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KAMERA THE HORROR ISSUE 02

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Kamera is published 5 times per year by
Oldcastle Books Ltd
P O Box 394
Harpenden
AL5 1XJ

www.kamera.co.uk

Next issue available January 2004

Distribution:
Turnaround,
3 Olympia Trading Estate,
Coburg Rd, London, N22 6TZ

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Subscriptions
5 issues
£25 inc P&P for UK
£40 inc P&P outside UK
see page 96 for special offer

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Oldcastle Books Ltd
ISBN 1-904048-96-X

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Europe Enlarged: Bigger, Better, Sexier?

Europe's biggest ever expansion is less than a year away: in 2004 ten new countries – Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia – will join the European Union. Three more – Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey – are queuing up for membership in 2007. To mark the approaching enlargement, UK's Foreign Office and Picturehouse Cinemas have teamed to organise a touring film series.

According to the accompanying brochure, it celebrates a 'bigger and better' Europe. And sexier. Rather than giving a boring academic speech at some University, the Minister for Europe Denis MacShane said (speaking to BBC World's Europe Today programme), he thought it would be best if he opened the series in the company of

'the world's most beautiful woman,' who also happened to come from these new territories. So he invited Czech-born lingerie model Eva Herzigova to launch the film series along with him at the map room of the Foreign Office.

Admittedly, it would be more to my taste if the series was launched by some of the great actors from the countries of the 'new Europe,' who would have to his or her name to weightier credits than the few scantily dressed film appearances that Herzigova has made. Even though not as sexy, Lithuanian Donatas Banionis (star of Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, 1972) or Romanian Maja Morgenstern (star of Angelopoulos's *Ulysses Gaze*, 1995) would appear a more appropriate choice.

But even the presence of the bomb shell at the launch was not enough to divert the attention from the lurking plight that creeps up every time new European cinema is talked about. Once again, there was the prevailing feeling that European cinema is somehow unglamorous and in fact, somehow closer to the *opposite* of sex. It is a mood that the allure of beautiful women cannot erase: most clearly revealed in the overwhelming boredom of the ceremonies for the European film awards in Rome earlier this year – a crushing monotony that could not be curbed even by host Asia Argento's beautiful and intelligent face and changes of stunning outfits.

It is possible to give a break-down of the problem elements that persistently blemish the figure of European cinema; a host of these came out in relation of the New Europe Film Season as well.

First of all, the films included in the selection were good but not outstanding. They would be of interest for someone who, like me, wants to stay informed about the current condition of European film-making. But these are more or less mainstream works that do not possess the artistic equivalent of sex appeal and I doubt if they could create an enduring interest among audiences in the cinemas of the 'new' Europe. Rather than delivering a forceful message of the cultural potency of these 'new' cinemas, the selected films confirm the awareness that European cinema is in a middle-of-the-road state.

Thematically, the selection delivers a typical European fare, asserting once again what we already know: that the people living in the countries of the 'new' Europe are inundated with problems and have to deal with a panorama of economic disparities and social ills that are likely to persist even after Europe becomes 'bigger and better' in 2004.

The Czech *Brats* (*Smradi*, dir. Zdenek Tyc, 2001), for example, tackles head on the subject matter of deeply seated anti-Romani racism. Estonian-Latvian *Good Hands* (*Labas rokas*, dir. Peter Simm, 2001) features the gritty lives of thieving women. The two Polish entries tackle problems of teenagers (*Inferno*, dir. Maciej Pieprzyca, 2001 and *Antichrist*, dir. Adam Guzinski, 2001). The black comedy *Occident* (dir. Cristian Mungiu, 2002) presents the gloomy everyday lives of present-day Romanians, agonizing over

the decision to emigrate or to stay behind. Slovenian *Blind Spot* (*Slepa pega*, dir. Hanna Slak, 2002) is shot in gritty details strongly influenced by the Polish school and tackles urban problems like heroine-taking, AIDS and euthanasia. In contrast, the Turkish box-office hit *Vizontele* (dir. Yilmaz Erdogan and Omer Faruk Sorak, 2001) features village life from the time of the 1974 Cyprus invasion and, among other things, makes references to Ankara as the westernmost place reachable by the protagonists (who live, in fact, in Asia).

The picture of post-Berlin Wall Europe that emerges from these films is of an area where old evils have been swept away while a host of new ones have soared. The protagonists of these films belong to the confused post-Cold War generation that had to live the volatility of crumbling political systems, incessantly patch up past and present-day realities, and continuously adjust to changing circumstances. Confronted with relentlessly contested claims on history and with a collapse of coherent ideologies, many of them are plunged into irreconcilable identity quests. Witnessing the complex and often distressing events evolving right in front of their eyes, the film-makers from the 'new' Europe dealt time and again with gloom and despair, presenting frail characters faced with the mighty sweep of historical change.

But is this the picture that one wants to project about the coming 'bigger and better' Europe? Most of these films stress gritty social concerns; on top of it they are all subtitled. There isn't anything particularly sexy about this assortment; it is unlikely to score high among entertainment-seeking audiences.

Minister MacShane could not have been aware of these limitations, as he admitted to not having seen the films. His contribution to the European box-office revenues for this year was restricted to buying tickets for *Good Bye, Lenin!* and *The Pianist*. But, in the company of the world's most beautiful woman, he was as enthusiastic as needed at the season's opening, thus compensating for the trivial statements he made in regard to European film industry. No wonder that *The Observer* and *The Guardian* ridiculed his call urging British film-makers to turn their backs to the decadent and money-obsessed Tinseltown and dedicate themselves to making Britain the heart of a 'Eurowood,' a task that in his view could be achieved by intensifying British co-production links with the countries of the 'new' Europe.

Displaying naïve zeal and bringing into the picture beautiful women are only two of the ways used in the ploy to hide the low-key face of European cinema. I would argue they are among the more innocuous ones. There are worse things about the situation in European film today. Most of all, the realisation that many of those whose job it is to endorse European film are not genuinely committed to the product they are meant to promote. There is an army of these people who effectively act as a fifth column, continuously undermining their own declared efforts. My own personal experience of this includes:

❖ Talking to the man responsible for film distribution at Eurimages in 1999: 'We do not invest into releasing on video the films that we subsidise,' he said; there was no point doing this because, in his view, people who go to the store to rent films are not looking for the lacklustre films that Eurimages sponsors but want something entertaining, with action, horror and sex.

❖ Checking out the results of the latest funding round at Eurimage's website in 2000: only directors from countries like France or Germany were listed with their proper nationality; most of the rest had been denoted as 'Namibian': Baltasar Kormakur (Icelandic), Ali Özgentürk (Turkish) and Drahomira Vihanova (Czech) were all incorrectly identified as 'Namibian', suggesting that everything in Europe beyond France and Germany was as little known as Namibia to the web-masters.

❖ Looking at the press release for the current event and noticing that one of the six films listed as *European* success releases is, in fact, the *New Zealand* Maori tale *Whale Rider* (2003).

❖ Shuddering at the prospect I may need to approach EU's MEDIA programmes offices, an operation that functions in a mode diametrically opposite of transparency and is an embodiment of red tape.

The uneasiness surrounding European film-making is summed up in a single scene in Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep* (1996): a French journalist comes to interview Hong Kong star Maggie Chung, flown in by the European veteran director to enliven the production. Maggie Chung's polite remarks on European cinema trigger an adverse reaction from the journalist: European cinema, he says, is 'public money given by friends to their friends so that they can make movies which no one wants to see;' when he gets

Inferno

to mention the stars of Hong Kong action film, however, the journalist becomes exalted.

With a similar disdain to 'fortress Europe' (and admiration for Hollywood's industry set-up), writing on the film industry in Britain, France and Germany, film industry expert Martin Dale claims that the 'European state has been preoccupied with controlling all forms of cinematic expression' and in general has not done much more than interfere with creativity under the pretext 'to protect European artists from the American aggressor' (*The Movie Game*, 1997: 116). Freedom-loving Dale is, of course, opposed to such imposed protectionism.

Some people reduce the European problems to funding shortage: Hollywood has got extensive funds, Europe has got none and that's that (on top of it, European investors put significant funds into Hollywood, as revealed in the context of a recent German controversy). I tend to believe that both in America and Europe two parallel cinematic cultures – the entertainment-minded one and the socially committed one – co-exist in a situation that the mass-minded entertainment overpowers; the differences are mostly in the cultural policy pursued by the respective governments. In the US these two cinematic cultures largely correspond to Hollywood and indie film-making, and the government is (unofficially but efficiently) committed to supporting and promoting Hollywood; the indie film industry is left to survive somehow. In the EU, on the contrary, the socially engaged film-making has got the support (official but inefficient); the commercial cinema is believed to have ample funding to keep itself above water.

Commercially-minded industry people in Europe, however, are not happy with this status quo, moreover it goes against the economic logic of capitalist society to which the countries of EU formally belong: Why are we all kept in self-imposed paucity when it is clear that there is money to be made in film? If Europe decided to go the American way, there is a chance we would all make more money. Only then would the European Film Awards shed off the dull atmosphere and would really come to rival the Oscars.

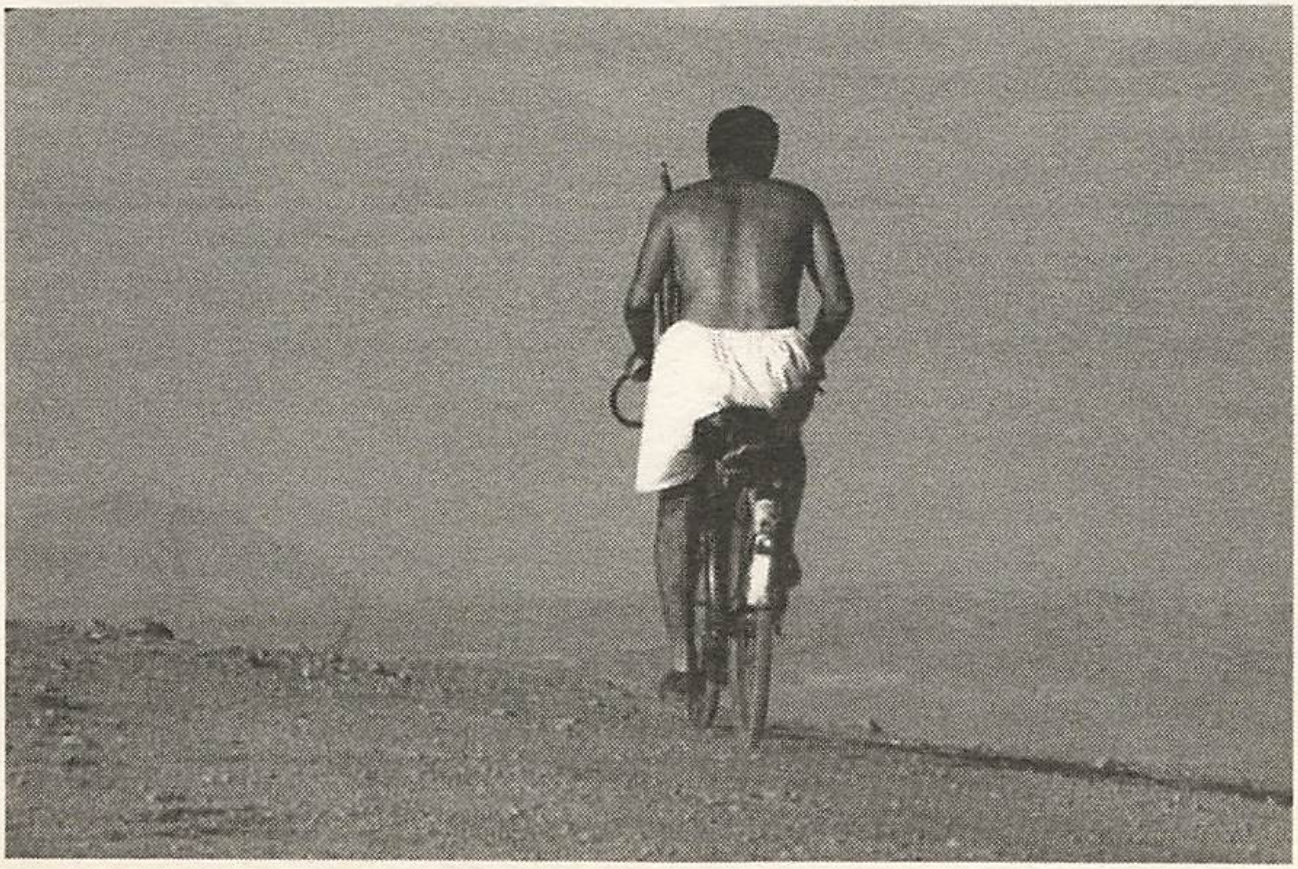
Faced with such a powerful argument, it is no wonder that many of the people who appointed to jobs meant to promote European cinema as it is at the moment do not really believe in what they do.

The pressures to change in favour of commercialisation have dominated European film industry debates over the past decade, and I believe they will continue to persist. Let's look at some aspects of the current film industry situation in Europe.

In today's Europe, financing for film is becoming increasingly international, and a variety of complex and sometime conflicting factors, are at play here. Promotion and distribution relies on an international audience, thus the prevailing international patterns in media consumption increasingly play a role as well. It is a set of international and transnational economic factors that finally determines many of the aesthetic

and personal choices that film-makers make. Applying American business savvy to European financing mechanisms as well as to as international distribution and pre-distribution deals for films from smaller countries is becoming a matter of increasing importance. The need of hyping up the product (film) – like bringing in a sex symbol like Eva Herzigova for promotional purposes – comes about in the process of adjusting to international media consumption patterns.

Historically, co-production practices in film-making developed as a solution to the impossibility to gather large budgets for films made in smaller countries. Pooling of financial resources is undoubtedly the main reason for the large number of co-productions that the European countries came to be involved with in the 1990s. In a situation of reduced and sometimes non-existent domestic subsidies, attracting foreign funds often happens to be the only possibility to produce a film. Even more, the new national funding mechanisms of some European countries are made directly dependable on foreign participation – if a production can show it has been granted funding from abroad, it makes it automatically eligible for domestic support. And while for West European participants a co-production with an East European partner may bring cost advantages in terms of labour and location, bringing in foreign productions benefits the under-employed professionals across the studios of Eastern Europe. In strictly economic terms, the distinction between the capitalist economies of the West and the transitional economies of the 'new European' states may translate into a relationship of 'have's' and 'have-not's'. The new EU members, however, favour co-productions not just because of the cost-advantages: to many



Vizontele

of these countries Western European partners are desired for political reasons as well, as re-orientation to the West is now on the top of the agenda for each and every one of them.

Creating more intense links with the West of Europe is of vital economic importance for the film industries of the countries joining Europe in 2004. A hit film like the recent *Good Bye, Lenin!* was made possible due to the broad representation of multinationals like Coca-Cola and Burger King, references to which are smartly plugged into the film's canvass. Similarly, many of the East European films that enjoyed an international critical acclaim over recent years (*Kolya*, 1996, *Underground*, 1995) may not have been made if not for co-production funds and the will for new partnerships. The first Bosnian movie shot after the war, Ademir Kenovic's *Perfect Circle* (1997), was made possible only due to international grants from the Soros Fund, Eurimages, Fonds E.C.O., Pro-Helvetia, and Rotterdam's IFF's Hubert Bals Fund. Macedonian *Before the Rain* (1994) secured the participation of the Macedonian Ministry of Culture mostly due to the availability of funding received from French and British sources.

But what is the nationality of these films? Legal experts working for the European audio-visual policy-making bodies are still preoccupied with comparative investigations on the concept of a 'national' film. Given the intense movements of film finance and people beyond national borders and former political division lines, classifying films as belonging to a national cinematic tradition is becoming increasingly problematic.

We often come across paradoxical cases where films produced with international financing become the subject of rows over nationality. Over the past decade we have seen many controversies surrounding the nationality of a film, and most of these have evolved, not surprisingly, around productions involving the countries of the 'new' Europe. When Poland, for example, entered Kieslowski's *Double Life of Veronique* (1991) into the foreign language competition at the Oscars, France objected as the film was made mostly with French financing. Macedonian director Milcho Manchevski's film *Dust* (2001), had only 5% Macedonian financing, with the rest of the funding coming from international sources. The largest chink of the film's finance came from Civilian Content, one of the Lottery-funded British franchise production outfits, so no wonder that in 2001 the film screened as part of a 'New British Cinema' programme touring provincial France.

Many of the disputes over a film's nationality will prove futile. The times we live in mark the end of strictly national film industries. A variety of collaborative artistic projects bring previously isolated spheres together. The film-making process is no longer confined within the narrow borders of a nation, and national particularities determine cultural consumption even less. The category of the national, which persists in the legal framework of the audio-visual industry and at various festivals and awards, will increasingly reveal itself as anachronistic.

But this also means that the future may well mean less diversity. In the new international division of film industry labour, the 'new' European countries are relegated to the role of the poor cousin: from hosting runaway productions to acting as minority producers on bigger international projects.

In addition, the internationally subsidised co-production schemes across Europe are becoming increasingly dependent on the estimated commercial potential of planned works. Because even though made with subsidies, films are expected to perform well at the international marketplace, and this has not really been the case of European film in the 1990s. The growing concern of poor commercial performance, or rather the push to measure success with box office indicators, results in changing funding policies that ultimately favours the emerging international class of European 'auteurs' (established film-makers who benefit from their existing international standing) and leads to diminishing chances for emerging talent from across Europe.

Even programs that invest public money, like Eurimages, have adopted rules that allow them to cash in on well-established directors by linking subsidies directly to market mechanisms. As of 2000, Eurimages split its funding between two schemes – the first one disposes of significantly higher funds and is set aside for films with 'real circulation potential.' The second, more modestly funded one, is reserved for films 'reflecting the cultural diversity of European cinema.' Eligibility for the more lucrative first scheme is strictly linked to circulation outlook, judged by criteria such as 'the commercial potential of the projects, their pre-sales and sales estimates, the number and quality of distribution commitments, the percentage of market financing confirmed, and the experience of the producer and the director' (Eurimages Guide, 2000:12). The projects are expected to have, at the time of application, a sales projection by a credible sales agent as well as documented distribution commitments from at least three countries. Effectively, it is a green light for experienced directors and producers, cashing in on established and marketable names. Thus, the work of more or less bankable 'auteurs,' is facilitated by specially adjusted arrangements, while emerging film-makers lose out faced with shrinking opportunities. In practise, it also means favouring the countries with well-established cinematic traditions as it is much more likely that projects from France, Italy, and Spain would have a better circulation potential and pre-sales than those of smaller and lesser-known cinemas like Romania or Estonia.

Then, there is the question of the regionalist approach that plainly takes over all pan-European intentions. Rather than seeing a real Europe-wide interaction of film-makers which would involve a variety of partnerships between participants from East and West, North and South, we observe the emergence of new regional co-production relationships that transcend former and even current political division lines and are based on strictly practical principles of regional

proximity. European funding bodies such like MEDIA and Eurimages have insisted on tripartite collaborations in their guidelines (to be eligible for financing, undertakings should include participants from at least three countries), yet a look at the list of tripartite co-productions realised under their aegis gives the picture of several regional partnerships that regularly go jointly for co-productions. One can distinguish a Romance region (where besides France at least two of the participants are from a Romance speaking country like Romania), a Nordic one (where Baltic countries like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are attached to their Scandinavian counterparts), a 'Mitteleuropa' one (usually involving Germany or Austria in partnerships with Hungary, Poland or the Czech Republic), as well as a Balkan one (in the context of which Greece and Turkey collaborate much more often than one could imagine given their reputation of countries at odds with each other). Thus, as far as film production is concerned, Europe's enlargement is not likely to change the existing pattern and collaborative film-making will most likely remain confined to regional collaborations.

Last but not least, European cinema is in a particularly disadvantaged position in regard to international distribution. Even though some mechanisms enhancing distribution alongside production are in place, they do not seem to work as expected. And while recuperation of subsidies invested in production can only materialise if a film is successfully distributed; in practice little is done to help a film's exposure once it is made. This situation is also partially due to the apathy that national distributors display to the films made in neighbouring European countries; anything coming from the U.S. appears as more marketable than anything coming from Europe.

To conclude, the promotional image of new European cinema – bigger, better and sexier – comes across as a red herring. Backed by a workforce that is not genuinely concerned with it and met with audience apathy, the new European cinema is a long way from receiving the appreciation that it needs so badly.

Dina Iordanova

GOOD WRITING ON FILM

KAMERA – ISSUE 2

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Urrrrgh, that's disgusting! But cool.

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Front cover photograph: The Shining (1980)
courtesy Warner Bros./The Moviestore Collection