

Book Reviews

Through Space and Time

Review of *The Odyssey of Communism: Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture*
edited by Michaela Praisler and
Oana-Celia Gheorghiu, Cambridge
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The Odyssey of Communism: Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture traces the intellectual history of Communist visual culture from Ceaușescu's Romania to Mao's China, as well as other countries in the Eastern Bloc and the non-Communist world. Its editors are Michaela Praisler and Oana-Celia Gheorghiu of the University of Galati, Romania.

Based on the proceedings of the 2019 Romanian conference "Thirty Years since the Fall of Communism: Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture," the volume features a polyphonic range of works by authors based in Turkey, Poland, Ukraine, Serbia, Romania, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and the United States. *The Odyssey of Communism* revisits the recent history of Communism through the lens of cinematic culture. The book aims to present a multidisciplinary perspective on Communist film, within a broad definition that includes both film texts produced in (former or presently) Communist countries and in the West. This book forms a valuable

contribution to the study of Communist cinema in English-language academia, drawing together several different areas of scholarship—including film theory, history, and cultural studies—in one engaging volume.

Taking the form of an episodic voyage of discovery, *The Odyssey of Communism* is divided into three parts, plus a coda. The first, entitled “Hades: The Red Turns to Black,” deals with films that directly or indirectly depict the darkest aspects of the “Communist inferno,” from the subversively critical Yugoslavian “Black Wave” film movement to the carceral spaces explored through Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) and the 1993 film adaptation of Marin Preda’s novel *Most Beloved of Earthlings* (1980).

Evoking Dante, the authors of this first and longest section use their film texts to reexamine some of the most difficult and painful episodes in Communist history, through close readings that at times employ philosophical or psychoanalytical approaches. For example, chapter 5 (“Abortion in Ceaușescu’s Era: From Personal Drama to Social Problem”) deals with the psychological implications and fraught gender politics of Romania’s 1960s abortion ban, “one of the most abusive and repressive measures for population growth in history.”¹ This chapter stands out particularly for its thoughtful comparison between two films, which depict Romanian women during this period, exploring the ways in which different characters respond psychologically to the traumatic political events that intrude into their lives and bodies. The films—*Postcards of Wild Flowers* (1975) and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007)—provide complementary perspectives, running the gauntlet from tragedy to absurdity. In chapter 1 (“The Repercussions of Finding a Voice: *Silent Wedding*”), Alexandru and Michaela Praisler also explore the interplay of farce and tragedy in *Silent Wedding* (2008); their work contributes to the rapidly growing intersection of cinema and sound studies. Due to a ban on all celebrations following the death of Stalin, a couple in a small Romanian

1. Felicia Cordoneanu, “Abortion in Ceaușescu’s Era: From Personal Drama to Social Problem,” in *The Odyssey of Communism, Visual Narratives, Memory and Culture* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 56.

village hold their wedding celebration at night, in complete silence: “Staged and silent, farcical and pathetic, [it] is the epitome of debasement, allowing the comic to dissolve into the tragic.”² The authors analyze the creative use of silence in the film: at times, the lack of dialogue alludes to cinema’s silent origins to intensify the farcical physical comedy. However, the film’s central themes of silence as a form of subversion or resistance also emphasize the complex relationship between speech, silence, and censorship.

The second part of the book, “Lotus Eaters. Propaganda, Intoxication and Complacency,” focuses on the implications of Communist cinema as propaganda. Chapter 6 (“Six Decades of Spring: Refashioning the Soviet Industrial Myth in *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (1956)” by Daria Moskvitina and Bohdan Korneliuk) traces the popular and critical receptions of the Soviet Ukrainian classic *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (1956). This chapter stands out for its exceptionally clear and engaging analysis of the enduring cultural legacy of *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* in the Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhia. The film is significant both as a relatable urban romance and as an exploration of the tensions between representations of intellectuals and industrial workers in Soviet popular culture. By contrast, in the following chapter (“Anecdotal Takes on Social History: Tales from the Golden Age Told and Re-Told” by Oana-Celia Gheorghiu), the author focuses on satire rather than nostalgia. She compares a 1975 Romanian propaganda film, *The Freshmen’s Autumn*, with a satirical omnibus film series produced in the early 2000s, *Tales from a Golden Age*, which brings to the fore the absurdist elements that were buried in the former work.

The final two chapters of this section (“Something Is Rotten in Film Propaganda: Ideological Games and Self/Other Representations in *Comrade Detective* (2017)” by Gabriela Iuliana Colipcă-Ciobanu and “From Hollywood to the Soviet Model: Building a Socialist Chinese Cinema” by Ying Zhu) considerably widen the volume’s scope. Western representations of

2. Alexandru and Michaela Praisler, “The Repercussions of Finding a Voice: *Silent Wedding*,” in *The Odyssey of Communism*, 12

Communism come to the fore in a discussion of the show-within-a-show *Comrade Detective*, which was created by a Western production team for Amazon Prime to resemble a piece of 1980s Romanian propaganda. This nested structure of pastiche brings to mind Kristen Daly's assertion that contemporary cinema, or "Cinema 3.0," takes on deliberately game-like characteristics, "based on interactivity, play, searching, and nonobvious relationships."³ While, like *Tales from a Golden Age*, there are satirical elements to *Comrade Detective*, the authors argue that ultimately it is "a deeply dialogic text . . . whose point may not be so much to produce the caricature of an antagonistic way of thinking but to question the validity of any dominant ideology."⁴ The final chapter shifts eastwards, as Ying Zhu uses a more historical perspective to insightfully chart the fortunes of Hollywood and Soviet cinema in China directly pre- and post-1949.

The third part of the book deals with the nostalgic recollections of the Communist era through recent reflective and retrospective films produced by a younger generation of filmmakers. Kaixuan Yao's chapter, "Schizo-Historicising with the Body: Representations of Dance in Recent Cold War Nostalgia Films," is particularly notable for her insightful discussion of the role played by dance in Cold War "nostalgia films," in which she analyzes the aesthetic and intellectual appeal of the Cold War from a contemporary perspective: "The beautifications or, at least, elevations of the Cold War memories in comparison with the present point to the use of the past as an alleviating, though self-deceiving discourse."⁵ For example, in her discussion of *White Crow* (2018), which tells the story of Soviet dancer Rudolf Nureyev's defection in Paris, she emphasizes the importance of Soviet material

3. Kristen Daly, "Cinema 3.0: The Interactive-Image," *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 1 (2010): 81–98, 83

4. Gabriela Iuliana Colipcă-Ciobanu, "Something Is Rotten in Film Propaganda: Ideological Games and Self/Other Representations in *Comrade Detective* (2017)," in *The Odyssey of Communism*, 136

5. Kaixuan Yao, "Schizo-Historicising with the Body: Representations of Dance in Recent Cold War Nostalgia Films," in *The Odyssey of Communism*, 165

culture and a sense of place for creating a mood of nostalgia in the film, a sense of home that makes Nureyev's eventual decision to leave for the West more meaningful. She also draws a pertinent link between films like *White Crow* and *The Shape of Water*, which feature dance explicitly on-screen, and balletic, elaborately choreographed action films such as *Atomic Blonde*. Eleni Varmazi's "Revisiting Germany's Communist Past after the Fall of the Berlin Wall: *The Lives of Others* (2006)" examines an attempt at post-Communist reconciliation in the 2006 drama *The Lives of Others*, in which a (fictional) Stasi officer defies his superiors to protect an idealistic intellectual upon whom he has been requested to spy. Varmazi argues that although the film received criticism for its perceived inauthenticity, painting perpetrators of surveillance in a sympathetic light, it is redeemed by its sensitive portrayal of individual struggles of the sort seldom captured by the broader strokes of history.

Chapter 12 ("To Make Ends Meet: Downplayed Struggle During the 1989 Polish Transition" by Olga Szmids) presents another challenge to conventional Western historiographies of the Cold War era and the monolithic Eastern bloc. Szmids explores the diversity of political, social, and economic realities in Poland during the *transformacja* (Polish for "transition" or "transformation") period before and after 1989. Finally, chapter 13 ("The Image of the Mayor in Communist and Postcommunist Romanian Filmography" by Monica Manolachi) leads the reader back to Romanian cinema, where the volume began. Chapter 13 focuses on the ambivalent figure of the mayor—whether they are a hero, rogue, or villain—in Communist and post-Communist cinema. Particularly interesting is the discussion of *A Bird's-eye View upon the City* (1975). Its narrative, centered around a capable female mayor, combines "melancholic and poetic" storytelling with "subtle satire," offering more nuance than the socialist heroes who populated screens of earlier decades.⁶ Through the evolution of these fictional mayors, Monica Manolachi charts the trajectory of Romanian cinema across the decades.

6. Monica Manolachi, "The Image of the Mayor in Communist and Postcommunist Romanian Filmography," in *The Odyssey of Communism*, 219

The final part of the book, “Coda: Cyclops,” consists of a single chapter (“‘This Is (Not) A Fairy Tale’: Documenting the Orsinian Revolution” by Gabriela Debita). It reopens the cycle of the *Odyssey*, probing the boundaries between cinema and other art forms through its analysis of Ursula Le Guin’s short story “Unlocking the Air,” which is set in the imagined socialist state of “Orsinia” during its fictional collapse. Debita highlights the story’s fragmentary structure: she argues that Le Guin’s style mimics both the montage of cinematic editing and the fast-moving kaleidoscope of late twentieth-century mass media. The story’s cinematic qualities, Debita suggests, evoke the zeitgeist of the end of the Cold War in Central and Eastern Europe and the self-conscious making of history through camera lenses. Using “Unlocking the Air” as a starting point, Debita interrogates the dynamic and sometimes problematic relations between Communism as it is remembered and reimagined in the West and how it was experienced by those who lived through it. She also points out that some of the heady promises of the era directly following the end of the Cold War have not come to pass, complicating narratives of this period still further. Although Le Guin reminds her readers that “this is not a fairy tale,” Debita suggests that Orsinia still offers readers a moment of uncertain, almost magical optimism, boldly declaring the start of a new journey. Her favorable reading of Le Guin’s short story, like Eleni Varmazi’s interpretation of *The Lives of Others*, focuses on visual narratives as a space for reconciliation and imagination, and for making sense of the recent past.

The Odyssey of Communism’s subject matter is highly diverse. In their foreword, Praisler and Gheorghiu emphasize the lightness of their editorial touch, particularly regarding the ideological implications of any chapter in the volume. *The Odyssey of Communism* covers an ambitious amount of ground, with subject matter stretching across time and space, covering more than half a century’s worth of history in a variety of geographical regions. While this diversity is admirable, it does at times stretch the limits of the book’s four-part structure, which can seem arbitrary in its divisions. (For example, the contemporary satire *Tales from a Golden Age* is discussed in chapters 7 and

13, falling in the second and third parts, respectively.) Conversely, this can leave the connections between chapters somewhat disjointed.

The large scope of the volume also means that the content at times can tend toward the broad-brush or descriptive, as in the case of chapter 9, on the topic of cinema in the early days of the PRC, which covers ground touched upon in other volumes such as Zhang Yingjin's *Chinese National Cinema*.⁷ Chapter 12, on the role of the mayor in Romanian cinema, reads at times like a filmography and might have benefited from a few closer analyses. The inclusion of films made in Western countries, turning their lens (or pen) upon Communism from an outsider's perspective—for example, chapters 8, 10, and the coda, which analyze depictions of Communism in Anglophone film, television, and literature—stretches the scope of the volume still further.

However, this epic scale and polyphonic content is also what makes *The Odyssey of Communism* an engaging and compelling book. The very diversity of its subject matter highlights the ideological and historical complexity of Communism, which runs through the book like a thread on Penelope's loom. Its boldly interdisciplinary approach would make it valuable to scholars of film history, film studies, comparative literature, cultural studies, and political history, among others. *The Odyssey of Communism* emphasizes the complex subjectivity of Communist cultural workers and their negotiations with politics, ideology, and identity. In reopening a period of recent history that is fast rigidifying into myth or new forms of propaganda, *The Odyssey of Communism* highlights the myriad ways in which the stories and images of the Cold War period continue to impact global narratives today.

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7. Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), ch. 6.

