East European Film Bulletin

EDITORIAL

Editorial

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It has often been noted that the peculiarity of Central and Eastern European comedies resides in their covert political nature. The audience is “in the know” and much of the pleasure of laughing comes from being able to translate public lies into private truths. The mechanism is similar to the many Eastern European political jokes that flourished during the period after the signing of the Warsaw pact. (One example: “What is colder in a Romanian winter than cold water? Hot water!”). This kind of inside joke is only humorous to those who are aware of the circumstances behind it. As Ana Grgić has noted in an article on Balkan comedies, this creates a ”conspiratorial relationship”, whereby humor is experienced as a kind of defiance against state-sanctioned mores and taboos. Not unlike political jokes, Czechoslovak comedies from the 1960s, or Polish and post-Yugoslavian films of the 1990s, thus put a more objective spin on a reality that had been distorted by the official state line and dominant political ideology. Comedies enabled people to laugh privately about public woes.

In last month’s editorial, we wrote about how this kind of private humor has swapped over into Western cinema, where a new genre of dark horror comedies is transforming the realities of late-stage capitalism into an imaginary world that is incongruous and funny. As with Eastern European comedies, the viewer must grasp the social realities to which the films allude. This is a new kind of cultural experience for Western audiences, where moviegoers are used to rely on conventions that tell them when it is alright to laugh (the laugh track that overlays most sitcoms since the 1950s lies at the end of that tradition). Now Western audiences can enjoy the kind of conspiratorial relationship Eastern European filmmakers were cultivating and turning into an artform. In the movie *Fresh* (dir. Mimi Cave, 2022), for example, a kidnapper keeps young women in his basement, selling their meat off to the ultra-rich. The film’s feminist premise is, of course, a satire on the extravagant tastes of the wealthy and the exploitative nature of capitalism. “Don’t stress,” the kidnapper assures his victims as he leaves them in their cells, “it’s not good for the meat.”

With a few exceptions (see Radu Jude’s *Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn*),

recent Eastern European comedies, generally hard to come by, are struggling to adopt the kind of conventional humor that arguably still dominates in the West. This is true as much as filmmakers are grappling to uphold the politically motivated comedic traditions of their predecessors. Aida Begić' *A Ballad* (2022), a feminist update on a Slavic folktale, tries to incorporate elements of soap-opera into an otherwise cramped screenplay and ultimately fails to deliver the light-hearted fun the director intended for it to be. Adam Rybanský's *Somewhere Over the Chemtrails* (2022) on the other hand, tries hard to imitate the absurd humor of Jiří Menzel and biting criticism of Miloš Forman – many scenes and the film's original title allude to *The Firemen's Ball*. However, the provincial paranoia the film is trying to criticize ends up being presented in an uncomfortably apologetic way; sexism, islamophobia and racism are ultimately downplayed as cutesy idiosyncrasies of the idyllic hinterlands.

Misery loves comedy. If there is relationship between the bleakness of reality and humor, all hope for Eastern European comedies to flourish once again, may not yet be lost. Even in times of relative prosperity – assuming that the ennui, cynicism, and despair of late capitalism is yet to come and has kept Central and Eastern European countries from going down the horror comedy road – there may be plenty of reason to laugh (think about the 1990s and the naiveté of the characters in shows like *Friends* or even *Seinfeld*). Where, then, are the *schlemiels* and *schlimazel*s? As it turns out, stand-up comedy has been gaining much ground in recent years, with some of the funniest acts coming from a generation of women stand-up comedians. Take this performance of Magda Mihăilă in Berlin, Ioana Luiza doing a TV-act, Marina Orsag's stand-up for TEDxZagreb or Olka Szczęśniak's act in Warsaw, with which she was on tour last year. In Romania, stand-up comedians Alex Cotet, Matei Dima, and Cosmin Nedelcu have teamed up for the satirical film *Teambuiling* (2022), which was a local box office success and bears trademarks of a gross-out comedy. Unsurprisingly, the film was directed by three men. Some of the female talent picking up a movie camera could be fantastic for the revitalization of humor in Eastern European cinema. The room for improvement is certainly there.

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This month, we are publishing material from several recent film festivals across Europe, with more to follow soon. From Thessaloniki, Ana Grgić and Antonis Lagarias report with a review of *The Good Driver* and an interview with its director Tonislav Hristov, who discusses his feature's main themes, above all migration on the European continent. Colette de Castro launches her coverage of the Trieste Film Festival with a look at Oldřich Lipský's *Happy End*, a 1967 comedy in which time runs backwards. At DOK Leipzig, Zoe Aiano saw Signe Baumanne's *My Love Affair With Marriage*, a reflection on the pitfalls of institutionalized love. Finally, we are publishing Isabel Jacobs' discussion of Asif Rustamov's *Cold as Marble*, a story of mad desire in which emotions run high,

and Fabio Bego’s review of Eduart Grishaj’s *Sophia*, which addresses Albanian-Serb relations.

We hope you enjoy our reads.
Konstanty Kuzma & Moritz Pfeifer
Editors