



# Where Good Eastern Europeans Go when They Die: Media Representations of Post-Socialist Europe between Present(s) and Past(s)

DOMINIKA KWAK

Technische Universität Dresden

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In this paper I will consider the representation of post-Socialist Eastern European countries in media and cultural products, highlighting its continuity with the Cold War narrative and with the Thatcherite capitalist realist ‘TINA’ (‘there is no alternative’) doctrine. One of my central reference points will be Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism.

My main, but not only, focus will be on the Czech Republic and Poland. I will concentrate mostly on US movies, in addition to many references to newspaper articles, as being significant in the creation and the maintenance of a ‘common sense’ general perception of the topic, a widespread vision seldom contradicted in mainstream public discourse, connected with a more or less unspoken, unconscious, and automatized ideology. I will try to identify specific aspects of such ideological representation, in particular when it comes to the relationship it establishes between the pre- and post-1990 world. The Socialist past, I argue, is often ahistorically prolonged over the following decade(s), both in order to explain away the failures of the subsequent system and to serve as a reminder of why the past one could never have constituted a viable alternative, deploying to this effect a whole range of othering techniques (e.g. those offered by the horror or comedy genres). Alternatively, that past is simply erased altogether (frequently, as it happens, by the Easterners themselves). I will then conclude with some remarks about architectural developments in formerly Socialist countries, pointing at ways in which these seem to me to both originate from and reinforce such ideology and go along with the kind of strategies I will describe in the media discourse that embodies it.

The othering of Eastern Europeans has ancient roots, and these go much further back than the recent developments discussed in this paper:

Historians of Eastern Europe agree that the idea of ‘Eastern Europe’ originated in Western Europe in the 18th century. It was created by Western geographers, philosophers and travel writers as part of the collective project of defining Western Europe: it was during the Enlightenment that Western Europe became associated,



and then synonymous with, civilisation, development, and rationality. (Azarova 2017)

It was therefore important to identify, in the Other, the opposite of these features; irrationality and lack of civilization are among the most basic traits of the Orientalized Other (Said 1979: 38). As I will try to point out, such features will prove very useful for the TINA narrative before and after the fall of the USSR.

But we should start by pointing out that the very concept of 'Eastern Europe' is far from being fixed and uncontroversial. It is, in fact, widely perceived as problematic or even outright pejorative, including by Eastern Europeans themselves:

Is the name Eastern Europe a pejorative label? The issue is extremely sensitive [...] the spectrum of associations is truly impressive. In the shallow end of this pool, there are indications of being "not comfortable with the label Eastern European... or... this uninspiring name", which often implies being "a Lesser European" [...] A UK-based, Polish-born author writes that "[a]ssociation with the 'East' is still nothing positive or to be proud of". The current unwillingness of Eastern Europeans to admit that they live in Eastern Europe is traced back to the cold war period, with all the bad things connected with it [...] Eastern Europe "was made up of all those losers" and "had those backward, Communist countries which were frozen in the Stone Age" [...] Eastern Europe is perceived as a place from which people want to flee. (Twardzisz 2018: 18)

It is clear, then, that the expression 'Eastern Europe' is not so much rooted in geography as in politics, or rather in the cultural perception of politics and their reflection on geography.

Speaking of a different 'East', Said made a similar observation: "the Orient is not an inert fact of nature [...] as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea" (1979: 4-5). 'Eastern Europe' is, thus, a definition that can seem sometimes at odds with the very geography of the subcontinent, even contradicting basic facts such as its East-West geographical axis, with the result that the 'Eastern' part of it can end up being limited to one country only (Russia – only part of which is on European land) or to a select few (Russia plus Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Romania in 'most definitions' according to the excellent thermometer of public opinion which is the English-language Wikipedia) (Wikipedia, "Eastern Europe") which only seem to share accidental features such as not being part of NATO, or of the Schengen area, or not having fully implemented a liberal-democratic state in the Western fashion. In countries such as the Czech Republic local media consistently publish articles confirming the country's firm standing in Central



Europe – based on US sources such as geography books or, indeed, travel guides<sup>1</sup>. Central Europe is a very different cultural construct, generally associated with Habsburg and/or Prussian history and its tradition of efficiency, more or less humanistic values, and wealth. It is likely not by chance that, precisely now that Ukraine is fighting off Russia in what is widely perceived as a defence of Western values against an Oriental despotism, the pro-Atlantic Slovak think-tank Globsec argues for a “rethinking [of the] concept of Central Europe with Ukraine as its member.” (Tuzhanskyl 2023)

If, according to Oscar Wilde, Paris is where good Americans go when they die, we could say that Central Europe is where good Eastern Europeans go when they die.

And die they did. The 1990s in the former Eastern Bloc were a veritable upheaval, and poverty-related ‘excess deaths’ or ‘deaths of despair’ (King, Scheiring, Nosrati 2022: 299-317) (by alcoholism, suicide, violence, etc.) more or less directly attributable to the collapse of ‘actually existing Socialism’, deindustrialisation, skyrocketing unemployment, the privatisation of the commons and the establishment of a particularly predatory brand of capitalism have been estimated in the millions<sup>2</sup>. The bibliography on this topic is vast, but these findings barely seem to affect the common perception of Eastern European countries and, particularly, of the root causes of their economic hardships. Politologist Elmar Altvater had predicted this when warning about the way in which the annexation of the former DDR by the Bundesrepublik was being planned:

The rapid economic annexation of the GDR would be an adventure not with an uncertain, but rather a highly certain outcome: the collapse of large parts of the GDR economy, which without the protection of its own currency with a low exchange rate would not be internationally competitive. Evidently, it is being deliberately calculated that it will be possible to blame the enormous social costs of a rapid annexation on the old system. (Tröger 2020)

Media representations of Eastern countries follow Altvater’s line precisely. Portrayed by default as drab, ‘unsexy’, and poor (but never in the hip way, preventing Eastern cities from getting the kind of reputation that built the cool image of Berlin: “Warsaw will never be the place where the creatives go, because it was on the wrong side when the points for mythmaking were being distributed” [Pyzik 2014: 28]), these features are consistently, and in the best case scenario implicitly, connected to the cursed heritage of the old Socialist regimes rather than to the dynamics that followed their fall. Of course, whenever the media has reason to present Eastern countries in a positive light, they will invariably

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1 See e.g. Pirodsky 2019 and 2023 for two articles addressed to English-speaking ‘expats’ and published in the same online newspaper.

2 Specific estimates about the numbers and their direct and indirect causes vary. A rather comprehensive overview can be found in Scheiring 2021.



be presented as having overcome that cursed heritage and therefore, ready to be accepted by actual Europeans as their peers, or almost (Azarova 2017).

In a way it is as if the media's commitment to a cultural Cold War (of the kind that brought us infinite movies of valiant Western spies fighting Commies, CIA-funded Abstract Expressionism [Levine 2020], and the reporting of *The New York Times* [Chomsky, Herman 2002]) never ceased: Thatcher's grim prophecy might have proven correct, but it is as if a need to demonstrate this correctness again and again is still felt. In the following I will try to show how that's done.

The past existence of anything remotely resembling the alternative she famously dismissed in her TINA dictum can be either forgotten altogether, as we will see later with regards to Wes Anderson and architectural historical amnesia; or, as I will presently show, Hollywood can create grotesquely caricatured strawmen of what once did appear as – indeed – an alternative, in order to strike them down mercilessly. For this purpose, playing on the audience's fears or ridiculing its objects – as opposed to taking them seriously – may be the most efficient strategy to stabilize a common sense perception of post-Socialist 'failed states'. Eastern Europe thus proves to be a rather popular setting for, respectively, horror and comedy cinema.

With regard to the latter, we can briefly consider a couple of exemplary movies. The first one is 2004 comedy *EuroTrip*. During the eponymous trip the American protagonists end up by mistake, instead of the planned destination Berlin, in dreadful Bratislava. The mix-up is interesting, given what I indicated regarding the status of Berlin vis-a-vis 'properly Eastern' cities: Berlin can add the dangerous allure of a (half) Socialist past to its current role as the capital of a safely Western country. But Bratislava, in the movie, is no tamed version of its former self. The protagonists get off the bus thinking they are in Berlin; and only when it drives off are they presented with the shocking reality. What they enter is a wasteland. The colour palette appropriately turns Cold-War-cold and Socialist grey as the unfortunate Western kids walk on the rubbish-littered no man's land (this, one assumes, is what public space looks like) between two rows of panel houses ravaged by graffiti. Windows are broken, excrements are thrown down from them into the street. Middle Ages-style, the cars are rusty and few, one shirtless old man sitting on a chair by the road washes himself with water from a metal bucket, a small dog growls with a human hand in its mouth, and – in order to get rid of any remaining doubts about the cause of such bleakness – the soundtrack turns to a Red Army Choir-style Soviet song. "Dear sweet mother of God," the protagonist says, "we are in Eastern Europe."

Out of the panel houses walks a bizarre middle-aged man and they try to ask him for information. His first utterances are "you are American? I love America! We just get Miami Wise [sic] on television. Hey, man, Miami Wise is no. 1 new show!", confirming the inevitable subordinate state of fascination of the semi-colonial subject with the superior



Western 'culture' as well as his similarly inevitable backwardness. He then informs them that the train they need to get away from the hellscape will come "very soon – they are building it now" (interestingly, it looks like it is only thanks to their recent entry into the Western capitalist order that Socialist countries can finally provide public transportation). The terrified kids try to put together money for accommodation, but they only have a handful of coins and one bill. "A dollar and eighty-three cents American!", their leader scoffs. "What are we gonna have with that?" Cut to a magnificent hotel where they are attended to by a legion of waiters in tails, massaged, pedicured, served an extravagant dinner and fancy drinks while commenting "gotta love the exchange rate", before the head waiter asks them, "would masters care for anything else?" When the leading kid tosses him a nickel with the patronizing move of a businessman to a shoeshine boy, the head waiter holds the coin like a holy relic. "Oohhh! A nickel!", he whispers, before turning to the hotel manager, slapping him in the face, saying, "do you see this? I open my own hotel," and waltzing out.

The colonialist subtext of this concentrate of stereotypes is so dense that the only thing I'll say about it is that it would be considered exceedingly offensive and absolutely inappropriate if this was set in any country other than a post-Socialist one. If nothing else, making fun of a country's supposedly medieval poverty (which was hardly the case in 2004 Slovakia – but 2004 Slovakia doesn't stand here for 2004 Slovakia, of course, as much as a generic Soviet Eastern-European-Land) would be considered in bad taste. But let's remember Altwater's observation: the blame for that poverty lies *with the old system* (the enemies of Rambo and Rocky!), so it is okay for the American viewer to laugh about it.

The same principle holds, though magnified a thousandfold, in the 2006 movie *Borat*. Director Larry Charles and star Sacha Baron Cohen, both darlings of the US liberal bourgeoisie and commentariat, purportedly intend to satirize the USA itself through the fresh eyes of a foreigner. This foreigner, however, happens to be a villager from post-Soviet Kazakhstan, a country picked because it sounds like it is a real place (it is) but at the same time one no one in the US would be able to place on a map (Stein 2020). Indeed, the protagonist doesn't speak Kazakh at all, but rather a mix of Hebrew and broken Polish. Kazakhstan is actually located between Central Asia and 'Eastern Europe' (although, in the context of this paper, it can be safely filed under the latter, not only because of the forever eastwards-shifting borders of what is and is not 'Eastern Europe', but also because it just stands here for yet another generic Soviet East-Europe-Land), but is home to a majority Muslim population. This allows the filmmakers to double down on Orientalism, merging Europe's own post-Socialist East with the historical concept of the Orient as described by Said. One additional perk of this imaginary Kazakhstan is that, by being an Orientalized Muslim country, it allows for the comedic portrayal of particularly savage forms of anti-Semitism. "Islam is an anti-Semitic ideology, not merely a religion [...] Islam



is an irrational herd or mass phenomenon [...] Islam does not develop, and neither do Muslims, including their 'long-standing hatred of Christians and Jews.'" (Said 1979: 317) (Ironically, while anti-Semitism has become a real problem in some Christian countries of Eastern Europe [Pyzik 2017: 37-38], this is not the case in Kazakhstan [NCSJ, "Kazakhstan"].) Exotic Kazakhstan is thus shown as a primitive country where people drink urine, punch cows for sport, think that Jews reproduce by laying eggs (which must be crushed before they hatch) and sing songs about throwing them down wells; and of course a place where women are routinely beaten and are, by default, for sale.

This latter point is another constant in the media representation of Eastern Europe, consistent with the standard feature of Said's concept of Orientalism, where women are portrayed at once as backwardly submissive and sexually insatiable:

Woven through all of Flaubert's Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex [...] Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate [...] Nevertheless one must acknowledge its importance as something eliciting complex responses, sometimes even a frightening self-discovery, in the Orientalists, and Flaubert was an interesting case in point. (Said 1979: 188)

Eastern European women have a long tradition of appearing in Western TV and movies in a thoroughly sexualized fashion, from James Bond's antagonists/love interests to, in post-Soviet times, the mail-order brides of 2001 *Birthday Girl* and 2003 *Mail Order Bride*, the strippers and 'gold-diggers' in *The Sopranos*, and countless other examples. Mail-order brides, sex trafficking, and prostitution are, of course, tragic realities that became rampant in the dire economic conditions of the 1990s, when millions found themselves suddenly unemployed in rapidly deteriorating economies. (Interestingly, the stereotype of the seductive Eastern woman doesn't seem to have much of a history in US – as opposed to UK – cinema until the fall of the USSR.) Moreover, just as in *Borat*, and consistent with Orientalist stereotypes directed at Muslim countries, "those eager to demonstrate Eastern Europe's inherent backwardness focus particularly on women from the region", with a standard procedure which "conflates Communist and post-Communist periods while ignoring the cultural and political diversity of Eastern Europe to depict the region as a uniformly decrepit place, populated by the badly educated *homo sovieticus*."<sup>3</sup> (Pyzik 2016)

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<sup>3</sup> This quotation is taken from an article about the liberal press making fun of Melania Trump according to the full rulebook of stereotypes about Eastern European women. What makes the case even more perversely interesting is that Trump herself has always seemed uncomfortable with her self-perceived identity as an Eastern European woman, to the point of Germanizing her surname before moving to the US, even though of course her country of origin – former Yugoslavia, and specifically Slovenia – wouldn't be considered 'Eastern' by any rational standards, being firmly located in Southern Europe and having no historical connections with the USSR at all.



But the sexual allure of the East also has a strong connection with the horror genre – in fact, since pre-Soviet times, as proven by Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Let’s consider the first two movies of the *Hostel* trilogy, in which male victims are lured into a torture dungeon by customarily attractive and uninhibited Eastern girls. (Once again, as in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “[i]deas about the lack of freedom of Eastern peoples, their sexual violence and promiscuity, their superstition and ignorance all clearly reflect back on an enlightened bourgeois agenda. Not only did these ideas serve to bolster Western confidence, they also forwarded a real project of extending Western power.” [Quinn 2017]) The eponymous hostel, purported to have “the best women in Europe”, is incidentally also located in Slovakia, where girls “love Americans.” The director picked Slovakia for reasons similar to those of *Borat’s* Kazakhstan – “Americans do not even know that this country exists” – although the alleged goal here was “to show Americans’ ignorance of the world around them.”<sup>4</sup> (BBC News, “Slovakia Angered by Horror Film”) This declaration of intent doesn’t sound particularly Orientalist, and the evil secret society that hunts and tortures people for sport is, in fact, one of international wealthy elites; the solidly colonial/Orientalist worldview of the frat boy protagonists meets its comeuppance; and, for once, it might be argued that Eastern Europeans are somewhat portrayed as themselves victims of the global capitalist order rather than of their ancient regimes, whose fall has generated a world in which human bodies and lives have no value except their market value (and not a particularly high one, although of course American lives cost more on the secret society’s price list).

Such a reading is valid, and yet some definitely Orientalist features of these movies seem to be at odds with, and problematize, it. The arrival at the hostel is shown in the first movie (actually shot in the Czech Republic with Czech-speaking actors) with the obligatory grey palette, scenes of post-industrial bleakness, and a toothless, middle-aged local driver. Modern technology is nowhere to be seen, Slovak men are still shown as evil, and Slovak women as dangerous sex fiends; the few protagonists that make it back alive in the end will be either traumatized or will have turned to the dark side, as if forever tainted by their contact with the savage Orient – declined here in its post-Socialist variant, a post-apocalyptic (indeed) place worthy of one of the many real-world ‘dark tourism’ offers attracting Western tourists to Chernobyl and Pripyat, or one of many ‘Museums of Communism’ that litter the cities of the former Eastern Bloc like little kitschy black Disneyland, upholding all the usual narratives about the horrors of life in Socialist regimes that visitors pay good money to hear.

If *Dracula*, like *Borat*, told of an Easterner coming West, then *Hostel*, like *EuroTrip*, stages the opposite movement: Westerners visiting the East. Arguably, this allows Western anxieties about the East to emerge – in a way, the movie portrays bad conscience.

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4 The director did not visit Slovakia before or during the shooting of the film.



This is shown on an individual level, that of tourists or ‘expats’ going to experience the (economically) cheap thrills of these exotic, ultimately irrational, and barely civilized countries, the famous beauty of their women and the colonial powers imposed upon them by the exchange rate<sup>5</sup>. A lurking sense of unease; a repressed guilt, perhaps, which returns here in a psychoanalytic carnival of blood; fear of the unknown, an unknown that is only so because the colonial-minded Westerner doesn’t really bother to get to know it at all; the exploiter’s own fear of being exploited and seen just as a moving moneybag (American victims, unlike local ones, go for a hefty 25,000 dollars) – all of this seems to be inevitably linked to all the fun promised by these places, whose threatening aura is just hiding beneath the surface. One thinks of Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz: ultimately, the main risk is that of going native under the sinister spell of (post) Socialism and forgetting one’s own upbringing, ‘Western values’, good liberal-democratic conscience, and, in the end, civilization.

The capitalist order is officially represented in the movie by the members of the secret society that prey on people in the formerly Socialist East, now open to Western financial capital which makes human life just a commodity to be sold and bought on the free market as cheaply as possible; but this eastbound economic imperialism is also reflected, on a smaller scale, in the no less predatory behaviour of the protagonist tourists, happy to exploit the country and its people (which mostly means, of course, its women<sup>6</sup>) as mere extras in the biggest frat party of them all. Slovakia, where people love Americans: the tourists in *Hostel* are the same as those of *EuroTrip*, only different insofar as they have *chosen* this destination and as the scary landscape they encounter on arrival will not prove to be the antechamber to a fancy hotel to live it up in. They may have just taken the wrong direction at some crossroads, and met with the most genuine face of the country instead of being able to lord over it with one dollar and eighty-three cents American. Thus, they eventually discover that Thatcher’s TINA doctrine may not necessarily hold true; there might be, or there might have been, an alternative after all – but this is too terrifying to even speak about it. Western fear and guilt are somehow mirrored in the movies’ explosions of violence, directly engendered by a global cabal of power and wealth; yet, to some extent, there might be a level of reassurance for the few survivors in knowing that the place they come from is far, in all senses, from this barbarism. It may also be interesting to notice that, while *Hostel*’s protagonists end up paying the price for luxury enjoyed for dirt cheap (unlike *EuroTrip*’s ones) and somehow meeting the comeuppance for their imperialist attitude, the fact that this only applies to small fry tourists because of

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5 “Cheap beer and even cheaper women” according to a Telegraph article quoted in Azarova 2017; but see also the quote from Altvater in Tröger 2020, an article about the role of the Deutsche Mark in the annexation of the DDR.

6 “This is Femen’s context: the post-Communist desert of sex industry, sex clubs, girls at your wish every minute of the night and day. When you check in a hotel, you’re totally expected to be interested in the wide offer of sex infrastructure, with ‘Gentlemen’s Clubs’ at every step of the city centers.” (Pyzik 2014: 140)



their personal behaviour (but not the system at large and the big fish who represent it in the movie) points, in itself, to another feature of contemporary neoliberal attitudes: guilt is privatized, the morality of individual choices substitutes any kind of systemic and political responsibility. Another famous phrase by Margaret Thatcher seems at play here – there’s no such thing as society, only individuals.

The full repertoire of ‘Eastern’ post-Socialist horror is too large to develop it here, but one of its main features seems to be the blurring – which I’ve already hinted at – between Socialism proper and post-Socialism. One could, perhaps, be forgiven for having the impression that such blurring is functional to the ideological, neoliberal showcasing of this Eastern cabinet of horrors as a direct consequence of, or indeed the exact same thing as, pre-1990 regimes. Such a retrospective or retroactive TINA, so to speak, seems particularly crucial in times when even liberal economists pick up Marx’s books again (suffice to think of Piketty, professor at the London School of Economics; but *The Economist* itself publishes articles with titles along the lines of “Was Karl Marx Right?” with uncanny frequency), when the *Communist Manifesto* is once again widely sold, read and commented upon<sup>7</sup> and an impressively growing number of disaffected youth in the USA itself declare themselves in favour of some kind of Socialist system (Saad 2019). It is urgent, then, to either cancel or damn all memories of the socio-economic experiments that did, in fact, attempt to build the sort of actual alternatives whose existence Thatcher denied.

The gods and demons of a dark Slavic past emerge in the recent Polish show *Cracow Monsters* (2022), released on Netflix and shot according to all the best practices of international prestige TV<sup>8</sup>. But are those demons really that ancient? We might see in them the staging of the Eastern Europeans’ complexes about their own Easternness, the lurking Slavic soul that resists assimilation in the West<sup>9</sup> (a complex that, indeed, might have a particularly strong tradition in Poland and has been traced back by some precisely

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7 “A ‘return to Marx’ occasioned by the financial crisis of 2008, a substantial spike in sales for his texts, provided much wry laughter from the commentariat. But even anecdotically, this fascination, in the aftermath of the banking collapse, is intriguing. In Berman’s words: ‘Whenever there’s trouble, anywhere in the world, this book becomes an item; when things quiet down, the book drops out of sight; when there’s trouble again, the people who forgot remember... When people dream of resistance – even if they’re not Communists – it provides music for their dreams.’” (Miéville 2022: 41)

8 This specific sub-genre, telling of ancient gods that re-emerge in today’s world, was brought into the mainstream by Neil Gaiman’s 2001 novel *American Gods*, itself dutifully portraying in its pantheon a Slavic one – Czernobog – as the most brutally bloodthirsty of them all, a specialist in smashing heads with a sledgehammer, and introducing him in the full regalia of a dodgy, poor Easterner: “He wore gray pinstripe pants, shiny from age, and slippers. He held an unfiltered cigarette with square-tipped fingers, sucking the tip while keeping it cupped in his fist – like a convict, thought Shadow, or a soldier [...] a flash of yellow teeth [...] He shook Shadow’s left hand with his own. His hands were rough and calloused, and the tips of his fingers were as yellow as if they had been dipped in iodine [...] an apartment that smelled like over-boiled cabbage and cat-box and unfiltered foreign cigarettes.” (Gaiman 2005: 84-85)

9 “The notion of the ‘Slavic soul’ [...] remains a burden on the advocates of Europeanness.” (Pyzik 2014: 156)



to the forced abandonment of the ancient religion coming back with a vengeance in *Cracow Monsters*<sup>10</sup>); or – perhaps – the return of the repressed of the monsters and demons of a much more recent past. I have already mentioned the ‘Museums of Communism’ that are almost ubiquitous in post-Socialist cities, perfectly analogous to the ‘Museums of Torture’ one finds everywhere in Europe – down to the horror B-movie sensationalism and sovereign disdain for historical accuracy. Another (US/UK) TV show blessed with massive international success, 2019 miniseries *Chernobyl*, tackled one sort of real-world horror (while also having a somewhat nonchalant attitude towards historical accuracy [Gessen 2019]) in its depiction of an accident that has become synonymous with Socialist contempt for human life and the infamous Socialist inefficiency, but is also a school example of how the heritage of Socialist administrations would stain and poison (in a quite literal sense) the successor states, blurring any distinction between the two.

This reference to a past that never really ended, conflating it with the present or strongly implying a direct line of continuity (while generally skipping over the 1990s and their effects), seems to be one of the main features of the Orientalist views of post-Socialist Eastern Europe that I’ve been describing. One interesting example, especially given the director’s fondness for overly aestheticized movies that never seem particularly concerned with history other than as a picturesque background, may be *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) by Wes Anderson. Framed through Anderson’s usual series of narrative Matryoshka dolls, the movie gets to its main story (explicitly set in a generic Eastern-European-Land country called Zubrowka, like the Polish vodka brand, and purported to be “on the farthest Eastern boundary of Europe” although the movie was mostly shot in Görlitz and the setting has a distinct Alpine and Mitteleuropean atmosphere) only after a modern-day character visits the grave of an imaginary writer who, in 1985, authored book about his 1968 visit to the titular hotel. By then, since Socialists are in power, the hotel is obviously a shadow of its former glory; in this decayed context, the writer is told the story (set in 1932) that constitutes the movie’s actual plot, some kind of heist/caper comedy while a coup is attempted by the stooges of a cartoonish, pseudo-Nazi regime. The movie has been criticized for its trivialization of the complex, tragic history of European fascism, as well as for the Orientalism of its setting (Quinn 2017). To that I’ll simply add that the pre-WW2 plot and the post-war frame narrative seem to partake in a similar, superficial flattening of history – not that this would come as a surprise, considering it is one of the trademarks of the director.

So far, Anderson is in line with the kind of obfuscation of the differences between pre- and post-1990 reality that we have seen operating in many media products. To this,

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10 “Devoid of their mythical origin, Poles became the orphans of Europe, marginalized in the West and unable to find themselves among the Slavic culture they lost.” (Pyzik 2014: 144)



however, he adds another and quite different way of confusing our view of the present and the past – namely, the removal of the latter. The very date 1968 (whose ‘Western’ declension has been similarly aestheticized, de-politicized, and de-historicized in another Anderson movie, 2021 *The French Dispatch*) seems to have been picked at random, whereas it was a very significant date in Central/Eastern Europe – Czechoslovakia had the ‘Prague Spring’ and saw Dubček’s attempt to establish a ‘Socialism with a human face’ before Soviet tanks invaded the country; Poland saw the student protests of the ‘March events’, also followed by harsh repression. These movements (not unlike the 1989 protests in the DDR, or *Solidarność*) were all led by unapologetic leftists, and aimed at a reform of ‘actually existing Socialism’ in a democratic direction which could bring it closer to what it was supposed to be in the first place<sup>11</sup>; the Italian Communist Party, the biggest in the West, as well as the French and the Portuguese ones, officially stood with Czechoslovakia even after the invasion, in an open break with Moscow (so did Albania and Romania). However, the general narrative and common perception about these events (as well as the ‘89 protests in the DDR or in Czechoslovakia itself, and *Solidarność*) work under the misleading assumption that they could be filed under the umbrella of ‘anti-Communist’ protests<sup>12</sup>.

Needless to say, Anderson’s movie doesn’t even remotely hint at any of this. 1968 is a date like any other. Socialism itself is only reflected in the decay of the hotel, a grim, distorted mirror of the lively grandeur of its old days in the interwar period – a historical time which is widely idealized in countries of the former Eastern Bloc in the explicit attempt to establish the positive narrative of a national golden age which can be opposed to the post-WW2 Socialist regimes<sup>13</sup>. This paradise lost of the interwar period is the setting of the core plot of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, portrayed in all the frivolous splendor of an age that has never existed. According to film critic Eileen Jones, ‘Anderson has reached the dizzying point of fantasizing about feeling nostalgic for nostalgia itself.’ (Jones 2014) Jones, who in her review makes reference to Fredric Jameson’s reflections on postmodern nostalgia and historical amnesia (and, indeed, the interwar period plays a

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11 See e.g., for the Polish 1968 crisis, Gawin 2008.

12 See e.g., for the Prague Spring, both international press releases such as Al Jazeera’s Heijmans, “Czechs mark 50 years”, or Associated Press’s “Czechs, Slovaks irked” and, oddly, even Czech articles such as Velinger, “Unknown artists apologise”; one of the categories the Wikipedia article about the Polish March events is grouped under is, indeed, “Anti-Communism in Poland.” See Wikipedia, “1968 Polish Political Crisis.”

13 See, for Poland, Wagner 2023: 159-166, and nevermind that the interwar ‘Second Polish Republic’ under Piłsudski was a militaristic, authoritarian regime; for Czechoslovakia, Holubec 2014. I’ll also point out a Czech newspaper article, Radio Prague International, “Prague lies further West than Vienna”, which is symptomatic in that it begins with the customary eulogy for the First Czechoslovak Republic, significantly bringing up the GDP as a supposedly neutral measuring unit for its success, right after the non-neutral observation that, indeed, “Prague lies further west than Vienna” (right in the very title; I have briefly discussed the political significance of such ‘geographical’ observations at the beginning of this paper) and goes on to take pride in the country’s NATO membership, gloating in its participation in the very “security strategy” which the Warsaw pact “was born to oppose.”



similar role in some Central/Eastern European imaginaries as, according to the Jameson, the 1950s do according in the American one), goes on:

Only here's the problem: Wes Anderson's Old Europe is just like a modern Andersonian world we know so well, mannered, decorative and nostalgic [...] Newly fascist Europe on the rise looks to be wonderfully Wes-like, only with slightly severer uniforms. 1970s Communist Zebrowka [*sic*] is the same too, though the décor takes on violent orange colors, but since Anderson loves 70s retro, that blends in fine. Which brings us to the present day in made-up Zebrowka [*sic*], which is obviously Wes-world again. Since it's all seamlessly unified, the whole suggestion that something wonderful has been lost circa 1934 carries no weight.

The Socialist past during which the main frame narrative is set is only present as yet another aesthetic packaging, allowing for the display of a different colour palette, without being discussed at all – without being *named*, even – and smoothly connected to the (supposedly) post-Socialist present of the graveyard visit in the opening scene. In doing so, Anderson manages to tick both boxes of the two possible ways of looking at the Socialist era that seem to me to be the most common in the contemporary approach: either it is presented as more or less indistinguishable from the subsequent post-Socialist world (as is partially the case in this movie and was definitely the case in the other ones I have discussed), or it is simply glossed over, much in the same way a polite person would not remark upon an embarrassing gaffe made by their interlocutor.

This latter approach seems most frequent in post-Socialist countries themselves, and nowhere is this invisibility more visible than in architecture. Anderson's movie is probably a good introduction: not only because his own remarks about *The Grand Budapest Hotel's* mix-and-match approach<sup>14</sup> closely echo Jameson's observations on the topic of the 'nostalgia mode' (which, coincidentally, is first defined as an architectural feature<sup>15</sup>), first and foremost because his "elaborately pretty candy-box aesthetic" (Jones 2014), the pastel colours and the doll-houses of his diorama-like scenographies seem a perfect correlative to the architectural trends and urban design policies that are rampant in post-Socialist countries.

Architecture, in fact, has been playing a central role in the dismantling of a set of shared memories. Countries of the former Eastern Bloc have been outperforming each other in

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14 "Anyway, we combined all that stuff and I thought, 'I don't want to censor myself, I want to be totally free with it, we're in a made up country, we're mixing wars together.' And we're mixing up nationalities and cultures, and this kid, a stateless person. Stateless is a big word in that time and place and he's from—I don't know if he's an Arab or a Jew or some mixture of them. And I don't know what happens, there's a war starting in 1932 and that's not exactly lining up with [history], so I just felt like we'll make our own experience however we want. Everything I'm interested will go in there, everybody already knows all this [real history], and we'll just see how it all adds up." (Perez 2024)

15 "The architects use this (exceedingly polysemous) word for the complacent eclecticism of postmodern architecture, which randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles." (Jameson 1991: 65)



the (more or less discreet<sup>16</sup>) removal of the tangible signs of the recent past, and the process is still ongoing (Prague-now, “Where to Find Traces of Prague’s Communist Past”). In Berlin, “[a] prolific ‘architecture of memory’ [...] remodelled the city [...] Yet, what the new authorities of Berlin did was to get rid of the memory of the DDR first.” (Pyzik 2014: 60) Dresden, of course, could be a case study: the DDR authorities had rebuilt almost all of its landmarks, but it was the new Federal Republic that decided to turn the face of the whole city back about 60 years as if nothing had happened after 1945, creating a facsimile architecture that had the clear goal of erasing the Socialist past and has been very controversial among the specialists (Kozlova 2022). At the same time, such a reconstruction made the city a poster child for neoliberal times and their peculiar historical amnesia, turning it into the ideal destination for tourists who aren’t necessarily aware that the Baroque buildings they’re looking at might very well be less than 20 years old.

Indeed, during those 20 years and counting, Central and Eastern European cities have been very busy in the (re)construction of their past. A mix of EU funds, government sponsorship, and private investments has allowed the ‘historical’ centres of countless cities and towns, from Prague to Warsaw to Budapest, to be restored to their former glory – or even to surpass it – in a series of dubious<sup>17</sup> face liftings that repackaged them in identical pastel colours, fixed up or rebuilt from scratch buildings and monuments that had been damaged or lost, and provided local businesses and tourist offices with the power of attraction of the perfect Instagram backgrounds.

In Berlin, appropriately dark mementos of the dictatorship are left in place and enter the mandatory tourist itineraries of Checkpoint Charlies, Stasi HQs, and the occasional marketable Ostalgie; meanwhile, in 2008, the Bundestag decided for the demolition of the 1976 Modernist Palast der Republik in order to make room for the reappearance of the old chateau of the Hohenzollern – again glossing over a now-uncomfortable half century, and curiously oblivious to the somewhat less than stellar track record of the Kingdom of Prussia and its rulers; but then, a certain deproblematized brand of nationalism seems to be perfectly compatible with the contemporary ‘soft’ relationship with history. What matters is that a conventionally ‘beautiful’ palace with its stuccos, statues, and old-fashioned detail, as fake as a Wes Anderson scenography, can again be part of the cityscape and look nice in pictures – much like Warsaw’s new/old Jabłonowski Palace and its future/past Saxon Palace, or, indeed, any of the number of more or less thoroughly reinvented structures that lay east of the Iron Curtain, all of them showcasing an aesthetic that might remind foreign visitors of the kind of quaint backgrounds against which the elegant minuettos of interwar social life could have unfolded. This resurrection of such

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16 See, for the less-than-discreet case of Ukraine, Dickinson, “Toppling Lenin”; Reuters, “Ukraine presses ahead”; Associated Press, “Ukraine replaces Soviet hammer and sickle.”

17 See “Venice Charter.”



idealized golden ages also plays into the more or less 19<sup>th</sup> century-style brand of nationalism that has been revamped after the fall of the Soviet Union in post-Socialist countries<sup>18</sup>. The wedding-cake-like Grand Budapest Hotel is uncannily similar, in its looks, to the way many of those Mitteleuropean and Eastern European cities now appear, all gesturing vaguely towards some pastiche of an idealized past through its generic stylistic recuperation (not unlike Jameson's 'nostalgia film')<sup>19</sup>; some kind of scary Museum of Communism might be just around the corner, to remind us of the haunting spectres of the *other* past. Of course, this de-historicized aesthetic corresponds exactly to a specific way of looking at history. Thus, "[f]rom the Eastern-Western battles over memory, we see how the 'new', posttransitional version of history triumphed over the real memories of the place or even the people who used to live and work there." (Pyzik 2014: 70)

In Polish cities, where tourists fill up their phones with selfies taken in front of the Andersonesque colourful facades of the Old Towns, their cameras might unwillingly capture graffiti stencils representing a short-haired woman wearing glasses. These are ubiquitous, and the woman's name was Jolanta Brzeska. An activist against the evictions of tenants from reprivatized buildings after the fall of the People's Republic, Brzeska was murdered on March 1st, 2011. The investigations were chaotic, and the murderer was never found. She became a nationally known symbol for the fight against evictions and against the wrongdoings of privatization. Still, I was not able to find a single article mentioning her in English-language media, and her Wikipedia page is in Polish only. Perhaps Brzeska was murdered under the wrong regime. She's no martyr of Communist dictatorship, and, despite the currency of generic 'resistance' groups in blockbuster movies, the media does not seem overly interested in celebrating those that try to prove that there might be an alternative after all. The tourists that see her face on the spick-and-span walls of the new/old buildings might deplore the vandalism that is ruining such nicely reconstructed cities.

I'm afraid Brzeska wasn't 'good' enough to go to Central Europe in her afterlife.

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18 "Important historiographic developments initially spearheaded and continued by revisionist historians, such as on nation-building, have not been immune to larger political shifts. The USSR's demise along national lines encouraged the idea that, just as US victory in the Cold War ushered 'the end of history,' so too had pre-Soviet nations been historically vindicated in their 'return' to independence and national liberation from Soviet rule. A historian could at once accept nations as constructed, while also asserting that Soviet nationhood was an unnatural imposition upon a more authentic pre-Soviet nation or nationality. Analyzing the nation as a historically constructed 'imagined community' did not on its own preclude the ability to frame culture, identity, or nationalism as phenomena separate from or even opposed to material forces, instead of being intimately intertwined with them." (Herbert, Gigantino 2024)

19 "What is more interesting, and more problematic, are the ultimate attempts, through this new discourse, to lay siege either to our own present and immediate past, or to a more distant history that escapes individual existential memory." (Jameson 1991: 66)



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