



Paradoxes of Popularity

— Balázs Varga



Uncle Marin, Billionaire

We know that many popular films were made in Eastern Europe during the socialist era. Comedies, musicals, historical epics, and adventure films attracted millions of viewers. But *how* were they popular? How did they participate in shaping, discussing, and regulating the social imagination? What kind of values, stories, and heroes were used by and within socialist popular cinemas, making everyday experiences intelligible and familiar? Finally – how can we get closer to socialist popular cinemas, beyond friendly nostalgia and mocking laughter?

While popular film culture was rich and dynamic throughout the region, and memory of it is still powerful, this topic was rarely raised in film criticism and scholarly discussions prior to the early 2010s. Before that, films from the socialist decades were watched and interpreted almost exclusively from the perspective of politically committed art cinema. Ambiguous feelings regarding entertainment were as present in socialist cultural policy as in film criticism. Socialist cultural policy wanted to educate and enlighten the public. Entertainment was not rejected at all, but ‘aimless’ and ‘pointless’ entertainment was considered unnecessary. For the elitist critical perspective, which focused on artistic innovation and political commentary, there was either limited political and artistic curiosity in the films of the socialist era, or the political content of these films was too much and direct (many popular films were interpreted as supporters of the then current ideology). In short, as Maya Turovskaya (1993) put it, the state, the intelligentsia, and

the mass audience had different favorites; the ideological, the aesthetic, and the box-office values differed.

This essay seeks to transcend the binary oppositions (high vs low, political vs apolitical, subversive vs affirmative, innovative vs formulaic) within which the registers of Eastern European film cultures have been usually interpreted. These registers (especially art cinema and popular cinema, not to mention middle-brow film culture) are neither homogeneous, nor they are sharply distinct. My approach is thus based on the emphasis on the complexity, interaction, and paradoxical nature of the topic, as well as on the assumption that the complexities and contradictions of socialist popular cinemas should not be smoothed out but given special attention. Analyzing these complexities can also aid us substantially in understanding (the memory of) socialism. For a long time, it was thought that we could gain a relevant picture of socialism through critical representations of high culture. As many current studies have argued convincingly (see Beumers 2003; Năripea, Trossek 2008; Imre 2016; Ostrowska, Pitassio

and Varga 2017; Mihelj, Huxtable 2018 to name only a few), without denying this perspective, we can say that popular film culture can also provide an exciting and nuanced insight into socialism. In the following, I will discuss the questions of popularity and success (attendance numbers and statistics), and then focus on the problems of genre-based film culture and genre-oriented interpretation of Eastern European films.

Drowning by numbers

There were a good number of entertainment films and they were also very popular everywhere in the Soviet Bloc. Comedies, historical and adventure films, as well as spectacular prestige films were at the top of box office lists

to strengthen the infrastructure for showing films. Thanks to these Soviet-style campaigns of ‘cinefication’ and travelling cinema, dense networks of movie theatres (or at least projection facilities) were built not only in the cities but also in the countryside by the early 1950s. Thus, the 1950s represented the golden age of movie-going almost everywhere in the Soviet Bloc. Admission numbers hit unprecedented records. In Hungary and Czechoslovakia, with a population of around ten million, the yearly attendance numbers were highest in the late 1950s with 186 million ticket sales in 1957 in Czechoslovakia and 140 million ticket sales in 1960 in Hungary (over the next decade, this was followed by a sharp drop in the number of viewers). Not surprisingly, the most-viewed Eastern European



Lemonade Joe

everywhere. Polish and Hungarian historical epics and literary adaptations (*Knights of the Teutonic Order*, 1960, A. Ford, *Men and Banners*, 1965, Z. Várkonyi), Soviet “sad comedies” (*The Diamond Arm*, 1969, L. Gaidai, *The Irony of Fate*, 1975, E. Ryazanov), Czech and Slovak rural comedies (the *Sun, Hay..* series by Z. Troska from the 1980s), Czech and East-German fairy-tale films (*The Proud Princess*, 1952, B. Zeman, *Once Upon a Time There Was a King*, 1954, B. Zeman, *The Story of Little Mook*, 1953, W. Staudte), Romanian adventure and historical films (*Michael the Brave*, 1970, S. Nicolaescu) demonstrate the genre diversity and local/national variations of popular films.

Going to the cinema was one of the most popular forms of entertainment. As socialist cultural policies regarded film as an important tool of mass education, serious efforts were made

films are from this era. The fairy-tale *Proud Princess* leads the top list of Czechoslovak films with more than 8 million viewers. The total number of domestic viewers of the Hungarian operetta, *Mickey Magnate* (1946, M. Keleti) was well over 9 million. The most-viewed East German film, *The Story of Little Mook* (1953) had almost 13 million viewers (the population of East Germany was around 18 million at that time), and the Polish *Knights of the Teutonic Order* had 32 million viewers. There are also examples of domestic attendance records from later periods. The most-watched Romanian film is the comedy *Uncle Marin, Billionaire* (1979, S. Nicolaescu) with more than 14 million viewers. The Soviet adventure film, *Pirates of the 20th Century* (1980, B. Durov) had more than 87 million admissions (the population of the USSR was around 270 million at that time).



Needless to say, these statistics are not always accurate and reliable. Manipulating the number of viewers was not uncommon. Still, the trends are convincing. Of course, numbers are not everything. The outstanding numbers of the most popular Hungarian films, for example, are not from the months after the premiere. These films were screened for a long time after the premiere and had several re-runs, thus the millions of their admission numbers are cumulative numbers, marking the whole theatrical career of the given film. Prolongation of the time films were on the programs was an essential and common tool of distribution policy. In Hungary, for example, re-runs of formerly released films were always significant within the overall numbers of annual

of which were considered war booty) were the biggest hits. While there were rare American films in distribution in Budapest, Tarzan films filled Moscow cinemas in the early 1950s. Similarly, in the late 1940s, not a Soviet war film, but a German musical starring Marika Rökk, *The Girl of My Dreams* (1944, G. Jacoby), was the most-watched film in the USSR. The release of Western films was essential to satisfy the needs of an audience that wanted to be entertained. On the one hand, few Soviet films were made at that time, and even fewer spectacular and entertaining films. On the other hand, cinema revenues were a significant source for the film industry and cultural policy. While in the 1950s in many Eastern European countries, domestic films broke admission



The Story of Little Mook

cinema attendance. They could have accounted for half or even most of the attendance numbers for Hungarian films. In Hungary, a total of 70 million movie tickets were sold in 1982, but only less than half of that was sold for newly released films.

Furthermore, of the new premieres, Western movies made up the majority of the audience numbers. All this shows the importance of distribution policy: what films were shown, when and in what circles. In the early 1950s, keeping Western, mainly American, films away from the Eastern European markets contributed greatly to the success and popularity of domestic films. Yet it cannot be said that the limited distribution of Western films was always and everywhere the most important tool. After all, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, in the Soviet Union, Western films (some

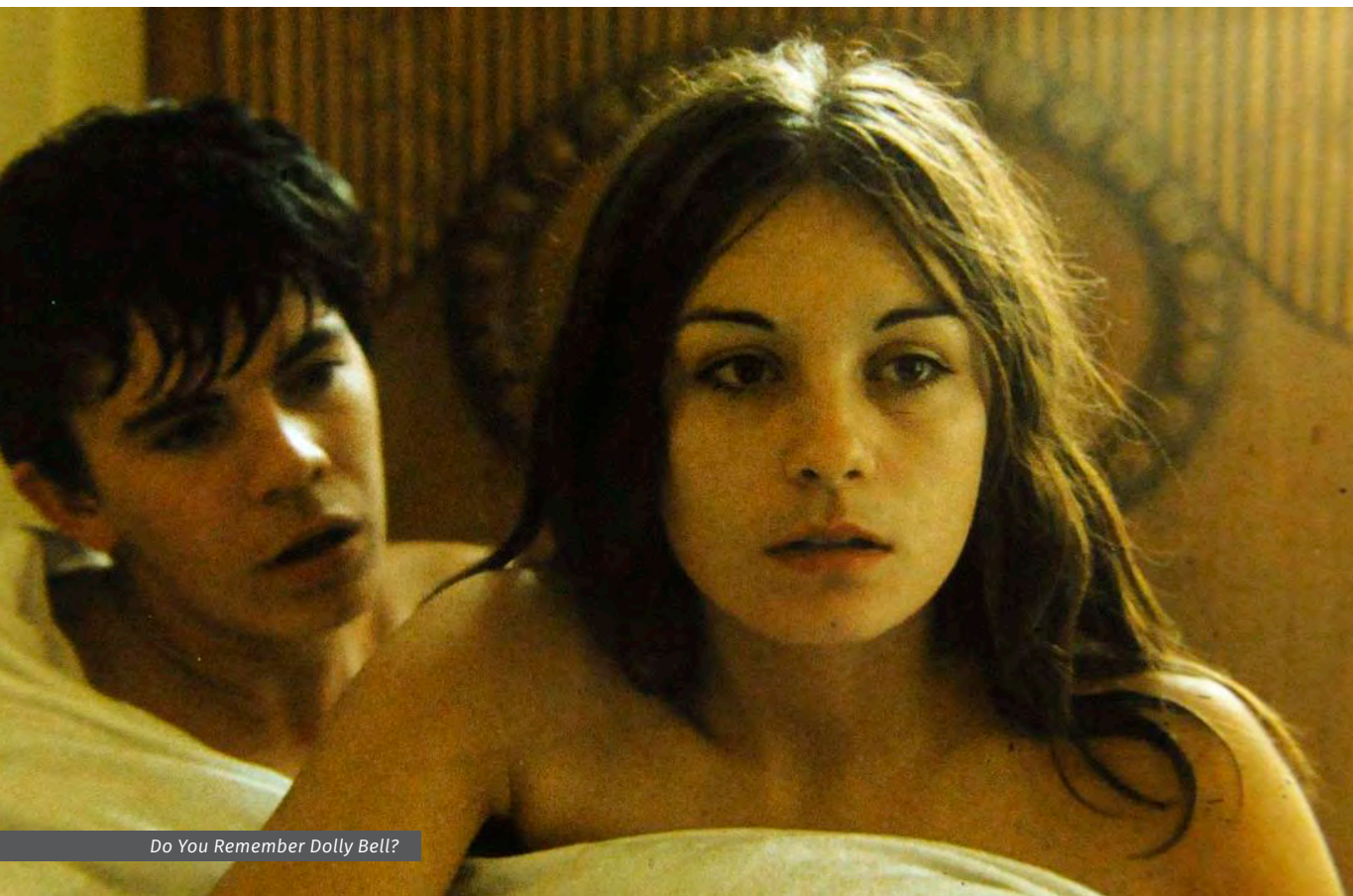
records, in the Soviet Union, Indian films were outstandingly successful: "In the post-Stalinist years of movie-going, Soviet audiences also enjoyed access to Hollywood productions and French, Italian and Mexican genre films (...) But of all the foreign genre films in the Soviet Union, the audience numbers were highest for Indian popular cinema. Statistics available for the years 1954-1989 reveal that 50 Indian films drew more than 20 million viewers in these years, making them the most successful of foreign films; these films led the way, followed by 41 American, 38 French and 12 Italian films." (Rajogopalan 2008: 30) The most popular film in the Soviet period was a Mexican melodrama, *Yesenia* (1971, A.B. Crevenna) with 91 million tickets sold. The first Soviet film to surpass the 50 million 'dream mark' was the science-fiction romance *Amphibian Man* (1961, V. Chebotaryov, G. Kazansky) with more than

65 million viewers. In terms of domestic hits, the records in Soviet cinemas are the aforementioned *Pirates of the 20th Century* and the Oscar-winning melodrama *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1980, V. Menshov) from the stagnation period. Thus, the popularity of domestic films and the issue of the presentation and popularity of rivals, especially Western, films do not follow a simple and one-dimensional logic.

Genre films without genre-based film culture

Any categorization, such as genre grouping, is a question of quantities and is based on a multitude of works to be classified. The Hollywood studio system (both in the classic and post-classic period) produced and still produces films in huge

Hollywood was and is the center of genre-based film culture because it developed and provided standard mechanisms of production, distribution, and exhibition. Genre analyses concentrated on Hollywood as an example of genre-based film culture because 1) films in the Hollywood system were made constantly and in huge numbers, 2) in a systematic production and marketing system, based on genre formulas from production to exhibition, which were met by 3) audience expectations and critical reception (i.e. were consumed and interpreted along with common schemes and categories). These pillars, i.e., production/industry, text/product/content, and reception/consumption are closely linked together. The scarcity of genre-based interpretation of non-Hollywood films



Do You Remember Dolly Bell?

numbers and varieties, providing a natural field of study. There are other influential and successful film industries (such as Bollywood, the Japanese, or South Korean) which are also based on mass production. However, the mere existence of genre films does not equal the existence of genre-based film culture. Mass production is only one of the necessary pre-conditions of genre-based film culture, but it alone is not sufficient. With some simplifications we can define three different elements of genre-based film culture: 1) mass production, 2) standardized mechanisms of production, distribution, and exhibition, and 3) genre-oriented discourses in the audience and critical reception. Thus, we should separate the question of genre films and genre-based film culture. Although socialist popular film cultures did not lack genres, it cannot be called a genre-based system.

and film cultures can thus be traced back to the deficiency of these factors: the lack of mass production; the shortcomings of genre standards in production, distribution, and exhibition; and the inadequacy or insufficiency of genre-oriented consumption and critical reception.

Socialist popular film cultures cannot be called genre-based film culture not only because of the lack of an industrial model of mass production. Equally lacking were the genre-oriented mechanisms of promotion, distribution, and exhibition. Knowledge about current trends and examples of contemporary (Western, Hollywood) film culture and the discourse of genre films was similarly limited. Nevertheless, it is more advisable to not look only to the “deficiencies” of Eastern European film cultures, because we do not want to understand socialist popular film culture only in relation



to a gold standard (that is, Hollywood), but to map its logic and operation – in all its complexity and contradictions. Thus, from the questions of genre-based film culture, we can turn (back) to the questions of Eastern European genre films (and genres).

Genres beyond Hollywood

There were plenty of genre films made in Eastern Europe during socialism. We can even distinguish socialist genres such as the partisan film, East German Indianerfilme and Czech(oslovak) “crazy comedies” of the 1960s, which can be called a genre version or generic cycle. These kinds of mass entertainment were not contrary to socialist film culture.

genres and their links to different cultural traditions (from penny stories to gothic horror novels, from commedia dell’arte to German Singspiel or Central-European operetta) and their variations. The interplay of transnational cultural transfers and local traditions continuously shapes film culture and genre structure, however, twentieth-century European popular culture and thus popular film culture was strongly tied to local cultural traditions. This is generally considered to be their strength and most important value, but it also often prevents European films from being internationally successful and reaching a wider audience, as Hollywood films succeed with their “universal” patterns (and with their political-cultural “soft power” in Cold War, but also in the post-Cold War environment).



Mickey Magnate

These genre films and genres were in many ways embedded in local socio-cultural traditions and contexts.

If we consider genres as special representations of culturally universal (narrative) meanings and forms their embeddedness into cultural-artistic traditions and socio-political contexts becomes even more important. Comedy, melodrama, crime, adventure, and fantastic narratives might be understood as broad formulas of popular culture – just as John Cawelti (1976) analyzed the cultural function of popular literary formulas. Therefore, if we want to examine genres and the generic specificities of socialist popular film cultures, Hollywood will not always and in every respect be our point of reference.

Film culture synthesizes different cultural traditions (be it high art or popular culture) from vaudeville to melodrama, folk tales to realist novels. It is enough to think of leading Western

We can illustrate the reciprocal horizontal/vertical (transnational connections/local traditions) interplays and exchanges with many examples. Variations of cinematic melodrama in different ages and cultural contexts may clearly show the distinctive features of these contexts – for example, American melodramas of the 1950s are heirs to the Victorian novel, while Italian melodramas from the same period are more related to the theatrical-opera tradition (not to mention Soviet melodramas and their cultural contexts). An interesting challenge might be the examination of (sub)genres that are usually related to one specific national/cultural context or a (politically) closed localized community. Such a genre, both historically and culturally important, was the German Heimatfilm, the Eastern European partisan film, or the socialist-realist sabotage or production narratives of the Stalinist years.

Genres and changes

So, how do genres change and dominate given periods in socialist popular cinemas? Hungarian sound film culture is usually described as having a narrow genre spectrum: it is dominated by comedy, melodrama, adventure, and historical films, but we can rarely find thrillers, horrors, or science-fiction. However, genres absent in Hungarian cinema often can be found in the popular culture of the period. This is the case with fantastic stories, since both high and mid-brow Hungarian literature are rich in these. Similarly, there is a widely accepted argument regarding the Hungarian film history that the highly successful adventure and historical films but also crime films of the 1960s disappeared from Hungarian film culture in the 1970s. Domestic popular cinema's positions undoubtedly weakened in the 1970s. One of the reasons for this was the disappearance of the old masters of entertainment cinema and the growing dominance of politically engaged arthouse/auteur films at the time. Yet those genres, vanishing from the cinemas, found their perfect place on television: the leading and highly popular TV programs of the 1970s were domestic crime and adventure series (such programs as the crime series *Kántor* or the Jules Verne adaptation, *The Danube Pilot*). This is why it is not enough to pay attention only to deficits and shortcomings. The dynamics of popular film culture are much more diverse, energetic, and varied than they can be described in fixed models and binary oppositions.

The late 1970s and early 1980s may be an important period in global popular film culture, perhaps not only because of (post) New Hollywood blockbusters but also as the beginning of a transformation in Eastern Europe. The early 1980s brought a generational change and a kind of generic restructuring in many film cultures in the Soviet bloc. Here are some memorable and iconic titles from the early 1980s: *Pirates of the 20th Century*, the aforementioned action-oriented modern adventure film from the Soviet Union with outstanding admission numbers; Machulski's debut retro crime film, *Vabank* (1981), and the first installments of the highly successful crime comedies by István Bujtor, the 'Hungarian Piedone' (*Pagan Madonna*, 1981, *Do not Panic*, 1982). Emblematic of this time is also the transnational trend of musical teen films, targeting the youth (sub)culture of the time (the Czechoslovak *Disco Story* or the Hungarian *Love Till First Blood*), Sixties nostalgia/retro pieces (the Polish *Yesterday*, the Hungarian *Cha-cha-cha* and *Time Stands Still* and the Yugoslav *Do You Remember Dolly Bell*), and the wave of genre experimentation (the Soviet melodrama-catastrophe film hybrid *Air Crew* from 1980 or the early films of Juliusz Machulski and the Hungarian Péter Tímár). The 1980s, be they the years of martial law, the period of Brezhnevite stagnation and Czechoslovak (post-1968) 'normalization', or the decade of slow Westernization and reforms in Kádár's Hungary, in short, despite the widely differing political and social conditions, brought serious changes to Eastern Europe's popular film cultures. New directors, new generations, old-new genres. In Eastern Europe, however, it did not become a Socialist New Hollywood.

Cultural meaning-making

This essay started with the assumption that we can separate questions of genre-based film culture and genre films. Eastern European popular cinemas are an example of how the latter might appear without the former. The conditions for genre-based film culture were not given (or were incomplete) over the long decades of socialism, even in the case of the Soviet film industry. As I have argued, generic cycles are based on the logic of repetition, seriality, and variation, and a critical mass of certain types of films is needed for the development and workflow of the genre-based film production. Regarding the process of cultural meaning-making, the key is whether it is possible to find topics that can be accepted and processed as materials of shared experiences for the given cultural environment and whether the multidisciplinary, collective interpretation and labeling of these topics and films occur. Genre film production and genre formation requires an effective and operating film industry, popular (film) culture, and the reflective gestures of cultural meaning-making. Together, these conditions were not present in Eastern Europe during the long decades of socialism.

However, we can outline some aspects along which Eastern European films can be interpreted within the genre framework. Given that the decisive condition for both genre formation and interpretation is to link a given film (formal, stylistic elements, story motifs, etc.) to other films or the characteristics of a given genre category when we place a film into a special class, we must also define its relationship with other members of the category. The more films in the group, the more pronounced the features which shape and form the genre. When we find only a small number of examples of a given genre (Hungarian sci-fi, Romanian horror, Soviet thriller, etc.), we have to compare the given film to some other corpus (in good cases to films with close relations and similarities from the Eastern bloc, but at other times to more distant groups – Western or Hollywood products). In this case, however, the explanatory power of the local cultural context often becomes uncertain, under- or overestimated, and the questions of auteurship and the director's stylistic markers will be even more important and uncertain. If met with a unique film, such as Hungarian teen musical film from the 1980s (György Dobray's *Love Till First Blood*), it is difficult to distinguish between the features of a 'typical' Hungarian teen movie and the characteristics of an early piece of a young Hungarian filmmaker-auteur. The danger or challenge of interpreting the given film as representative for the given local (culturally specific) genre is that the explanatory power of the local context suppresses the traits of the author's style. On the other hand, when we highlight the auteur's distinctive marks, we can easily suppress the explanatory potential of the local socio-cultural context. This is true for example in the case of Machulski's *Sex Mission* (1983)

So, how can we make relationships and connections? We usually compare the given film with an abstract system of genre characteristics and other (non-domestic) films. In this case, films that seem rare in the given cultural environment can be analyzed as genre films in a broader genre context. This strategy might be interesting for unique (local) examples of strong (global) genres with distinct features – such as Piestrak's *Curse*



of *Snakes Valley* (1988) in the context of Indiana Jones-style action-adventure films. Or we can compare the given film with other local films, which seem similar. This might be fruitful in the case of very broad, loosely defined genres (comedy, historical film, melodrama) with less definite features, but strong roots in the local cultural-artistic tradition. In such a case, however, it is not the closeness to abstract genre characteristics, but the difference (which might appear as a socio-cultural or authorial distinctiveness) that will be interesting.

As mentioned, a significant problem with socialist popular cinema was that the knowledge regarding the current international trends of (Western) popular cinemas and genre filmmaking was severely limited. From the 1940s until the early or mid-1980s, Western genre films were at a disadvantage in terms of distribution in Eastern Europe. Not even the most significant Hollywood films were distributed, or only with a significant delay. Two iconic films of the New Hollywood of the 1970s, *Jaws* (1975, S. Spielberg), and *The Godfather* (1972, F.F. Coppola), for example, arrived in Hungarian cinemas with a ten-year delay in the mid-1980s. (The reason for the delay was often not even political. That is, it was not censorship that forbade the premiere, but the copyright fee for a given film was too expensive. Hungarian film distribution often waited for years to buy “trendy” Hollywood movies because, after the first wave subsided, it was cheaper to buy distribution rights.) *Star Wars* (1977, G. Lucas) was released in Hungary and Poland with ‘only’ a few years delay – but, for example, it was not in distribution in the Soviet Union until the end of the regime. Distribution policies thus showed huge variety in the Soviet bloc (more American films were released in Poland and with shorter lead times than in Hungary, but Bulgarian or Soviet viewers were in an even worse position), so we can hardly speak of a shared ‘Eastern European’ knowledge regarding Western popular film culture under socialism – which might be an important factor, influencing the trends of local popular cinemas. Accordingly, the differences, limitations, and delays in distribution resulted in a strange asynchrony: certain influences hit local audiences (filmmakers, critics) at different times. Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) was withdrawn from Hungarian cinemas a few weeks after its premiere (which was more than ten years’ delay, only in the early 1970s). The ‘Hungarian version’ of *Psycho*, Lajos Fazekas’s *Defekt* was shot in 1977 but was only released in Hungarian cinemas in the mid-1980s.

Socialist popular film culture is therefore a unique and striking formation. Memory of it is very strong, and if we look at it closely, it existed in rather complex variations. There were important common features of and reciprocal connections between socialist popular cinemas, but the local social-political-cultural variances are also significant. Furthermore, socialist popular cinemas had their relationship with Western/Hollywood filmmaking. Connected to its time, yet it is here with us. Post-socialism brought sequels, remakes, or new variations of popular hits of the socialist period. We have *Teddy Bear* (1981) and *Rys* (2007), *Och, Karol 1* and *2* (1985 and 2011), *Love Till First, Second... and Last Blood* (1986–2002), *Air Crew* and *Flight Crew* (2016), *The Irony of Fate* (1975) and *The Irony of Fate 2* (2009). It is a sign of contemporary retromania and remix or re-culture, the turn

towards previously successful materials. However, this trend shows the power of post-socialist nostalgia and is a sign of cultural self-understanding. This is the phoenix-like power of popular culture. The cycles only keep going...

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