

INTERVIEW

Heleen Gerritsen on the 2020 goEast Symposium

VOL. 107 (SEPTEMBER 2020) BY **MARIANA HRISTOVA**

We spoke to goEast's festival director Heleen Gerritsen on the occasion of the "Film Heritage in Transition. Central and Eastern Europe 1985-1999" Symposium, which took place July 24-27 at DFF - Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum in Frankfurt. The Symposium, which was part of the goEast film festival's hybrid program, was one of the earliest physical film events held in Europe after the restrictions were first introduced. Gerritsen shares her thoughts about 90s Eastern European cinema, the state of national film archives, and how the film industry in the region has and might further change post-2020.

Last year's goEast retrospective "Everything Stays Different - The Wild Nineties" was dedicated to the volatile 1990s in Eastern European cinema, and the Symposium this year is digging further into the period, looking back to 1985 and the so-called Perestroika times. What interests you about this turbulent époque?

As I said in my opening speech, this Symposium and the topic of disappearing film heritage from the nineties is of personal importance to me. I made my first experiences with Central and Eastern Europe during this period. When I entered the Eastern European Institute in Amsterdam in 1997, a lot of my fellow students came from the countries of the former Soviet Union and an equally large part came from former Yugoslavia. When I look at cinema from the 90s, its intensity, energy and courage are very inspiring. Despite the difficult circumstances, filmmakers found it important to talk about certain topics from the reality and the past, specifically dark chapters of history. In Germany we have this special culture of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* - "dealing with the past" -, like for example the presence of the Holocaust in school curricula. German society has profited from this a lot, while in many countries of Central and East Europe we are now seeing the opposite, the hiding away of unpleasant chapters from the past, which I find very unhealthy. With another very important aspect we came up last year while preparing the program you mentioned.

Those were my favorite films from the festival, actually, but we encountered a lot of logistical problems in the process of finding screenable copies. In the research process we realized this was a systematic issue. Thus the whole heritage part came into play and, of course, it fits into the institutional role of the DFF in Frankfurt as an organizer of goEast. We have our own archive and the preservation and presentation of film heritage is the core business of the institute.

In Germany, the situation is very interesting as well. The questions of film heritage are institutional questions related to politics and certain priorities: what films are we going to preserve, what is of secondary importance? After the reunification of East and West Germany in one country, all the institutions appeared to be doubled. Hence, questions arose if they should be merged, or if they continue functioning as separate entities and, in that case, how the collections should be distributed and what the preservation priorities would be. There are also blind spots because the nineties were not just a political and economical transition period, but also a time of technical transition: films were shot in different formats, many of them are not on 35 mm prints but available in vulnerable video formats only.

Could we say that the Western model dominated the Eastern one in Germany after the division? It must have been difficult for East German filmmakers to integrate in an already established system in which their Western colleagues had already built up their reputation.

There were a lot of filmmakers that were on a payroll of the East German DEFA studio, and in the nineties this situation obviously ended. As directors coming from this state structure were never trained to work with producers or look for funding independently, it was extremely hard for them to adapt to new times, and a lot of them did not succeed. The funding system has been completely integrated into the Western German model which includes centralized but also regional sources of financing. It took a while before this funding model was set up in the mid-1990s.

It was perceived by many Easterners as a colonization process and this applied to all areas. Many companies were merged or privatized. In the film sector, it also affected the themes that filmmakers addressed. Both parts had their own topics and maybe for a while the Eastern look was intriguing for broader audiences, but at some point, the two sides were not necessarily interested in each other anymore.

Going back to the Symposium and considering the fragile state of film heritage from the period, did you have to make a lot of compromises due to obstructed access while choosing the titles?

Yes, the best example is Romania. We're not screening any Romanian titles mainly because we could not find the films our curators were interested in, like for example,

the early documentaries by Cristi Puiu which dealt with these specific topics. Of course, a lot of COVID-19 related issues also occurred. Fortunately, we had not requested Gosfilmofond copies from Russia because their transportation is usually very complicated: they travel by car from Russia to Germany, which is a route that is currently not open. Those were basically our logistical restrictions, but the more significant one was actually that there were more films that we wanted to show than we have slots available.

Also, last year I was at the Dovzhenko Center in Kiev where I conducted some research and there was a great film by a Natalya Andreychenko, which we could not include, partly due to the financial issues the center is currently facing. That said, we have plans with the Dovzhenko Center for next year together with institutions in Belgrade, Bucharest, Riga and Prague. The idea is to continue the Symposium topic and create an inventory of the 1990s period but in specific places, while inviting local experts to get together and talk in detail. In the end we would like to issue a publication as a broader overview. We would like to exchange expertise, not to export it. But of course, it still depends on the financing and the overall pandemic situation.

Were copyrights also an obstacle to screening certain films? I could imagine that in the chaos of the 90s many legal issues remained unclear.

We did not encounter this particular issue, but it is a well-known paradox that the archives that keep the copies do not own the distribution rights. This makes the promotion of these films problematic and even if a film is digitized and has an accessible copy, in some cases nothing can be done with it. Sometimes even the restoration process can remain blocked. Which is a shame because I think the archives should and could be a vital part of our film landscapes.

Are the archives in Central and Eastern Europe actively working on improving the situation with the 90s heritage?

This is what we are trying to find out through the Symposium and I hope that the discussions among the experts we invited will bring some insights. As the head of the Czech Film Archive Michal Bregant suggested, for our generations the 90s are not that far away, for which reason we are lacking the consciousness that it is already part of our history. And it is perceived as a period of identity crisis in culture- among others Borislav Petranov, director of the Bulgarian cultural institute in Berlin, mentioned that to me once. Looking at it objectively, if the films from the époque were not traveling to the Cannes Film Festival or other big events, they were not recognized and they suffer from an inferiority complex. But a lot of those films didn't travel mainly for practical, not for aesthetic reasons or due to their artistic quality. The producers did not have established connections and the needed promotional tools etc. It was generally speaking a traumatic period: Eastern Europeans appeared to be the losers in the world

economic order because they had chosen a model that clearly failed, and then the West just “conquered” them. Maybe it is a period at which we do not look back fondly, and for that reason its heritage might be overlooked.

Going back to your concrete question, the Dovzhenko Center in Kiev is doing a good job in that direction and they demonstrated their efforts through a special program at the Odesa Film Festival; then Karlovy Vary showed what the Czech and the Slovak archives are working on. In Poland, the situation is different because they have various formerly state-owned studios owning the rights to their films. For instance, Krzysztof Zanussi’s Tor Film studio managed to digitize many titles, but it is in the middle of a merger with other studios and I do not know what will happen to the collections.

In your opening speech for the Symposium you quoted Russian filmmaker Mikhail Litvyakov, who once said: „I am convinced that filmmakers can only freely create cinema in a totalitarian system.“ Despite the obvious negatives that the lockdown brought to the film industry, do you think that some restrictions could be fruitful in unexpected ways?

First of all there were lives at stake, so we have to take that seriously. I don’t think the lockdown will lead to ideological or commercial restrictions. But I hope that film goes back to its essence more, as I feel that many contemporary works are losing their initial idea out of sight after going through so many training programs, film polishing workshops and armies of producers who work on the script. Thus, the industry becomes more important than the films themselves, which is a shame, so it might be good to have less films but more diversification in terms of topics, countries, and the cultures they represent. Our last year’s Symposium was about the presence of Roma people and culture in Central and East European cinema and as part of that we wanted to also share their point of view, which is clearly underrepresented. It is difficult to predict the future of the film industry from today’s point of view but I would very much like to see the intensity and the passion of the 90s again, which also emerged in a critical moment of crisis and you could really recognize the filmmakers’ urge and good reasons to make their films.

Are you already planning the next edition differently, considering the current situation?

We have all become crisis managers this year and we should be prepared for everything, mentally and practically. We go for different scenarios and already gained the experience about what worked well and what did not. I also would like to take more distribution initiatives outside of the festival by making certain films available for online viewing. I am very much against online premieres because of the lack of discussion and all the other missing aspects of the physical projection, but as an addition to the festival I think it would be important to bring more Eastern European

culture to Germany. In Berlin there are more options, but this does not apply to the rest of Germany, so I hope that with online screenings we could expand our niche audience. Otherwise, we are planning a physical event for next year, as much as possible. Preparing an online edition was not fun at all, moreover sections like the East-West Talent Lab are losing a lot of their energy and spontaneity that way. Although it is a pity that we have the Symposium now on such a small scale and only 25 people are allowed in the cinema, I am happy that we managed that at least and I hope that the discussions and the face-to-face exchange will open up new possibilities. It is noteworthy that the DFF and goEast already financed the digitization of two films at the Dovzhenko Film Center especially for screening them at the event: *Decay* (*ROZPAD*, dir. Mikhail Belikov, 1990) and *Famine-33* (*GOLOD-33*, 1991, dir. Oles Yanchuk). The first one about Chernobyl is quite exceptional. In fact, it is hysterical – one notices the authors did not attend script workshops –, but also intense, explicit, and very critical.

Are you aware of what other festivals in the region are up to? How do you think the crisis will impact the festival landscape in Eastern Europe in general?

The situation looks very different across the region. Karlovy Vary for example went to small cities and cinemas and screened films there, which is great. However, in other countries cultural funds do not have any priority at the moment: Ukraine is an example again, as the Odesa Film Festival was cancelled. TIFF in Cluj-Napoca and Sofia Film festivals have planned more local editions, while the Black Nights Film Festival in Tallinn is planning to take place and might be the first large film event from the region to take place after the restrictions were introduced.

Thank you for the interview.