East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

Nothing New from the East

Saulé Bliuvaité's *Toxic* (*Akipleša*, 2024)

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Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the majority of Eastern European films screened at international festivals have tended to depict places and people living in harsh social and financial conditions. Poverty, social frustration, economic migration, political instability, war trauma, and the desire to escape one's world have become common narrative tropes. These themes often tie back to the region's political history and the transition from Communism to (neo)liberal democracy, which tend to be represented as an ongoing and never-ending process. This has led to a form of political cinema that explores the contemporary financial and social condition of former Communist societies and their people still struggling to come to terms with a new or re-defined postsocialist identity, often by comparing it to the perceived standards of 'Western' societies.

Saulé Bliuvaité's debut feature *Toxic*, winner of the Golden Leopard at the 2024 Locarno Film Festival, follows a similar path. The film draws on the director's personal experiences to explore the lengths to which teenage girls can go to escape a dead-end (and visibly decrepit) town with no future. The film unfolds in a poor, post-industrial suburb that, without precise context about its location, viewers can easily place 'somewhere' in Eastern Europe. Thirteen-year-old Marija (Vesta Matulytė) is a newcomer to the community. Her meeting with Kristina (Ieva Rupeikaitė), a girl her own age, leads to a strong friendship built around their shared desire to escape this place and create a different life for themselves. Marija joins the modeling school Kristina is already attending, and finds herself among a small group of teenage girls competing to realize their modeling dream of fame and international travel. Financial independence becomes a prerequisite for escaping the grim social conditions that have trapped their parents' generation in poverty and ignorance, offering a gateway to an exciting international – and Western – world. Convinced by the success stories the school advertises and unable to imagine any other path, the two girls come to see modeling as their only real chance at a better life.

Themes commonly found in films featuring teenage girls – concerns about identity, body, appearance, or sexual appeal – are amplified here by modeling standards that demand the girls be ultra-thin, confident, and graceful. They feign eating, secretly vomiting any food that ends up in their stomach, and Kristina even buys a tapeworm egg from the dark web with the help of an older boy, which can grow inside intestines and supposedly helps with weight loss. Kristina eagerly swallows the tapeworm egg in a scene that conveys the film's central message: in such grim social conditions, children live under extreme emotional and mental pressure, literally being eaten from the inside by their psychic and imaginary desires. As the tapeworm grows bigger inside Kristina's belly and intestines, a bird's-eye shot of the girls lining up inside the modeling school, dressed in swimsuits to take photos, echoes its growing shape.

The school grows increasingly competitive and so do the girls. Bullying and mild physical violence are quietly tolerated in their small group. In addition, when the two girls realize that their families are unable to afford the exorbitant fees for a professional photo shoot – supposedly their ticket to a first job in the industry – against Marija's advice, Kristina is ready to go one step further and offer sexual favors to older men. Together they catch the bus to an old man's villa, where they are supposedly meant to offer a massage. Finally, Marija refuses to go inside, while Kristina sacrifices herself and enters the house. In an earlier scene, Kristina's father sells his taxi to help fund his daughter's modeling career, himself reinforcing the Western escapist dream of his daughter, telling her that she should leave this place no matter what. Basically, all of the adults in the film are depicted as either depraved, exploitative, helpless, or even ridiculous individuals, be it the modeling school manager, the invisible old man who likes young girls, or Kristina's father and his girlfriend. Unlike Marija, Kristina is represented as being more mature and frequently exhibits adult-like behavior. There is only one scene that shows Kristina smoking and brushing the hair of a blonde Barbie doll, which seemingly underlines the contradiction of these girls and their inner struggle (of straddling the child and adult universes at the same time). However, the film doesn't fully explore this problem, instead offering highly orchestrated and aesthetically pleasing images of girls within their toxic environment. The film reaches its climax when Marija and Kristina's friendship is put to the test, and asks whether these young girls can reject the toxic promises of the modeling world and return to a life more appropriate for their age.

The world of modeling, its beauty standards and promise of success reaches young people, and girls in particular, regardless of their social condition or geographic context. In *Toxic*, however, these broader issues of teenage anxiety and normative representations about female beauty are shown to be direct consequences of the financial prospects of a society whose members can no longer envision a future. As mentioned above, the kind of social frustration that drives the two girls into the modeling world is a recurring theme in Eastern European social dramas selected at international festivals. Many of these films

depict impoverished societies marked by political corruption and economic exploitation. Big portions of the lower and working classes flee to wealthier European Union countries in hope of better working conditions. Those who stay behind struggle to raise their families, leaving their children to dream of escape. By all appearances, these cinematic narratives are intended as social criticism, and are perceived as such at film festivals. Everything in those films, from the physical state of the city – e.g. poor road conditions and unexploited terrains full of trash – to widespread moral corruption, is seen as a sign of a failing society.

In *Toxic*, it is implied that the modeling school is a symptom of this systemic failure. The local society has no agency left and its dreams are imported. These are dreams that are not only inherently toxic but also distorted and manipulated by corrupt locals for personal gain. Without going deeper into the specifics of their personal circumstances or inner world, the two girls are solely defined against the background of a weak local community that has resigned to its fate in the face of stronger, predatory international forces and their local enablers. Even if the two girls do not fall victim to the modeling industry, they are not presented with any credible alternative. One can assume that, given that their society will remain in this state of social crisis, their modeling dream will only be replaced by another one that is equally problematic. This simple narrative line conveniently aligns with the expectations of international audiences, who often see these 'other' poor crisis-stricken societies as radically different places where people are exploited by 'evil' and corrupt forces preying on their aspirations for a better life. The film's geographical vagueness further reinforces its intention to appear open and 'universal'. Paradoxically, however, it is hard to imagine an audience, local or international, that would feel personally concerned by the film without reducing it to broad and well-known statements about the morals of the modeling industry.

For films to have an impact in their social criticism, they arguably need to provoke viewers and challenge their fundamental beliefs. *Toxic*, on the other hand, feels familiar. Its narrative ideas and formal approach tread well-known territory for viewers who may appreciate the cinematic experience exactly for this reason. This is further suggested by the film's visual composition. Its 'raw' realistic aspects are counterbalanced by meticulous attention to lighting, framing, and color, making the images both visually pleasing and artificial. This aestheticization suggests a clear intent to appeal to a broad audience, a goal in which the film was evidently successful, as its Locarno award attests. *Toxic* is well-paced and provides a story able to capture the attention of viewers, and jurors, as well as the aesthetic to support it. To do so, however, it needed to sacrifice a more complex – and more interesting – vision on politics and society and rely instead on the local-versus-global dynamic so often found in Eastern European cinema. In this sense, *Toxic*'s plot and style feel too familiar to leave a lasting impact, at least with regard to the political message that the film seeks to convey. Ultimately, *Toxic* seems to offer itself to be consumed by

Western and international audiences on the festival circuit by presenting a digestible narrative fitting expectations about Eastern European cinema and reinforcing a sense of ‘Western’ superiority. To this end, we must ask ourselves, as film critics and cinephiles, what role high-profile A-list film festivals situated in the ‘West’ play in purporting and reproducing such easily consumed Eastern European narratives, regurgitating once again already seen themes without challenging the political ideologies and the post-colonial reality that contribute to the present situation.