

“What Went Wrong in the Nineties”: NATO, the EU, and Eastern European Cinema

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A Heated Discussion at the GoEast Film Festival

If I could summarize the discussion titled “What Went Wrong in the Nineties” held at the GoEast Film Festival in Wiesbaden, Germany, in April, I would draw on the name of the festival itself to call it: “Go West!” Bringing together an eclectic mix of professionals, the hour-and-a-half-long talk turned out to be not only a lesson in further humility for the austerity-ridden and transition-fatigued East Europeans, but a telling example that what actually did go wrong in the nineties—namely the financialization of Eastern Europe and its (re)turn to the status of a Western colony—continues to be openly celebrated (in a majority of political circles) rather than critiqued and deplored.

A bipolar panel

The political circles celebrating financialization and renewed dependence were representing at this year’s festival the institutional framework of an EU seemingly still oblivious as to the circumstances of the East Europeans. The panel discussing “What Went Wrong in the 90s” was effectively split down the middle, divided between the representatives of NATO (Petr Lunak) and the German Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations (Andreas Metz) sitting, quite literally, on the right, and Ewa Mazierska (Professor of contemporary cinema at the University of Lancashire) and Roland Trisch (former director of the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival) on the left. The discussion which attempted to make headways into what happened in the nineties in Eastern Europe turned out to be quite bipolar, if emotional and animated.

Why bipolar? Because despite the skillful moderation of Bernd Buder, Cottbus film festival director, ardent questions concerning the integration of the former East into the capitalist West such as “Was the transition too fast?” and “Are East Europeans happy with the results of democratization some thirty years after the collapse of Communism?” went mostly unanswered. Or they were not so much unanswered as answered by a sole voice: that of Western liberalism. With the NATO-EU “coalition” in the midst of the panelists obsessively making the case for a “united Europe,” the dialogue between the two sides seemed to bog down in endless statistics (from the right), systematically rejected by Ewa Mazierska as unrepresentative for the affective state of the populace of the former socialist countries. Despite repeated reassurances coming from comfortably-relaxed and smartly-dressed Petr Lunak and Andreas Metz that Eastern Europe represented a major “success story” for the EU, and that only a minority of the populace in countries like Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland still pined for the old days of Communism, the self-composure of the two “officials” was assailed both by audience members and Ewa Mazierska. They brought up the “slightly embarrassing” fact that 100,000 people had died in the Yugoslav wars, and that opinion polls and GDP figures—if not economic data at large—were unreliable when assessing the well-being of a country. This unoptimistic substantiation was corroborated by the generally silent Roland Trisch, who poignantly informed everyone that following the unification of the two Germanies, up to 10,000 former employees in the state sector of the film industry alone had lost their jobs through urgent lay-offs.

The NATO-EU team easily brushed this evidence aside, and, allowing for the exception of the Yugoslav genocide, the two voices of the establishment pronounced almost at unison that we should focus on positive facts; that it is positive readings of data such as theirs (skillfully read from polls printed on pieces of paper produced from their pockets) that will contribute to the resignification of any melancholy possibly present today in anxiety-ridden Eastern environments. And in order to sway any such skeptics as there might still be, Andreas Metz intimated the fact that he—an ethnic German—was married to a Polish woman, which automatically meant for the government employee that he looked at a future in which his kids would be neither “Ossies” nor “Wessies.” But neither the two speakers’ rather conservative suggestion to focus on the positive nor Mr. Metz’s marital situation seemed to convince most audience members, who, though restrained, seemed to share a certain reticence—if not downright anger—about celebrating a “success story” that appeared as such uniquely in the eyes of Western officialdom.

Finally, as if to validate the generalized skepticism of the audience, a question in the second half of the discussion focused on the rather dismal economic situation of certain Eastern European countries, circumstances that couldn’t be labeled as necessarily “successful.” This was, however, again downplayed and interpreted by the panelists on the right as seeing the glass half empty, leading to a panel finale marked by the same generalized frustration that continues to accompany “integration” efforts of Eastern Europe into the “West,” even as we celebrate 30 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Curious to find out more about the concept behind the discussion, as well as the 19-year old history of the dialogue between East and West as played out at GoEast, I spoke with Heleen Gerritsen, the festival director, who conceived and helped set up the panel. Heleen has a background in Russian and economics, and she has been at the helm of the festival for two years.

A post-panel chat with GoEast Festival director Heleen Gerritsen

After listening to the debate, Heleen’s first avowed impression was that she was suddenly flung back into university and forced to listen to the predominant discourse of the nineties pledging that market economics in combination with democracy was “going to save us all.” Before I even asked her, she further acknowledged that “inviting someone who represented NATO was kind of risky, but I wanted someone who would provoke the audience.” The downside was, as Heleen equally admitted, that a politician and an economist make very good bedfellows, which undoubtedly resulted in the one-sidedness of the overall discourse. In that sense, Heleen praised Ewa Mazierska’s counterbalancing act. In her view, Mazierska straightforwardly challenged the NATO-EU pact’s rosy assumptions of transition by stating that the past 30 years can indeed be seen as a success story only as long as neoliberalism is regarded as the East’s single alternative to development.

As I was listening to Heleen, I became increasingly convinced that the politician/economist versus artist/theorist combination may not have been such a bad one after all: As she herself argued, such a makeup was sure to stir powerful passions, both among the panelists and the audience. This would insure not only an interesting conversation, but might begin to foreshadow some possible “winners.” As far as I was concerned, I had no doubts as to whose “camp” had come out in the lead.

Since GoEast is after all a film festival, most of my dialogue with Heleen Gerritsen was spent discussing how the films chosen for this year’s edition interacted with politics. In that sense, it’s essential to mention that the panel took place on the sidelines of a festival section entitled “Different? The Wild Nineties,” dexterously curated by Mariana Hristova. It screened such gems as Godard’s *Germany Year Ninety Nine Zero*, Lucian Pintilie’s *The Oak*, and Wojciech Marczewski’s *Escape from Liberty Cinema*.

In view of the eccentricities paraded in these films, the split allegiances of the panel acquired an even more urgent meaning, which was something the audience itself addressed when inquiring after the unorthodox *mélange* of economists and film “people” on the panel. But Heleen wasn’t particularly concerned because, as she put it: “I don’t necessarily think only film “people” should be judging films. I think it’s interesting to mix it up, especially as film people seem to live in a bubble.” She went on to explain that she had met Petr Lunak at another film festival where he was on a documentary film jury, and, because he was also a historian, Heleen decided he would be in a good position “to provoke,” which in her opinion insured a strong debate. Funnily, the first thing Petr wrote back after receiving the invitation was: ‘Since I don’t think a lot went wrong in the nineties, I am willing to participate in this debate.’”

Heleen’s own allegiance became clearer when, as I asked whether she intends the festival itself to be political, that is, to promote political consciousness, she told me that this was certainly one of her most important goals. Not only that, she added, but she sympathized with the anger she too had felt in the discussion room – an anger which can only be attributed to something having *definitely* gone wrong in the nineties, I dared to assume. In this sense, she bemoaned the fact that there is an ongoing rift between “East” and “West,” and this is visible—she added jokingly—when for a large number of political and cultural figures active today Leipzig (which belonged to the former East Germany) is assumed to be as far away as Vladivostok. There is a lack of interest, Heleen believes, in correctly assessing the situation in the former East (of Germany, let alone Europe), where Easterners continue to feel treated as second class citizens. This lack of interest translates into further clichés which lead to the Western side constructing the Easterners as “complainers,” which is an image incompatible with the West’s “character” and political goals. This has been made worse, she adds, by the rise of nationalism in the East (from where the “Alternative for Germany” party allegedly hails) and which gets to act as visiting card for unruly Easterners who, for this very reason, are looked down upon. What is being ignored is that—as the moderator also pointed out—nationalism originated in France with Le Pen’s party, and only spread East thereafter, Ms. Gerritsen added.

We further engaged with this one-sided view of Eastern Europe perpetuated in the West (including by the news media) which focuses precisely on the much-trumpeted nationalism of Easterners, trying to identify further reasons why this came about. I brought up the fact that one of the panelists, Mr. Metz, referred to “authoritarian Russia” as an already done deal, as this trope was something we should already be taking for granted, and even fight against.

Heleen didn’t so much disagree with the aforementioned trope, however, indicating that in Russia’s case, at least from where she was standing, things appeared more “clear cut” than in more ambivalent Eastern Europe. Without further commenting on her position, Heleen seemed to believe—if my reading is correct—that democracy in Russia is facing greater hurdles than elsewhere. And if this is so, it may be because what she calls the “gangster capitalism” of the nineties polarized more deeply the divide between civil society and politics, she reasons. In Heleen’s view, the shock therapy of the nineties in Russia went incredibly wrong and figures like 3,000 percent inflation in Georgia only stand to prove it. According to her, this made the former Communists distrust the measures of the democrats, which is how democracy got a bad reputation in connection with market economics. Without clarifying her own stand on authoritarianism, she added that the ideology of “shock therapy” was precisely what two of the panel members also shared at least in relation to Eastern Europe.

And this was an ideology promoted not by Western Europe alone, but by Jefferey Sachs and his Harvard School, I added.

“Exactly,” said Heleen: “That, the IMF and the World Bank. And we should not forget that following

their intervention in Eastern Europe a huge chain of privatizations happened in Western Europe as well. It's only after that, for instance, that the UK decided to privatize their national railways to disastrous effects."

"So the West was also influenced by the East, not only the other way round", I pointed out.

"Very much," came Heleen's response. "I think the reason we only recently started to talk about alternative forms of economics and basic income is that the East helped us better see the impact of neoliberalism. Of course, Thatcherism had been around for decades, but all the protesting was ignored before also because those doing the protesting were mostly marginal groups that were deemed by the establishment to be 'crazy leftists'."

I pushed a little further and stated that the panel discussion seemed quite divided to me, that there was no dialogue between the "right" and the "left," and that at times the two sides weren't listening to each other. I further extrapolated this condition to see the West as continuing to thrive on demonizing or at least lecturing the East, and becoming stuck on its clichés, just as the NATO-EU side became stuck on seeing Western development in the East as a "success story" during the panel at GoEast. Moreover, I ventured that the West became so entrenched in its superior position vis-à-vis the East, that it can now afford to blame anything going badly in the world on events taking place somewhere in the general land mass stretching all the way from China to just after Sarajevo, and asked Heleen if she might agree with that statement.

The GoEast festival director laughed and didn't answer this directly. She did opine, however, that big name festivals such as IDFA tend to include few Eastern European films in their selections. Festival directors usually motivate this reluctance by claiming that Eastern films are too local, Heleen explained, and that these films don't represent the larger context, and therefore don't speak to general audiences. She found this sad because in her opinion Eastern Europe does have an optimistic side (just as Mr. Metz and Mr. Lunak would want us to believe), and there are political actors in Eastern Europe who—although they might have little influence over their governments—are still able to initiate grassroots movements, which is something that would indeed speak to larger audiences. I agreed with this, but pointed out that most films screened in Western festivals about the East continue to present a monochrome view of the area. Since Heleen had brought up IDFA, I mentioned that in my memories of an earlier edition of the famous Amsterdam festival, the only film from Eastern Europe that stuck to mind was a documentary on the Pussy Riot movement, which led again to the standard dichotomy authoritarianism vs. democracy we have become so familiar with. I thought that Western festivals in general had very little "radicalness" by way of their selections, therefore not enough leftism to counterbalance (as in the panel discussion) the predominantly rightist perspective on the region. And this applied to GoEast as well.

Without directly addressing the issue of programming per se, Heleen pointed out that such films as *How Big Is the Galaxy?* of first-time Russian director Ksenia Elyan, which premiered in Germany at GoEast, walk a more balanced line between right and left, and, while not "pushing" politics, they tend to comment on it more subtly from the sidelines. While this didn't constitute the kind of redressing of political balance I had in mind, I did agree that indeed, there were other reportages at GoEast this year, such as Zhanna Maksymenko-Dovhych's short *Holiday* which offer an x-ray, as it were, of the ideological conflict that seems to be ripping apart the fabric of Ukrainian cohabitation. Again, even if the directorial position in such films is somewhat biased, they stand proof that the political right and left are clearly engaged in debate, even violently so in Zhanna's film.

Despite the presence of this onscreen "dialogue," it seemed to me that even though Heleen allegedly held back from programming straightforward political films simply because they don't always work structurally, as she explained, there was too much Loznitsa (represented at *GoEast* this year by his

powerful *The Trial*) and too little Vertov. Vertov made a surprising come-back this year with his recently found film *Anniversary of the Revolution* that played to live accompaniment in Wiesbaden and enjoyed a warm reception. Would a more balanced approach between the right and the left in Eastern cinema have also put more equilibrium under the discussion on post-nineties economic development?

Downplaying the obvious anti-Soviet sentiment of a very political film like *The Trial*, Heleen thought that Lozsntsitsa's films were more socially than politically minded, in that they showed the social effects of politics on the private lives of their protagonists rather than engaging with politics from an activist's agenda. In terms of the latter, she mentioned both the presence at GoEast of Eszter Hajdú's documentary *Hungary 2018*, which attempts to explain the undergirding of Orban's populism, as well as the emotional value of Vertov's early film as, to a degree, helping to "politicize" the festival, in the sense of promoting political consciousness, which was something that doesn't fall too far from Heleen's own intentions, she concluded.

All in all, as politically centrist as the festival presents itself, the general consensus at this year's edition, at least inasmuch as 'Eastern business' is concerned, seems to be that laissez-faire liberalism appears to be backfiring in Eastern Europe. This, especially for Wiesbaden, is a remarkable conclusion. In that sense, Heleen wants the festival to become a platform for discussion not too far removed from the lines of the panel in which the "left" and the "right" confront each other again as emotionally as they did this year. From this point of view, she considers the panel a success, and, unlike the alleged 'success story' of neoliberalism in Eastern Europe, I partially agree.

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