

OSTALGIA AND IRRETRIEVABILITY IN CENTRAL EUROPEAN CINEMA

Any discussion regarding the representation of the past in post-1989 Central European cinema encounters the issue of memory as one of the main organizational elements of a narrative. Modern historiography increasingly often poses the question “In what way is the past remembered?”, instead of asking the traditional question, “How were things really back then?”¹

According to Aleida Assmann, memory is not a monolith, which is perhaps why we should consider various forms of memories (1998a, 158). Individual memories create the memories of a collective, out of which cultural memory is constructed, which is, in turn, dependent on the media as carriers of memory as well as on institutionalized memory politics. Assmann emphasizes that remembering is a reconstructive process whose point of reference is the present (2009, 119). Practices of remembering have been influenced by forgetting, memory loss, distortions and misrepresentations (Assmann 2009, 120).

This last aspect is of particular importance to us, because nostalgia began to be experienced so intensely in countries of the former Soviet bloc that it found its reflection in public discourse as well as art. It has to be remembered, however, that this nostalgia is a damaged form of remembering, and, at the same time, it is a particular type of forgetting. This distorted memory of communism bears the name *ostalga*,

¹ Cf. (Wójcicki)

a term derived from the German language (*Ostalgie*) constituting a play on words *Ost* – East and *die Nostalgie*.

This concept appeared in Germany in 1992. It is said that its creator was Uwe Steiml, a cabaret artist from Dresden, who, in a television show, *Ostalgia*, entertained the audience with jokes about the recent East German past. However, it was not until 2003 that this term permanently entered public discourse after the premiere of Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!*, a film based on these themes.

Initially, this term was employed to describe the problem of damaged memory in what once was East Germany, dominated by nostalgia of local socialism, but it soon became clear that this phenomenon could also be observed in other countries of the former Soviet bloc. Ostalgia assumed and still assumes various forms. The characteristic features of ostalgie memory are the following: selectivity, imprecision, incompleteness, imperfection. In effect, the kinds of memories that appear are those of prosperity, a sense of security, peace, and unshakeable order (Andrukhovych).

The reasons for selective memory²

The question that is invariably asked is the following: **What is the mechanism behind the appearance of the illusion** prompting citizens of post-communist countries to indulge in such nostalgic narratives, which, in many cases, contradict historical fact and sometimes even individual experience?

Yurii Andrukhovych observes that the reason for this confusion might be, among other things, the fixed control over information during the communist era in regards to the illusory success of socialist economy. The years of freedom following 1989 did little to negate the effects of this pervasive propaganda that forms the basis of a phenomenon which in Poland is called "Gierkonostalgia" and Yugo-nostalgia in the Balkans.

The selective nature of ostalgia leads towards forgetting. Simona Popescu, a Romanian writer and essayist, claims that ostalgia is forgetting (104). Popescu further indicates that this type of ostalgia affects those in her country who have erased the 80s from their me-

² The Hungarian historian and writer Béla Nóvé emphasized the importance of the social and political context in which ostalgia appeared (Nóvé 190).

mories and only remember their country from the 60s, when there was a sense of relative openness, liberalization and when the economic situation saw improvement.

Incomplete and selective remembering can also be the effect of radical social change, and this is precisely how we can characterize the experience of the Revolutions of 1989. Martin Šimečka, a Slovakian novelist and publicist, notes that a portion of his countrymen had

enough reasons to look back nostalgically at those times when their life had meaning, their social position was solid and the certainty that nothing will change was unmoved like a rock. That is the common key to nostalgia, which more than half of Slovakia feels, and not without reason. (114)

These comments are applicable also to the experiences of the Czechs, whose memory of their sense of stability and social security converges with their fear over the consequences of social transformation. As Svetlana Boym, a Russian slavist, aptly concluded, ostalgia becomes then “a defense mechanism against an accelerated rhythm of change and economic shock therapy” (273).

The unwritten “prohibition against mentioning socialism” after 1989 can also be seen as having a considerable role in the appearance of selective memory. As Šimečka observes, this prohibition results in false memories being constructed out of random elements, e.g. from reruns of decades-old television shows aired in post-communist countries, or from the presence of socialist pop music stars in the mediascape” (148). These false memories, claims Simona Popescu, could be construed as “bemoaning the loss of petty privileges” (98). Ostalgia can, therefore, be understood as an **answer to intensified disillusionment**. Frustration with the difficulties of the transformation reinforces the need for sentimental reminiscing.

Martin Šimečka believes that, in nostalgically reminiscing about the socialist past, a similar mechanism is triggered as the one accompanying nostalgia felt for one’s childhood, which did not have to be happy at all (132). There is a critical point of unpleasantness that cannot be crossed if the memory is to remain pleasant. In post-communist countries, there is no nostalgia for the times of Stalinist terror. Russia and Russian cinema deviates from this rule³.

³ Svetlana Boym, in her analysis of the state of Russian cinema beginning with the period of perestroika, notices two strong cinematic tendencies referring to the Stalinist

Let us shift our attention to who is susceptible to sentimental reminiscence. Of course, “the truly powerful **longing is felt by the privileged**” (Popescu 99), but the most popular form of longing in post-communist countries is the longing for “heroic survival”, which transforms the ordinary citizen into a hero appropriate to his times. The crux of nostalgia would then be the longing for an “ideal I” – a simple, unambiguous and, in a sense, innocent image of one’s self from those times.

It would seem that the largest group of people who experience pleasure at returning to the post-communist past are young people, who themselves have no memories of that era. This could be a signal that the memories of communism have been conquered, stemming from the conviction held by these people that it is “a closed era, definitively closed”, in which one can even find a “kind of charm (...) a type of <surreal> dependence” (Popescu 107). Young people view everyday communist culture as a kind of absurd local museum full of unbelievable curiosities. The older generations, on the other hand, reach for memorabilia from the Polish People’s Republic (PRL) only to:

(...) recall the times when they could only dream of the world that has finally come to fruition, but is still far from ideal version (...) of [those] dreams. (Smołeński 120)

As we can see, sentimentally recalling the past before 1989 can have a different intensity but also different causes. Poland, Hungary and also Slovakia are dominated by a more playful style of ostalgie remembering. The German discourse of memory presents a different aspect. The German historian Stefan Wolle drew attention to this, claiming that ostalgie coproduces, after the collapse of the nation, “an East German identity”.⁴ The unification of Germany entailed the necessity of abandoning the culture formed in East Germany, and yet it

past. A tendency appeared during the era perestroika which delineated “Stalinist kitsch” cinema as characterized by its eclectic style. On the other hand, in the mid-90s there appeared a nostalgic tendency replacing the playful carnivalesque engagement with kitsch. Less stylistically eclectic films searched for new ways of storytelling, but without demystifying Stalinism. Boym does not use the term ostalgie, proposing instead the term “Glocal nostalgia” for the Russian phenomenon. The standard example of this type of work was Nikita Mikhalkov’s films, especially *Burnt by the Sun* (1994) and *The Barber of Siberia* (1998). Cf. (Boymová).

⁴ Cf. (Wolle 25).

is impossible to function without a past. That is why the much-scorned elements of socialist material and spiritual culture have now assumed the symbolic role of representing a mythologized past. They became a weapon in the struggle of the "Easterners", who had to pay the price for this unification by being reduced to the role of second-class citizens, as unification came to mean mandatory and unequivocal assimilation of Western standards and solutions.

The importance of ostalgie memory in the eastern parts of Germany should not, however, create the impression that the ostalgie discourse is dominant in the German discourse on the past.⁵ It is seen to clash with an equally powerful call to hold accountable those people and intuitions who committed acts of injustices during the previous era, and thereby accentuates the terror, violence, constant surveillance, mass repressions, and also the collaborations in the totalitarian system of a huge number of East German citizens.

The question of what place is occupied by nostalgic reflection in discourses of the past in countries forming the post-Soviet bloc seems important enough to warrant its examination on the example of its presence in Central European cinema.

Cinema of sentimental reminiscing

It is interesting to see the extent to which the mechanisms of ostalgia have influenced cinema's discourse of the past that was brought about by post-1989 cinema. Undoubtedly, it was the earliest and most clear that it made itself known in post Eastern German cinema. The film that popularized the ostalgie trend was Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin* (2003), which in a symbolic way preserved the bygone world. It depicts a staunch communist who lapses into a months' long coma a day before the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the meantime, thousands of people living in East Germany rearrange their homes in a symbolic gesture mirroring the social changes. Christiane's children decide to create a kind of repository of communist-era relics in the room where she is bedridden, so that after awaking she would not suffer culture shock. With their increasingly absurd efforts they are attempting to reclaim the idealized image of their childhood world in

⁵ Ewa Fiuk, in her work on contemporary German cinema, avoids the problem of ostalgia when discussing the fall of the Berlin Wall. Cf. (Fiuk)

which not only their mother but also they themselves would feel safe and at home.

In his analysis of German cinema, in which the problem of the communist past is addressed, Hans-Christian Trepte identified social uncertainty following unification as the main cause of ostalgia (132). The need to “brighten the drab and grey reality” was, as Trepte claims, fulfilled by films such as *Go Trabi Go* (Peter Timm and Reinhard Kloos, 1990); *Sun Avenue* (Leander Haussman, 1999), *Heroes Like Us*, (Sebastian Peterson, 1999). According to Trepte, “Humor, infantilization, confusion, at times limitations, and an indulgence for East Germany are the characteristic features of the many films from that period” (81). What these films also had in common was the perspective of a child or adolescent narrator.

In 2004, RTL channel aired *Meine schönsten Jahre*, a series that eventually came to be regarded as the Eastern German equivalent of the American series *Wonder Years*. What connected these two culturally distant stories was the structure of the protagonist, a boy narrating a nostalgic coming-of-age story about childhood from his perspective as an adult. A child does not have to formulate judgments about reality, does not need to understand the world or analyze it with any depth. This strategy allows for the unrestricted idealization of youth, which is especially noticeable in *Sun Avenue*, a movie about the experiences of a group of boys who live next to the Berlin Wall. One of the characters in the last scene of the film declares that he would not trade his youth with anyone else. This conservative optics is readily employed not only by German ostalgie cinema,⁶ but it can also be found in Czech and Hungarian cinema.

Florian von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006), one of the best known and unfoundedly respected films in recent years, is a problematic case. The main character is a Stasi agent, who devoted his whole life to spying on a well-known dissident artist. At first the scrupulous officer carries out his duty, without any deeper reflection leading him to notice anything immoral in his actions, only to undergo an inexplicable moral transformation, which in effect convinces him to devote his life to rescuing his invigilated victim. The mawkish ending manipulates the ethical dimension of Stasi agents' conduct, proposing a relative evaluation of people working for that institution.

⁶ Cf. (Kledzik 99-109).

There is doubt as to whether we are still dealing with the process of “clearing up a bleak reality”, or perhaps we are witnessing a transgression of the acceptable limits of memory and crossing into manipulation and deception. This example illustrates that the ostalgie processes oscillate between mechanisms of subjective and imprecise remembering and procedures serving to manipulate these mechanisms.

Czech ostalgia

In the Czech reflection on ostalgie cinema, the assumption which has until recently dominated the conversation on this topic is that this phenomenon belongs to popular culture and does not take part in the discourse about the past. Today in the Czech Republic the question is asked to what extent can ostalgia be considered a phenomenon that co-produces post-normalized identity.

Ina Marešová claims that contemporary ostalgians hail primarily from the “Husákovy děti” (Husákovy children), who still remember well-stocked stores, supposedly no unemployment and homelessness, and also a colorful world of socialist pop culture celebrities.⁷ The Czech film critic Jaroslav Pinkas points out that the selective treatment of memories in ostalgie cinema leads to the elimination of memories linked to traumatic experiences.⁸ Although German nostalgic cinema constitutes the most representative form of longing for the socialist past, it is nonetheless only one of the trends in German cinema dealing with the East German legacy. In the case of the Czech Republic, the situation is different. Until recently, the majority of films about the past presented it through a nostalgic lens. The following films would attest to this observation: *Ta naše písnička česká II* (1990) by Vit Olmer, *Obecná škola* (1991) by Jan Svěrák, *Díky za každé nové rano* (1994) by Milan Steidler, *Báječná léta pod psa* (1997) by Petr Nikolaev (after a novel by Michal Viewegh), *Pelišky* (1999) by Jan Svěrák, *Rebelové* (2001) by Filip Renč, *Pupendo* (2003) by Jan Hřebejk, *Anglické jahody* (2008) by Vladimír Drha, *Občanský průkaz* (2011) by Ondřej Trojan. An interesting phenomenon is the television series *Výpravej*

⁷ Cf. (Marešová).

⁸ Cf. (Pinkas, 67).

(2009-?), which takes place at the beginning of 1964 and ends in 1989. No historical events, such as the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia dominate the show's plot which centers on the tribulations and joys of everyday existence in a socialist country. The barely visible historical context is accentuated in every episode by fragments of newsreel footage from that time, which had, as was the case in Poland, a propagandist character. Using them today as a source of historical knowledge may arouse bewilderment, as would the immense popularity of the series among Czech and Slovakian viewers.

These aforementioned films consciously trivialize the depicted reality, as the historical events they depict serve only as the background for the private ordeals of the characters, thereby silencing, to a large extent, the terror of the historical context enveloping the narrative.

Ostalgic cinema, which aims to maintain ideological neutrality, seeks justification for its negligence. The majority of Czech, German, Polish and Hungarian films of this genre are comedies, where the conventions of genre dictate the presentation of reality, even the most dramatic. The musical genre is also revived. Jan Hřebejk's *Šakali leta*, which takes place in the 1950s, and Filip Renč's *Rebelove*, which takes place in 1968, are both Czech productions. The conventions of the musical were deployed to protect the films from accusations to the effect that they were trivializing the world and lacked a historical vision. The tendency to escape to genre movies is attested by the Hungarian musical *Dollybirds* (1997) by Péter Tímár, which utilized the safe musical convention in order to invoke only the pleasant memories of the 1960s.

Hungarian ostalgia

Ostalgia can also be observed in Hungarian cinema, though the reasons for its existence there are not only akin to the German experience.⁹ According to Aleksandra Muga, ostalgia refers to the difficul-

⁹ Aleksandra Muga indicated films which made references in a sentimental fashion to the 1960s: *We Never Die* (1993) and *Samba* (1996) by Róbert Koltai; the 70s and 80s. *The Little Voyage* (2000) by Mihály Búzás and György Pálos, *Moscow Square* by Ferenc Török (2001), *Forward!* (2002) by Dániel Erdély.

ties connected to the political transformation, the disillusionment in the present, which did not fulfill expectations. The most common object of sentimental reminiscence are the 1960s, a decade of relative prosperity in Hungary, which, in difficult times of unpopular transitional policies, could appear as socially friendly and economically secure (Muga 158).

Béla Nývé seconds Muga's diagnosis as follows:

Should we be surprised that, having had enough of the great historic march, many people long for the refuge of the past? To the world of summer romances and camping trips, weekend "gardening hobbyists" and the Eastern European "smuggling runs" in Trabants or Wartburgs, to the times when everything was still and, at least on the surface, more unified. The obvious, though satisfactory, compensation for the loss of freedom was the countless number of political jokes in radio cabarets. (194)

Polish recollection of the socialist past

It is interesting that films recollecting the socialist past as more entertaining than disturbing appeared sporadically in Polish cinema, and were usually shot by young directors: Oskar Kaszyński, who directed *Segment '76* (2002), Wiesław Paluch, who wrote *Motór* (2004). A particular example appears to be the Polish-Czech *Operation Danube* (2009) directed by Jacek Głomb. This comic history of a tank crew which took part in an invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 depicts their adventures as they took place in a small Czech town, with various references to the Socialist era TV series, *Four Tankers and a Dog*, and for the most part turned out to be an unfortunate and morally dubious endeavor. Intentionally or not, the descendants of those who participated in the 1968 occupation allowed themselves to use a frivolous and ribald tone towards one of the most dramatic experiences of our southern neighbors. The attempt to annex the characteristic (Hrabal's?) style of narrating dramatic, tragic, sublime experiences did not prove successful.

The relatively small presence of ostalgie tendencies in Polish cinema is balanced out by its strong representation in the media, e.g. in the visual representations in advertising and the Internet.¹⁰ Ostalgie representations can also include the various publications concerning

¹⁰ Cf. (Golonka-Czajkowska); (Grębecka); (Talarczyk-Gubała).

the Polish People's Republic (PRL), which focus on humorous and ironic descriptions of characteristic artifacts from that era.¹¹

Ostalgic films, which do not hold a significant place in contemporary Polish cinema, prove how cultural memory is created from marginalized resources, which can serve to build pop-cultural messages. This type of ostalgia can be seen as deriving from the assumption that the conscious unrepresentability of elements constituting the narration of the past takes on the form of a mere game. In accordance with the findings of Aleida Assmann, this type of cinema makes use of elements taken from discarded memories which now assume a new meaning. Objects and places have now become conveyors of a new memory, such as the eponymous "motor" in the Polish film as well as the fashionable living room wall unit, the Trabant in the German film *Go Trabi Go* the pickle in *Good Bye, Lenin!*, the space of the eponymous palace in the Hungarian film, which today is not called Muscovite but **Kálmán Széll**, or also the Dejvice district in Prague with the Social Realistic era hotel Intercontinental in *Šakali leta*. Recollected memories of objects and places from before this political turning point are subjected to a redefinition. As they are brought into a new, fictional reality of film, they no longer represent the past.

Irretrievability in cinema as a reaction to ostalgia

If ostalgia is built on sentimentality felt towards certain aspects of the past, the repudiation of ostalgia, which we shall call irretrievability, finds its roots in resentment to the equally selectively treated past.

Simona Popescu, in her search for a term to repudiate ostalgia, proposed the concept of "rebellious nostalgia"

Which does not insist (...) that we return to the past, but enables you to re-experience the time which was taken from you, retrieve everything: forbidden books, music, everything that was happening in the world during the 1980s but remained inaccessible. (103)

Her suggestion allows us to identify a phenomenon that we shall call irretrievability, which reveals itself in its disinclination to reminisce, in the escape from the past to the present, and in its ability to cap-

¹¹ Cf. (*Mała encyklopedia obciachu*) (Fragment of a supplementary text).

ture the darkest experiences of communism. Irretrievability is also characterized by selective memory, which asks us to focus on the flaws of the system and its consequences. Missing are often private memories, which in a direct manner would belie the nature of the system; instead the preferred memories are those that reinforce and reaffirm the practice of undemocratic systems: destruction in the mental and moral sphere, the spiritual and material paucity of the citizens, and finally, the demeaning tribulations of everyday life.

The Czechs say “film český je hešký” (a **Czech film** is a pretty film). It is precisely this uncontroversial “prettiness” that impressed the members of the Academy who awarded Jan Svěrák’s *Kola* an Oscar in 1996. The conciliatory spirit of the film was received by the Western audience with gratitude and relief. As a result, gates of European cinemas were opened to Czech films. Films by Jan Hřebejk, Jan Svěrák, and the earlier films by Petr Zelenka conquered the hearts of the European audience which had grown tired of Central European politically engaged cinema. And yet, Jan H. Vitvar, a reporter for the influential Czech magazine *Respect*, announced during the premiere of *Lidice* in 2011 the following: “The disgusting congeniality of our cinema is slowly leaving the stage”. For years Czech historians and film critics had been expressing their anxiety over the state of Czech cinema, which, in their minds, confined itself into a formula of ostalgie stories about the past. These films were safe, liked by the public, but increasingly revealing their exhaustion and banality. The last couple of years brought with them a more serious consideration of the Czechoslovakian past in Czech cinema. Instantiations of this new trend are films like *Kavasakiho Ruže* (2009) by Jan Hřebejk, which joined the central European lustration discourse, or *Pouta* (2010) by Radim Špaček, which engaged in a kind of polemics with the German film *The Lives of Others*.

The developing considerations on the essence of ostalgia change the way the past is captured in central European cinema. Various artifacts from the socialist era now elicit stories about “how things were” in the manner of a Proustian memory triggered by eating a madeleine that evokes the bitter taste of the past. The absence of the contemporary perspective is characteristic here, as it allows the Czechs to view the era of normalization with distance and humor, and it derives from the knowledge gained later “that nothing really bad had happened, as everything turned out all right.” Discarding that corrective perspec-

tive allows us to segregate from our memories those and only those recollections.

In the search of films realizing the assumptions of irretrievability we should point to the **Ukrainian film** by Kira Muratova, *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1989). The image of moral and material destruction after communism here takes on a powerfully apocalyptic character.

The idea of irretrievability, i.e. renouncing sentimentalism in the way PRL (Polish People's Republic) is represented was manifested in Wojciech Smarzowski's film, *The Dark House* (2010). Smarzowski was able to capture a sense of authenticity and to evoke unvarnished recollections by almost triggering subliminal memories by means of the appearance of the characters, their behavior and way of speaking.

The idealized past is also discarded by two other films that share a similar style and themes: Slovakian *Music* (Juraj Nvota, 2008) and the Polish *All That I Love* (Jacek Borcuch, 2010). In the Polish film we have a young man who dreams of playing rock one day, which during the period of Martial Law in Poland was the embodiment of freedom. In the Slovakian film a slightly older protagonist indulges in similarly unrealistic dreams about being a real jazz musician. Although the plot structure lends itself nicely to nostalgic perspective, the directors were able to avoid falsely idealizing the experiences of the era.

Romanian New Wave cinema from the beginning of the millennium without a doubt demonstrates the aversion felt towards the dictatorship of Ceaușescu. The ostalgie trend seems to be absent from Romanian cinema. The strength of the kind of cinema that implements the idea of irretrievability derives from completely refusing to fetishize objects and spaces that had retained their repulsive dimension (e.g., Lăzărescu's home in *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005) by Cristi Puiu, the grey streets of Bucharest, the interiors of the dormitory in *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* by Cristian Mungiu.

12:08 East of Bucharest (2006) by Corneliu Porumboiu is a radical anti-ostalgie manifesto, whose topic addresses how the deceptive memories of the events of the revolution conspire to undermine the possibility of reflecting in a credible way about the past.

From this perspective, Juliusz Machulski's *How Much Does the Trojan Horse Weight?* (2010) is an interesting film. The film is a humorous critique of ostalgie based on selective memories and of the creation of phantasms of the past. Reflecting on memories of the communist past, realized here in a light comedic tone, can also be found in an inte-

resting documentary, *Welcome to North Korea!* (2009) directed by Linda Jablonská, a Czech director. This documentary is about a group of Czech tourists on a trip to North Korea. At first, they were curious and fascinated by a world which reminded them of their own country from decades back, but the ostalgie emotions with which they embarked on this journey to the past gave way to dismay. Instead of being a sentimental adventure, this trip back in time turned out to be a return to a nightmare, an expedition filled with horror, recalling the worst memories from the communist era Czechoslovakia. Yet another strategy of irretrievability was carried out by the Polish film *Reverse* (2009), directed by Borys Lankosz, which challenges the aesthetics of socialist realism that had by then become ostalgized in pop culture. Though the film is set in the 1950s, it dispenses with the typical 1950s background scenography in order to remove itself, by means of employing the cinematic tradition of expressionism and film noir, from the staid, stereotypical perception of those experiences.

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Ostalgia and irretrievability are two strategies of employing memory for the purpose of organizing how we talk about the past in post-1989 cinema. Of course, I am aware that these are only ways of using memory in the cinema from the transformation period. Outside of the realm of interest here is the cinema reconstructing the past by means of historical sources and also “bunking history” or one realizing the current “historical politics”.

The cinematic portrayals of ostalgia, which are part of contemporary pop culture, play with elements that have been recognized, in the context of established conventions, as representative of the socialist era. What becomes problematic is when an ostalgie view of the past becomes an important, sometimes constitutive, element of identity discourse. The idea of irretrievability attempts to equalize recollections that generate idealized images which are products of nostalgic memory. The attempt to sever ties with the repressive past, thereby mitigating its traumatic image, can be rendered possible by an unresidential turn towards history. However, that sort of selective memory is implicated in the forgetting of the dangerously deforming registers of social memory. The answer to ostalgie phantasms takes the form of a cinema which accentuates the aversion to idealized images of the past.

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