

Dina Iordanova, Foreword to Imre, Aniko (ed)
A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas,
New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2012, xv-xvii.

PREFACE

In my teaching I often face a room full of students who, in 1989, were either toddlers or not even born yet and to whom I need to explain what the Cold War was, because all they know about is the war on terror. We all tell these students the story of communism: there is a more or less agreed-upon account of it. But we do not really have consensus on what the rundown be would on developments that took place in communism's aftermath. Some of us, mainly based in the social science disciplines, maintain that, once liberated from Soviet tyranny, the countries of the former Soviet bloc promptly readjusted their political and economic course and soon caught up with the democracies of old Europe, rejoining a position where they always belonged, historically and culturally. Others, mainly from the humanities camp, focus their attention on the hiccups, the failed enthusiasm, and the disillusionment. Yet others simply decide to pass on and avoid the topic altogether.

By looking at film and media representations, at production and reception, this book aims to bridge older and newer narratives and propositions as they play out in the discourse on Eastern Europe's shifting realities.

The more effectively one deals with change, the more likely one is to thrive, management wisdom has it. Just like the natural world, societies and individuals encounter changing conditions that are beyond their control; successful adaptation to change is crucial. Change management, in this context, is an approach to shifting individuals and groups from a current to a desired state, to empowering stakeholders to accept and thrive in an environment that has not settled quite yet.

The post-1989 transition of Eastern Europe makes for a suitable case study of flopped enthusiasm under the change management paradigm, where romantic fervor and zeal were dampened by short-term profiteering and a rush to redistribute limited quantities of wealth and power. The break-up of multicultural conglomerates on the one hand, with the bloody demise of “brotherhood and unity” in Yugoslavia and the proliferation of break-away “statelets” at the periphery of the former Soviet Union, and ethnic consolidation on the other, with the reunification of Germany and the reabsorption of various dispersed populations back into a mono-ethnic nation-state, erected nationalism on the pedestal and legitimized it as an energizing political credo across the region. The most radical social change of the end of the tumultuous twentieth century, a soft revolution that was undertaken with a vision of renewal, reinvigoration and reinvention of a social order, failed to deliver. It descended into economic volatility, precariousness, and massive outmigration.

The 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia had dispelled whatever post-World War Two hopes regarding the chances of “socialism with a human face” still lingered. In the climate of fear that this event instituted, Eastern Europeans lived in anticipation of change, knowing that transformation of the system, politically oppressive and economically awkward, was inevitable and would come, sooner or later. Waiting for the change to come about, however, was marked by uncertainty and, often, by an inability to plan ahead. The omens of civil society and the change management process could converge meaningfully only after 1989.

In the years since “die Wende,” many amazing metamorphoses came about. Mikhail Gorbachev, the visionary general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party who came from within the ranks of the KGB, was emblematically seen in the new millennium actively promoting the consumer society by fronting ads for Pizza Hut and luxury luggage-maker Luis

Vuitton. Newly found prosperity in some corners came hand in hand with destitution in other parts.

This transition trajectory was reflected in cinema, both in industry transformation and identity discourse. The film industry saw previous state assets sold off to new, usually foreign, owners, who swiftly turned the region into a cut-price production playground. The “film factory,” previously run by state apparatchiks, now turned into a bargain-basement service economy offering skilled personnel and amenities to international runaway film businesses. Global film franchises did not take long to arrive; the older one-screen theatres closed down, replaced by ostentatious popcorn-selling multiplexes. There is no longer much difference between the film industries in Western and Eastern Europe, both competing to secure a place in the lucrative manufacturing and exhibition of outsourced content.

Refashioning the narratives related to history, national character, or collective identities, however, has been less straightforward. Any unanimity over what was happening rapidly vanished amidst crumbling communal memory. Post-communism’s finest films tackled the vigorous memory work that involved selective forgetting and the formation of new favored narratives. They inevitably evolved around the ambivalence of shared memory and the ambiguity of compromise. Films like *12:08 East of Bucharest* confirmed that it is no longer possible to reconstruct a shared narrative of what happened in 1989, while films like *Goodbye Lenin!* Endorsed the view that it is no longer possible to leave intact previously uncontested storylines.

The East European cinema of post-communism focused on stories of morally ambiguous protagonists, a new array of characters, ranging from gold-chain-adorned gangsters to budding *Gastarbeiter*s, plotting their move to the West while stuck in the drab environment that communism had constructed and then left behind for future generations to

tackle. Other films zoomed in on penurious pensioners subsisting on remittances from their absent sons and daughters who had struck lucky somewhere out in the wide world.

Alongside all this, other events emerged and hijacked the global political imagination, pushing the anxieties of post-communism aside. New narratives and concerns – of radicalization and terrorist threat, of a bellicose world order, and of environmental self-destruction – came to the fore as the world’s attention moved away from the post-Communist world and Eastern Europe. The Arab Spring, most recently, relegated the “velvet revolutions” of 1989 categorically to the pages of history. Change management in the Eastern bloc did not fascinate anymore; the public interest moved away before the culture of communism and its aftermath were properly assessed.

The political venture of post-communism, however, is still in the center of the intellectual filmmaking explored in this volume. On the surface, not much has changed: like before, East Europeans wake up and go to work every morning. But whereas before they would be engaged in a collective effort to construct the bright future charted by the party officials, nowadays they are busy with deconstructing the derelict artifacts of state Socialist grandeur. Social and individual lives intertwine in this vital course of change management.

Dina Iordanova