Eastern European Movies of the 90s: A Watershed Moment from Nationalism into the New Age

Eastern European cinema's shift from national struggles to the New-Age
Source: The Bite-Sized Backpacker & BAMPFA **(all images for reference)**

The dominance of French cinema compared to Eastern European cinema in the 1900s
Source: Britannica

European cinema has been considered a remarkable producer of avant-garde and acclaimed films since the inception of the cinematic world in 1895. It's interesting to note that the Lumière brothers created the first film of all time in France - a major Western European country that is the 'original home of cinema' today. Eventually, the art form of motion picture spread through the world and cemented into only six centers of global cinemas - France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The global audiences engaged in European films, but recognized only French and Italian cinema (Gorky, 2014). However, we might ponder upon a question: "In this string of global cinema, where do the 'Eastern European cinemas' count?"

The history of Eastern European cinema commenced in the early 20th century with scarce distribution of film production, when only a few countries in the region tried their hands at creating 'independent' national cinemas. Most of the Eastern European countries of the time were under the Soviet Union's rule. Thus, any piece of film produced in the region was 'state-owned'. The colonial forces overlooked the complete process of financing film production, running the theaters, and also controlling the distribution of films in foreign countries and the import of foreign films. The films of the early 1900s were primarily based on two themes - a bold attempt to present nationalist struggles, or state-funded films on the glorification of Soviet rule. In the 1950s, the countries like Estonia, Lithuania, and Ukraine found their art and attempts at filmmaking lost under the burden of imperialism. (Gorky, 2014).

The three protagonists for each film of Three Colors Trilogy in their signature colors
Source: Indiewire

The dawn of Czech cinema and its distinct aesthetics *(Marketa Lazarova)*
Source: IMDb & The Criterion Channel

Ecstasy (Extase): A landmark Czech film for Eastern European cinema
Source: Wikipedia

The year 1945 acted as a major point in this course as the three countries of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia developed their properly-functioning 'national cinemas'. The leading country in the Eastern representation of European cinema was Czechoslovakia. In 1934, the Czechoslovakian film *Ecstasy* received the first prize for the best national selection and direction at the Venice Film Festival. Czech was the only strong representation in the 1900s, and its films were known all over Europe, if not all over the world, for their artistic achievements. They also had a very well-organized economic and technical basis for production and very good studios. However, the realm of Eastern European films witnessed the dawn of the 'cinematic revolution' as a nationalist initiative against Soviet censorship and other forces in most of the 1960s. The wave of change was led by bold Eastern European filmmakers such as Jirí Menzel, Vera Chytilová, Milos Foreman, and Andrzej Wajda. Despite the Cold War–era, many filmmakers from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia received international acclaim from the 1950s through the 1980s and have continued to receive it since 1989 (National Gallery of Art, n.d.). Some of the best-produced films of the era are *Adam Wants to Be a Man* (1959), *Closely Watched Trains* (1966), *Marketa Lazarova* (1967), *All My Good Countrymen* (1969), and *The Dead Mountaineer's Hotel* (1979) (Cine, n.d.). All the films of the pre-1990s era consistently explored the struggles of the masses, violent themes, soldiers and armed weapons, the honor of countrymen, and the rural lifestyles of Eastern Europeans. The visuals of the films from the 1960s to 1980s depict a substantial development in storytelling and color cinematography, but their themes were adamant toward hardcore rebellion against societal norms or tragedies of battles - an insinuation of the transformation from imperial age to new-age cinema.

The aesthetics of Eastern European cinema before the 1990s *(All My Good Countrymen)*
Source: CCA Glasgow & The Arts Desk

The ‘modern yet minimal’ aesthetics and settings of the 1990s Eastern European films *(The Three Colors)*
Source: Medium & Film Positivity

The final nail to the firm structure of Eastern Europe and its cinemas was struck in the monumental year of 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The achievement of independence led to a ‘watershed moment’ for the cinemas as they were liberated to explore themes beyond survival and nationalism. The shift of the national cinemas from the Eastern side of the continent was marked by the ‘privatization’ of filmmaking, surpassing the dominance of Soviet state-run institutions. The fresh beginnings of Estonian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Czech cinemas led to remarkable films that emphasize the journey of an ‘individual’, his life post-independence, various facets of liberty, and freedom to explore life’s simplicity beyond the great purpose of honors (BAMPFA, n.d.). These classics are collectively pretty sentimental in their storytelling, where a ‘character’s POV’ is emphasized more than a national event. Interestingly, the characters in such films are not entirely separated from the impact of national events or isolated from the masses, but a film presents its protagonist’s story ‘in retrospect’ of the greater event (the individual is ‘primary’ and the mass events are ‘secondary’ here).

The focus on unorthodox, personal stories and ‘protagonist's POV’ in New-Age Eastern European films
(The Czech film Kolya, and the Polish film The Double Life of Veronique)
Source: Film-Rezensionen & Roger Ebert

The ‘Velvet’ Revolution of Czech Cinema replaced the conservative totalitarian system with the advent of democracy, further strengthening the narrative of the ‘power and story of an individual’ over the system or communities. The Velvet Revolution’s impact strongly seeped into the cinema industry of the country as it produced some of the most internationally successful films from Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The Czech films of the era were filled with personal stories of common people, illustrated by several native filmmakers on-screen. The young Czech directors of the time were under the spell of European-style cinematic postmodernism with an intriguing blend of American elements of filmmaking. Such an interesting conundrum of filmmaking style helped the national cinema set itself apart from other European cinemas. Czech films presented regular lives but in an envelope of modernist themes; a trend that can also be observed in Lithuanian and Estonian films of the 90s. It is also important to note that the world cinema was in the stage of the ‘dawn of the 21st century’, thus, heavy experimentations were being done on the openness of romantic relationships beyond traditional ties, evolved family dynamics, themes of urbanization, and greater volumes of ‘coming of age dramas’ (such as *Vaikai iš Amerikos Viesbucio* - 1990, and *The Double Life of Veronique - 1991)* (Padna, 2002).

The concept of 'rediscovering the inner child' in *Kolya*
Source: Film Affinity

In the league of successful directors after the Velvet Revolution, one director who created the most memorable masterpieces in the 90s is Jan Svěrák. His 1991 feature debut *Elementary School* was nominated for the Academy Award and his later film *Kolya* (1996) won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1997 (Padna, 2002). *Kolya* is considered one of the best classic films made in the decade thanks to its impeccable narration and heartfelt story. The film portrays the tale of a middle-aged perplexed man Louka and his unexpected deep friendship with a five-year-old kid Kolya. The movie also explores an unorthodox relationship between Louka and an immigrant Russian woman, with whom he agrees to have a sham marriage to enable her to stay in Czechoslovakia. The modernist narratives and the theme of rediscovering 'one's inner child' have been immaculately presented in the internationally acclaimed film.

The emphasis on 'youth' and 'coming-of-age themes' in the 90s Eastern European films
(Vaikai iš Amerikos viešbučio)
Source: KC Romuva

The era of the 1990s also commenced a wave of modernism and New-Age thought processes through cinema in Lithuania. The hot-blooded aspirations of the youth of Lithuania were reflected in the popular classic and highest-rated Lithuanian film of all time - *Vaikai iš Amerikos viešbučio (The Children from the Hotel America)* (1990) (Crawford, n.d.). The film was directed by native filmmaker Raimundas Banionis and portrays the story of a group of teenage friends who have been inspired by several foreign artistic influences such as classic rock digital station 'Radio Luxembourg', British rock band 'Rolling Stones', and popular music fair 'Woodstock' (Crawford, n.d.). The revolutionary and rebellious tones of the 'rock' genre inspire them to express themselves with the utmost freedom, however, the American Hotel that they are living in presents them with issues of strong cultural differences and language barriers. The coming-of-age film is the perfect example of Eastern European cinema's unique integration of Euro-centric themes with popular American elements.

The acclaimed Czech director Jan Svěrák is one of the leaders of the 90s Eastern European cinema
Source: CT24

The journey of Eastern European films has been exemplary, as they have consistently transitioned from one stage of thematic development to another - from nationalism to the distinct modernism of the 21st century. The 1990s played a catalyst period in the journey as it marked the transition to independence of lives, mindsets, and eventually cinema. The most significant filmmakers of this transitionary period, such as Czech director Jan Svěrák, Polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski, and Lithuanian director Šarūnas Bartas, conducted spirited and highly creative experimentation in their films that led to the production of competent films that often surpass American and Western European films in terms of criticality. Since the 90s, these national cinemas have continued to produce thought-provoking international films on the 'exploration of the self/individual'. Thus, the 'watershed' ascension of Eastern European films registers itself as a remarkable chapter in the history of world cinema.

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