the country is plunged into a state of economic chaos and political confusion, the sharper the anticommunist hysteria becomes, and the louder become the cries about how the ‘communist experiment’ has proved to be a complete disaster. ...

“Gutter journalism has begun to flourish ... Along with the fabrication of historical myths which, in their arbitrary and fantastic nature exceed even the ideological product of the

Stalinist school of falsification, everything possible is being done to conceal from the people the scale to which the country is being ravaged and its natural wealth is being sold off.”

In November 1992 a series of articles appeared in the *New York Times* on the cultural situation in the former Soviet Union, which began by saying, “The most immediate image of the country’s cultural life is of poverty and creative paralysis,” and continued, “The lack of money, the dead hand of the past and an almost hopeless capitulation to the worst of the West can now be seen everywhere: in routine performances before dated and shabby opera sets at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow, in crumbling hallways and decaying facades at the country’s leading museums and conservatories, in cheap popular entertainments at its theaters, in third-rate American films on television and in movie theaters, in pornography sold at flea markets.”

Another piece in the same newspaper, from March 1993, headlined “An Empty feeling Is Infecting Eastern Europe,” noted, that “the upheavals that swept away Communism in Eastern Europe share a trait surprising in such a radical transition: the conspicuous absence of any new galvanizing ideas.”

In 1996, we commented on the “new cinema” from Russia and Eastern Europe: “Has the collapse of Stalinism, proclaimed with fanfare as the rebirth of intellectual freedom, produced an artistic renaissance in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union? This question answers itself. It is now clear that the former artist-‘dissidents,’ even those who courageously opposed the old dictatorial regimes, nourished themselves on very thin ideological gruel indeed. The most honest have produced nothing of substance, the worst simply sold themselves not necessarily to the highest, but the first, bidder.”

This is by way of introduction to a new Romanian film, *So Bright is the View*, directed by brothers Michaël and Joël Florescu.

Twenty years or more have come and gone since the downfall of the Nicolae Ceaușescu regime, greeted with

great fanfare in Romania and elsewhere. The Ceaușescus were deservedly hated for their cruelty and avarice, but no golden age has opened up in Romania.

In May 2013, World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim paid a two-day visit during which he congratulated the Romanian elites on “the country’s successes in economic growth during the last 20 years [i.e., their ability to make themselves rich]”, before noting that “Despite good progress achieved by the government, Romania remains the country with the highest poverty levels in the European Union. More than 30 percent of the population lives on less than US\$5 per day.” If further “successes” along those lines are achieved, perhaps Kim will report on his next visit that 40 percent of the population have fallen below \$5 a day!

So, if a film from Romania appears that not only points to the economic disparities, but begins to criticize the illusions people have in this or that “utopia,” it has some sociological significance. A new generation, which has grown up under mafia-capitalist rule, is emerging.

In *So Bright is the View*, Estera, a middle class Jewish girl in Bucharest, has to make a choice between pursuing a job in Atlanta, working for one of the nouveau riche thugs, or joining her mother in Israel, which the latter initially paints in the most glowing terms in a series of letters. Estera’s father is in prison for unspecified crimes. She is expecting a baby, and trying hard to work out some sort of future with her boyfriend, Vlad.

The film begins in the present, and then proceeds, in the manner, for example of Robert Bresson’s *A Gentle Creature*, to explain the events over the course of a few months that have led up to the present. In the opening scene, Estera’s cousin Rivka explains that, in fact, her mother, in Israel, has been experiencing an “emotional decline for a long time.” She doesn’t feel well and she’s “not all right financially” either. She hasn’t been making a go of it in a number of jobs, including cleaning buildings, and she’s about to be evicted from her apartment. Estera’s mother has been concealing the truth. “Why didn’t she tell me anything?”

A few months before, we discover Estera having a “friend-interview” with Mike, the Romanian-American, who reveals himself to be an uncouth bully, determined to throw his weight around. In a restaurant, he torments a waitress who has apparently not shown him proper respect. When Estera comes to dinner with Mike, he torments his unfortunate wife even more relentlessly, about her aging skin and other infractions. He threatens to trade her in for “your sister and a horse-cart.” Estera squirms in embarrassment, as do we. The lengthy scene, in a high-rise apartment against the city’s skyline, is effective.

In the end, Mike has “problems with clients and creditors,” and that job offer seems to dry up.

In perhaps the most dramatic sequence in *Bright View*, again quite lengthy, Estera finds out from her female boss that her efforts to educate herself in computer technology have backfired, as she has given the wrong advice to the firm’s clients. She’s fired. “I’m pregnant.” “That’s irrelevant.” “But I added value ...”

All this, and Vlad’s abandonment of her, push Estera in her mother’s direction. Her roommate suggests that by filling out all the Israeli’s embassy’s forms, “you’re drowning your sorrow in paper.” However, we know from the first scene what the mother’s Israeli reality is, despite her promises in letters that “so bright is the view.”

The writer-directors have decided on an unmoving camera and one static shot per scene. This shows artistic ambitiousness, which is not a bad thing, but also inexperience, which is neither good nor bad, but something to be overcome. The self-conscious approach calls attention to itself, and that is not necessary or helpful.

If I had the collective ear of the filmmakers, I would suggest more spontaneity and less formalism, which runs the risk of appearing to be showing off or trying to impress. The Florescu brothers have obvious talent, and the ability to present the drama of everyday life. That needs to be developed. The artistic forms for presenting it will emerge out of the fight for life and truth.

In any case, the production notes explain that the filmmakers “use the concept of an unseen, unnamed New Jerusalem, always in the distance like a stubborn mirage, to examine labour precarity among university graduates and the appeal of ethnic nationalism during the aftermath of the economic crisis.” *So Bright is the View*, which has been invited to the Moscow International Film Festival, suggests that the allure of both Israel and America has begun to wear off, as Romanians become aware of the realities of both those societies. Meanwhile, the notes point out, “During the pre-crisis years, many fortunes were made in Bucharest, but not all of these fortunes were kept.”

The film is credited to the Romanian Independent Film Collective, which is guided by democratic principles and not by dependence on wealthy financial backers, or the government. “The brothers hope that their effort will be a trailblazer for independent cinema in Eastern Europe.” One can only wish them well.



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