Obsession with the Past and Disappointment with the Present in the Cinema of the Ex-Communist Countries

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Abstract: *The notion that the ex-communist countries could emerge as one of the most vibrant and exciting filmmaking centers in Europe, if not the world, would have seemed far-fetched a decade ago. And yet, since the beginning of the third millenium a generation of remarkably talented young directors have produced an impressive body of films that have consistently landed at the top of international critics' polls and in the coveted top tier of film festivals. Their films have become increasingly self-referential, using specific structures to draw attention to the means whereby their fiction is created and to make the spectator aware of the process of filmic narrative. Part of this is a recognition and an exploration of the specificities of the medium, not least its ability to deal with historical time. Essentially, these films acknowledge European memory, while also showing the centrality of film itself within this memory.*

Key words: *nationalism, cultural identity, realism, hyperrealism, surrealism*

For most of its history, the European cinema has evolved in fraught but creative tension with its main rival, Hollywood. During the globalisation of the 1990s, Hollywood held Europe - its most valuable export market - in its grip and expanded its influence into former communist territories in Central and Eastern Europe, where the lifting of trade restrictions created unprecedented levels of competition from US films. France, Britain, Germany, Spain and Italy are Europe's biggest film-producers, yet even their domestic markets are largely captive to Hollywood. Despite that, increasing competition from Hollywood has acted as a powerful catalyst for innovative strategies in some of the region's cinemas. An outstanding example is provided by several ex-communist countries. These countries' recent histories are linked by the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, the decline of empires in the twentieth century, the experience of two World Wars, the Cold War and the formation of the new Europe. Now, as David Gillespie says, "With the disappearance of the old certainties, across" these countries "nationalism fills the gap left by the collapse of ideology" (Gillespie, 2005: 59). But the ex-communist countries are not only asserting their nationalism as a motor for their cultural identity and political self-determination after the fake internationalism and nationalism of the Stalinist past. They are also coming to the fore with a renewed concern for a national cinema, shadowing the fact that Western Europe underestimated the degree of militancy still inherent in the nationalism in the Balkans and elsewhere. As a result of this shared background and concern, there are a number of similar themes across the region's cinemas, including obsession with the past and disappointment with the present.

The European cinema's defining aesthetic is realism. The ideology of realism is one of the means by which the European cinema has traditionally sought to differentiate itself from Hollywood. While the Hollywood realism is guided by character motivation and causal relationships (realism seen in terms of plausibility), in the European cinema realism is often conceived as an appeal to national or cultural authenticity (Chaudhuri, 2007: 14).

The Italian neorealist movement of the 1940s had an enormous impact on the French and British New Waves of the 1950s and 1960s and has a continuing influence on conceptions of realism today. So too has the 1960s French documentary movement *cinéma-vérité* which has come to epitomise cinematic attempts to capture reality. In contemporary European cinema, realism has reformed into further varieties; as John Orr notes, one type strives to get under "the skin of the real" through techniques like hyperactive camerawork and decentred close-ups that disrupt normal perception, while another, "hyperrealism," absorbs the real into the spectacular, transforming normality into a stylised surface (Orr, 2004: 301). However, realism is not always the favoured vehicle

for the expression of European national or cultural identities. The cinemas of ex-communist countries often disregard realism, partly as a reaction to the so-called socialist realism, which prescribed clear-cut, idealised depictions. Surrealism, which emerged as a 1920s avant-garde movement in France, is still a defining force in many parts of Europe.

Romanian cinema. Much of the interesting film-making in Europe at the moment is happening in the Balkans but "it is in Romania that the first real 'wave' has broken, as though the embers of the 1989 revolution had suddenly flared into cinematic life as the generation of film-makers who experienced it in their early 20s hits 40" (Roddick, 2007). The only Romanian director to achieve international acclaim during the 1990s was Lucian Pintilie with films such as *The Oak* (1992) and *Terminus paradis* (1998). It is Pintilie's 2003 film *Niki and Flo* that provides the link between his generation and the new one. The story of the fractious relationship between a former army officer and his aggressively modernising son-in-law, *Niki and Flo* was co-written by Cristi Puiu, who went on to direct *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*. The 2000s saw the emergence of a new Romanian realism at about the same time that Romania joined the European Union, proving that the "cinematic and geopolitical institutions interconnect in a temporally and materially legible manner" (Galt and Schoonover, 2010: 13). What interests most Romanian filmmakers in the 21st century? Not romantic comedies, epic fantasies or costume dramas. The main theme that intrigues Romanian filmmakers today, almost twenty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, is still communism, life under it and the marks it left on society.

A clear pattern was defined by the almost unanimous praise and wealth of prizes garnered by Puiu's *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (2005). A bleak satire of bureaucratic inefficiency, it follows the title character as he waits for attention in a rundown hospital emergency ward – and unwittingly begins a nightmarish journey of horrendous mistreatment at the hands of the hospital staff. It won numerous awards in films festivals, including Un Certain Regard award in 2005 Cannes Film Festival, and it became the first Romanian film to achieve significant international distribution, thus launching the Romanian new wave. It also set the style for much of what was to follow over the next years: a meticulous attention to detail delivered through very long takes and an often static camera that simply records what is in front of it. That attention to detail extends to performance and dialogue too, both of which are so strikingly naturalistic that Lazarescu's scenes with neighbours, the ambulance attendant, and the hospital doctors could be mistaken for documentary. Leaving aside the flourishes and fripperies of film language, it focuses instead on honing the script, casting and acting to perfection. The result is "cinematic humanism in its purest form" (Roddick, 2007). According to Paul Arthur, Puiu's film lies in the centre of the "metagenre" of "corporeal cinema," which consists of grim allegories that are preoccupied with "Eastern Europe's recent historical convulsions," including Bela Tarr's, Alexander Sokurov's, and Emir Kusturica's films (qtd in Imre, 2009: 215).

A similar approach - albeit more traditional in style and with significant (mainly satirical) inflections - can be found in Corneliu Porumboiu's *12:08 East of Bucharest* (2006), a film that focuses on the moment when Romania imploded, seen through the mythologizing filter of memory. It satirically investigates whether the revolution really occurred on December 22, 1989, in a small town to the east of Bucharest, Vaslui. Set 16 years later, it focuses on a local television station that invites several residents to share their memories and answer questions from viewers who doubt those events ever took place. What Porumboiu's dry media satire actually does is to interrogate the past in order to "face a vacuum of identity that may well extend from Romania to the whole of Europe, where the West and the East are no longer poles of a safe and stable identification" (Rivi,

2007: 23). The achievement was great enough to earn the director The Golden Camera – the Cannes Film Festival award for best first film.

Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* (2006), set during the hours when the people massed outside Ceausescu's palace, follows a young army recruit through the confusions of the night to the tragedy we know will come at dawn because the story is told in flashback. A less dramatic reliving of the revolution is found in Catalin Mitulescu's *How I Spent the End of the World* (2006) - Best Actress, Un Certain Regard, Cannes, 2006 - , which views events through the eyes of a seven-year-old boy. Both films make clear that while the Romanian new wave has frequently used the 1989 revolution as a catalyst for personal epiphanies and private tragedies, it has yet to deal with the cataclysm head-on.

The nearest thing to a historical perspective, to an overview of Romanian society in the aftermath of the fall of Ceausescu, is Cristian Nemescu's *California Dreamin'* (2007). This based-on-a-true-story political satire is set against the backdrop of the war in Kosovo. A NATO train equipped with military supplies and weapons is passing through Romanian territory. Since the train has no official documents and received only verbal permission from the Romanian authorities, it is stopped in the middle of nowhere by the corrupt head of a railway station, who aims to manipulate the situation to his benefit. The story begins as a deceptively familiar Balkan comedy - raunchy, ridiculous, awash with colourful characters - then narrows into a tragedy that manages to reference not just modern Romania but the aftermath of World War II and the blinkered vision that comes with the United States' war on terror as well. The film won the Un Certain Regard award in the Cannes Film Festival 2007.

Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) is alongside *California Dreamin*' a "twin peak of the Romanian new wave" (Roddick, 2007) and it firmly established Romania as a major force in early twenty-first-century world cinema. Winner of the Palme d'Or at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, this excruciatingly intense, realistic and minimalistic drama is set in Bucharest in the mid-1980s, tracing the attempt by two female students to attain an illegal abortion. The resulting 24 hours is a harrowing descent into a world in which the possibility of tragedy lurks around every corner. Mungiu's decision to film every scene in a hyper-documentary style, with long, unbroken takes, ratchets up the tension to nearly unbearable proportions. Adding even greater drama is his decision to focus on the friend, not the victim. The film strikes by the purity of the storytelling, the rigour of the shot and editing choices, the conviction of the performances and dialogue, and the passionate concern for the characters.

Finally, Florin Serban's *If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle* (2010), which won the Silver Bear for Jury Grand Prix and the Alfred Bauer award at the 60th Berlinale International Film Festival in Berlin (2010), is the story of Silviu, a young delinquent, who is about to be released from reform school. Only five days to go. But ever since he learned that his mother has suddenly reappeared on the scene after a long absence and is determined to take his young brother away to live with her, these five days have seemed like an eternity. Silviu himself has raised his little brother and loves him as if he were his own son. During his time behind bars Silviu has met and fallen in love with a young social worker who is studying psychology. Time is running out and his anxiety about his brother begins to turn into panic. Without a moment's hesitation, he decides to kidnap Ana and run away with her. The drama largely represents a lean, subtle take on the young-man-in-prison genre, boasting an especially powerful visiting-room sequence and impressive skills from the largely non-pro cast. With subtle use of a handheld camera, which provides the right amount of realistic flavour, the director keeps it "admirably trim, allowing character and dialogue just enough space to capture the conflicting elements that cause hope to lead to panic" (Weissberg, 2010).

Hungarian cinema. After 1989, a tradition of quality filmmaking has continued in Hungary. Some degree of international success was achieved by such films as *Ildiko* Szabó's *Child Murders* (1993), János Szász's *Woyzeck* (1994), György Fehér's *Passion* (1998), Ibolya Fekete's *Bolse Vita* (1996), and Péter Timár's *Dollybirds* (1997), but the overall bleak and pessimistic tone of many of these films gave them little popular appeal. István Szabó's Canadian co-production *Sunshine* (1999), an English-language film, won and was nominated for several European and American film awards, while Miklós Jancsó attained unprecedented popularity at the age of eighty with a series of anarchic comedies. The most influential of contemporary directors, however, is Béla Tarr, whose *Satan's Tango* (1994) and *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) have attained cult status abroad. Alongside the New Romanian Wave, Hungary has also generated its own significant new cinema, with a succession of young talents: Kornél Mundruczó's *Pleasant Days* (2002) and *Johanna* (2005); György Pálfi's *Hukkle* (2002) and *Taxidermia* (2006); Benedek Fliegauf's *Forest* (2003), *Dealer* (2004), and *Milky Way* (2007), Ágnes Kocsis' *Fresh Air* (2006), and Csaba Bollók's *Iska's Journey* (2007). *Iska's Journey* is a tale of a young girl's struggle to survive in a dilapidated mining region in Romania. Iska is an ethnic-Hungarian girl, about thirteen years old, who lives with her dysfunctional, alcoholic parents and a sickly younger sister. Her home life is miserable and she squeezes some kind of existence out of her barren surroundings by "iron-picking" — salvaging scrap metal from an industrial wasteland. The little amount of money she receives for the scrap metal is purloined by her parents for Pálinka and she often resorts to eating in the miners' canteen, where the few remaining miners treat her with kindness. It is one of the few instances of human kindness in the film. The mines are almost all closed and the miners — along with their traditional, historically bred solidarity and community spirit — have all but disappeared; there is nothing left in their place except rusting machinery. Iska and her sister are put in a care-home. While there, Iska strikes up a relationship with a boy and later, together, they run-off to the seaside. However, while making her way to the railway station to meet up with the boy she accepts a lift from two strangers. They take her to the sea, but she is now their prisoner. The last shot of the film sees Iska looking out of a porthole on a boat heading for who knows where. She will now become another kind of victim — a child prostitute. Iska gazes wistfully out of the porthole at the receding shoreline that she has hardly had a chance to see, let alone savour, and the film ends. As is often the case with this kind of realistic filmmaking, the cast is a mix of professionals and non-professionals and their performances are enhanced by a documentary-style cinematography and a clear impression of the importance of Iska's environment. The camera is frequently distanced from the action, allowing a more observational mode. This technique makes the occasional close-ups all the more powerful in their emotional impact. The result is a film that imparts to the viewer a strong sense of reality and authenticity, however grim that may be. Bollók's film is, therefore, "not just about the journey of one unfortunate girl, but also has much to say to audiences about the kind of Europe we live in today" (Cunningham, 2008).

German cinema. A year after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), East Germany reunified with the West. Around the same time, a new generation of filmmakers emerged, aiming to make films that are liked by, and accessible to, the German public. These films are generally unconcerned with Germany's Nazi past and reflect the normalisation and Americanisation of Germany since reunification (Rentschler, 2000: 260-277). Amongst key issues for contemporary German film-makers, the former east-west division and the often painful experiences of reunification now predominate, yet again indicating that film has a key contribution to make in negotiating such issues. Although popular at home, they do not travel well, being perceived as too parochial. However, two directors who have

departed from parochial concerns differently, achieving popular success at home and abroad, are Tom Tykwer and Wolfgang Becker.

Run Lola Run (1998) –Tykwer's third film - was Germany's most successful 1990s film. With a fast-paced, techno soundtrack-driven thriller narrative and a goal-directed heroine, *Run Lola Run* combines Hollywood-like entertainment values with European art house. Lola has only twenty minutes to find 100,000 DM to save her boyfriend Manni from his drug-dealer boss. The film gives her three chances to complete her quest, with characters and events configured slightly differently on each round. It renders the multiple outcomes through influences from computer games, hypertext, animation, MTV and chaos theory. Lola has the power to change her fate, yet her actions spring partly from contingency. This stresses the unpredictability of cause and effect, especially in snapshot flash-forwards of passers-by whose brief contact with Lola generates random repercussions. The film's storytelling techniques - unexpected twists and turns, combining still photography, video technology, and animation sequences - constitute a "particular mode of narration that reconfigures temporal linearity and circularity, action and causality, movement and stasis around the central problems of embodied subjectivity, spatio-temporal intervals, and hetero-topic experience" (Wedel, 2009: 127).

For German audiences, *Run Lola Run* is distinctively a Berlin film. It opens with a prologue showing Berlin's East and West halves being soldered together. The reason why Lola must run, rather than take a taxi, is offered in the first few minutes: a previous taxi journey took her to the wrong destination, a street in the East with the same name. When Lola runs, she passes well-known Berlin locations, but not Nazi landmarks. The film plays with space in these sequences, juxtaposing parts of Berlin which are geographically disparate in order to show a city in the process of being remade and reconstructed: a new Berlin unfettered by the past in which Lola is a dynamic agent of change, sprinting into the future despite the odds stacked against her and despite her initial failures. Released in the same year as the elections that ended Helmut Kohl's sixteen years as Chancellor, the film was interpreted as a call for political rejuvenation (Sinka, 2004).

Becker's *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003) starts in the German Democratic Republic before the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is narrated from the perspective of Alex Kern, whose mother - a Communist Party faithful - has a heart-attack when she sees him in an anti-government demonstration. She falls into an eight-month coma, waking up after the Wall has fallen and the GDR no longer exists. Alex protects her from shock by pretending that these events have not occurred. He and his friend Denis record fake TV reports to explain the chinks appearing in the illusion, as when his mother witnesses Lenin's statue being freighted away and an enormous Coca-Cola advert unfurling next door; Alex has East German astronaut Sigmund Jahn pose as the new GDR president, declaring that the Wall has been pulled down to welcome Western refugees disillusioned by capitalism - a hilarious inversion of actual events. Signs of globalisation and multinational capital flood the landscape everywhere except in his mother's flat; Alex himself becomes a satellite-dish salesman, and his sister works at Burger King. The supermarkets stock foreign produce, so Alex rummages in bins for old GDR jars in which to repackage his mother's food.

Goodbye, Lenin! feeds a growing nostalgia for the GDR which includes the reissue of GDR brands, GDR theme parks, and the wearing of communist-style uniforms as fashion statements, and makes it clear that the GDR lost out economically. Alex finds his mother's hidden savings when it is too late to convert them into West German marks. However, *Goodbye, Lenin!* maintains a critical edge on the nostalgia by having Alex realise that the fake picture of the GDR that he paints for his mother is the GDR he dreamed of - a country that acknowledges its faults and welcomes outsiders.

On the other hand, the older generation of directors seems to be obssessed with the Nazi past. From Volker Schloendorff's *The Ninth Day* (2004) about a resisting priest, to films like *Enemy at the Gates* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001, about Stalingrad) and *The Twilight* (Oliver Hirschbiege, 2004, about the last days of Hitler), historians rather than film critics fiind themselves called upon for media comment, earnestly discussing whether Hitler can be depicted as human being. Next to these commercial productions, there are more oblique, often politically risky and "incorrect" works, such as Romuald Karmaker's *The Himmler Project* (2000), Lutz Hachmeister's *The Goebbels-Experiment* (2004), Oskar Roehler's *The Untouchable* (2000), Christian Petzold's *The Inner Certainty* (2000) – the last two titles not directly about fascism or the Holocaust, but showing how the ghosts of each nation's past haunt the present, and how important the cinema as the medium of different temporalities can be in showing Europe "working on its memories."

Polish cinema. Often hailed as the most important contemporary European director (Chaudhuri, 2007: 27), Krzysztof Kieslowski paved the way for an emerging breed of transnational European directors including Tom Tykwer, who filmed Kieslowski's script *Heaven* (2002), and Austria's Michael Haneke. He gradually moved from exploring moral concerns in determinate socio-political contexts (namely, Polish state socialism) to universal existential themes, including coincidence and parallel destinies, which enabled him to reach a larger audience (Iordanova, 2003: 111-112). The style of his films also changed, giving more emphasis to colour, lighting, unusual camera angles and music. His trilogy *Three Colours - Blue, White* and *Red* (1994) meditates on the broad social theme of European unification: *Blue, White* and *Red* take place in France, Poland and Switzerland respectively, yet they remain focused on the personal level, interweaving the main characters' destinies so that they all turn up as ferry-disaster survivors in *Red,* the final film. They are also loosely based on French Revolution ideals - Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. For example, *White* deals with equality, transposing a skit on communism - nobody wants to be equal, they want to be more than equal - into a Pole's vendetta against his French ex-wife.

In 2001, two Polish films - *With Fire and Sword* (Jerzy Hoffman) and *Pan Tedeusz* (Andrzej Wajda), set box office records, together accounting for nearly 40 per cent of local admissions; something of a blow for American imports. Both these films were epics based on Polish literary classics (a novel and poem respectively), and this phenomenon, while conforming to a pattern in which film industries intent upon (re)establishing themselves tend to refer to solid cultural traditions, also indicates something of a trend in Poland, where several more epic films have been made. Wajda's *Katyn* (2007) is also an epic film but with a difference. It tells the story of the near-simultaneous Soviet and German invasions of Poland in September 1939, and the Red Army's subsequent capture, imprisonment, and murder of some 20,000 Polish officers in the forests near the Russian village of Katyn and elsewhere, among them the director's father. The film is about more than the mass murder itself; it is about the lies and distortions, told over decades, designed to disguise the reality of the Soviet postwar occupation and Poland's loss of sovereignty; it is about the wives left behind, many of whom, like Wajda's mother, didn't know the fate of their husbands for decades; it is about the men who survived Soviet deportation, and were consumed by guilt; it is about those who tried to accept and adjust to the lie and move on. The film ends with a stunningly brutal, almost unwatchable depiction of the massacre itself. Wajda increases the horror by focusing on the terrible logistics of the murder, which took several weeks and required dozens of people to carry out: the black trucks carrying men from the prison camps to the forest, the enormous ditches, the rounds of ammunition, the bulldozers that pushed dirt onto the mass graves. When his film came out — on September 17, the sixty-eighth anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland —

Wajda was asked several times to explain himself. Why Katyn? Why now? Most of those who actually remembered the events of 1939 were now dead, Wajda explained, so the film could no longer be made for them. Instead, he said, he wanted to tell the story again for young people, trying to reach "those moviegoers for whom it matters that we are a society, and not just an accidental crowd" (qtd by Applebaum, 2008).

Czech cinema. Czech culture is known for its black humour, pessimism and cynicism as well as its interest in fantasy, magic and surrealism. All of these can be found in animator Jan Svankmajer's films, which are greatly influenced by local folk puppetry, a stylised puppet art form comparable to Japanese Kabuki and Chinese opera. In *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996) and *Little Otik* (2000), Svankmajer combines animation with live action. They are filmed using the same method as the director's short films - editing together short and single-frame shots. These films mine the underside of horror, dream and infantilism in myths, fairy tales and children's stories, with eating and dismemberment as recurring motifs. In *Little Otiky* for instance, mouths - whether speaking or eating - are filmed in tight close-ups. The live action, like the animation, makes viewers react to tactile images on screen with their imaginations and evokes perverse, even libidinous, attitudes towards seemingly innocuous activities.

Historical films are a major trend in Czech cinema. They generally focus on the two World Wars, the Holocaust and the Stalinist era. Within this trend, there is a new leaning towards revisionist films that either express nostalgia for communism or unearth stories suppressed during the Stalinist era. In the nostalgia category, there is a tendency to humanise the former colonisers, the Russians, turning them into vulnerable beings, like the little boy in the Oscar-winning *Kolya* (Jan Sverak, 1996), or showing them trapped into prostitution. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Dina Iordanova remarks, "the tyrant has disappeared," leaving its former occupied territories in a competitive capitalist world where they find themselves being the losers (Iordanova, 2003: 160). The sentiment of forgiveness rather than resentment permeates *Kolya,* where a Prague bachelor who hates everything Russian finds his attitudes softening after he is forced to look after the boy.

Sverak's *Dark Blue World* (2001), reportedly the most ambitious film in Czech film history (Chaudhuri, 2007: 29), belongs to the other revisionist category. Narrated in flashback from the 1950s Stalinist terrors, it follows two Czech pilots, Franta and Karel, who arrive in England in 1939 from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. They join the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain, and fall in love with the same English woman. With amazing aerial dogfights, the film celebrates the Czechoslovak servicemen who fought with the Western Allies - a glorious moment which was buried when the communists took control of Czechoslovakia in 1948 and made the West a capitalist enemy. Czech airmen, no longer considered patriots, were arrested as traitors, like Franta in the film, who is condemned to a labour camp.

Former Yugoslavia cinema. Emir Kusturica's internationally acclaimed films revel in absurdity and use magic realism to highlight the limits of naturalism for capturing the chaotic events in the Balkans. In *Underground* (1995) he relates the escapades of Marko, Blacky and Natalia; Marko and Natalia trick Blacky into hiding underground during the communist era under the pretext that the Second World War is still going on, while the two of them become international arms-dealers. After an apocalyptic finale, the characters reassemble for the epilogue, a wedding in which they continue celebrating even when the section of land on which they stand breaks and drifts away from the mainland. The film traces contemporary problems to Tito's communist era and, as well as blaming the communists, it suggests that the troubles result from ancient quarrels.

The theme of Self versus Br(Other) is treated in a number of films, including Srdjan Dragojevic's *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1996). This film follows two boyhood friends,

Milan (a Serb) and Halil (a Bosnian Muslim), who play outside a disused Brotherhood and Unity tunnel. Neither dares enter the tunnel, imagining that an ogre inhabits it. During the Bosnian War, however, Milan and other Serb soldiers shelter in it and find themselves besieged by Muslim soldiers; among them is Halil, who Milan now believes killed his mother: their friendship, so solid during peacetime, is renounced in the expedient of war. Told in flashback from Milan's perspective, as he lies injured in a Belgrade military hospital in 1994, the film represents Serbs as more than just murderers, yet it gives them a share of the blame along with others. This moral complexity aided its international success, as did its deployment of Vietnam War film motifs. It delights in the pyrotechnics of destruction; hence the title, which translates more literally as *Pretty Villages Burn Nicely* - an ambivalent statement, as ethnic cleansing takes place through the burning of villages.

International accolade also went to *No Man's Land* (2001), the debut feature by Bosnian Muslim Danis Tanovic, praised for its clear and thought-provoking treatment of the conflict (which brought it the 2002 Best Foreign Film Oscar). It is set in the Bosnian War, when UN peacekeepers were sent in but ordered not to intervene, and centres on two soldiers - a Bosnian Muslim, Ciki, and a Serb, Nino - trapped together in a disused trench between enemy lines, with a third soldier, Ciki's friend Cera, lying on the trench floor booby-trapped to a mine that will explode if he moves. A French UN sergeant tries to help the soldiers, but is initially stopped by UN Headquarters. British journalist Jane Livingstone rushes to the trench along with other reporters, baying for a hot story. Tanovic ambivalently portrays the combative power of the global media training their lenses on the conflict; they pressure the UN to take action, yet their presence has a distorting effect. When Cera's mine proves impossible to defuse, the UN pretend they have rescued him for the media's benefit. The film ends with the camera floating over the trench where Cera still lies, fading into darkness as night descends, his plight of no more concern now that the media circus has departed - without verifying their reports.

The film crystallises wider issues relevant to other contemporary conflicts through its tight focus on the trench - a microcosm of the Bosnian War. Its dark humour expresses the war's tragic and painful absurdity. Ciki and Nino are like brothers or neighbours who now mistrust each other, quarrelling over who started the war and shooting each other as soon as they are evacuated. Yet ironically they have more in common than any of the other characters - they once dated the same girl in the same town, and they understand each other without translators.

Russian cinema. Russians today grope their way towards an as yet uncertain identity, an unknown destiny. This is an identity not as yet based, as in Western Europe, on political institutions, as these (the Communist Party, the Parliament) have been discredited in the wake of the revolutions of 1991 and 1993. Rather, identity is based above all on culture, and the cultural consciousness is one which the 1917 Revolution did not break. Russian culture has always been deeply spiritual. In the years since Gorbachev came to power and effectively ushered in the end of totalitarianism, national identity has been based on the concept of the Russian soul, the cultural heritage, and the belief in the strength and spirit of Russia. For Russians, the "collective identity is based on the national experience and the people's culture" (Gillespie, 2005: 65). Given the cataclysms of twentieth-century Russian history, the assault on its culture by Bolshevik ideology, and the decimation of its people, it is no wonder that the current search for identity and purpose is beset by bitter argument and division. For some, national identity becomes associated with a glorification of the past, the assertion of a mythic, golden age of order, stability, and above all faith in the destiny of Russia. On the other hand, there are film-makers intent on exploring the actual events and experiences of the past in order to put right historical

injustices, to avoid a repeat of them in the future. Examples of such films include Georgi Daneliya's *Fortune* (1995), Evgenii Matveyev's *To Love, the Russian Way 3* (1999), and Andrey Kravchuk's *Admiral* (2008). *Admiral* is set in Russia during the time of the 1917 revolution. The plot centers on Admiral Kolchak, a WWI war hero and naval commander who played an important role in the February Revolution and the ensuing Russian Civil War. Kolchak's physical participation in the fight against the Bolshevik regime is emotionally paralleled by his relationship with Anna Vaselivna, the wife of his best friend. Their journeys intertwine to create a romantic image of the White Army and the Provisional Government while vivdly portraying all the horrifying details of that tumultous period in Russia's history. Part of a new movement to revive and honour figures declared enemies of the state by the Soviet regime to their perhaps rightful statuses as martyrs and heroes, *The Admiral* is a glory-filled expression of how the revolution of a heart can become the revolution of a country.

Conclusion. The notion that the ex-communist countries could emerge as one of the most vibrant and exciting filmmaking centers in Europe, if not the world, would have seemed far-fetched a decade ago. And yet, since the beginning of the third millenium a generation of remarkably talented young directors have produced an impressive body of films that have consistently landed at the top of international critics' polls and in the coveted top tier of film festivals. Their films have become increasingly self-referential, using specific structures to draw attention to the means whereby their fiction is created and to make the spectator aware of the process of filmic narrative. Part of this is a recognition and an exploration of the specificities of the medium, not least its ability to deal with historical time. Essentially, these films acknowledge European memory, while also showing the centrality of film itself within this memory.

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