Eszter Zimanyi

Secrets, Surveillance, and Fragments: Some Contemporary Documentary Challenges to Post-Socialist Europe's Regional Brand

Absztrakt

A shared characteristic of the new generation of contemporary documentary filmmakers from post-socialist Europe is their strategic appropriation of recognizable narrative tropes broadly associated with Eastern Europe. Appropriating these tropes allows filmmakers to brand their works as authentic representations of the region and increases the probability of securing international funding, distribution, and viewership. However, many filmmakers remain cognizant and critical of these stereotypes, and find ways to destabilize them over the course of their films. Directors such as Bojina Panayotova, Mila Turajlić, and Lisbeth Kovacic have mobilized common themes such as surveillance and spying, secrets, and divided spaces and identities within their self-reflexive, first person and polyvocal films in order to propel their narratives forward while also deconstructing rigid conceptualizations of post-socialist European identities. They offer promising examples of how post-socialist European documentary filmmakers can address the specific historical, political, and cultural aspects of the region while refusing immutable articulations of national or regional identities.

Szerző

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In 2008, video artist and scholar Hito Steyerl declared, "The documentary mode is a transnational language of practice. Its standard narratives are recognized all over the world and its forms are almost independent of national or cultural difference" (Steyerl 2008, 225). Indeed, contemporary documentaries—like narrative cinema—are created with global audiences in mind. They tend to rely on familiar generic elements of the documentary form, whether those be talking-head interviews and archival footage, re-enactments or animation, the observational style of direct cinema or the reflexive, participatory practice of cinema verité. [1] Contemporary documentaries are also often transnationally funded and produced; filmmakers benefit from and depend upon a number of international funding bodies, documentary film institutes, and developmental programs that aid artists with conceptualizing and executing their nonfiction media projects. Film crews are similarly diverse, with talent sourced from around the world. Furthermore, some of the best-known documentaries of the past decade have been made by filmmakers who travelled far beyond their home countries to chase compelling stories. It is thus increasingly difficult to speak of contemporary documentary in national or regional terms. [2]

The aim of this special issue, then, which seeks to think through the regional specificities and characteristics of "Central European documentary," raises a number of difficult questions in relationship to our contemporary globalized media environment. Should a documentary's "home" country be defined by the personal background of its director, the nationality of its crew members, or by the primary language spoken within the film? Should a documentary's regional identity be determined by its major funding sources, or by the location(s) it depicts? Are documentaries filmed *in* Central Europe and *about* Central European subjects considered "Central European documentaries" if their directors, crew, and funding originate from another region(s)? How, for example, would we categorize a documentary like *Another News Story* (Orban Wallace, 2017), a largely crowd-funded film, directed by a British filmmaker, that depicts both refugees and the international journalists reporting on Europe's refugee crisis as they travel across multiple countries in Southeastern and Central Europe and come into contact with the region's local inhabitants along the way? Is *Another News Story* Central European? British? Syrian? Or is it simply best described as global?

In this paper, I reflect on the ways in which contemporary post-socialist European documentaries rely upon presumed regional characteristics about the former Eastern bloc in order to secure international funding and distribution and to appear authentic to international audiences. First, I briefly examine how the entry of global media corporations into the post-socialist European market has affected documentary production in the region. I question how the marketing and branding strategies of companies like HBO entrench stereotypes about post-socialist Europe by privileging films that detail political and social corruption, scandals, and family secrets. I then turn to three examples of contemporary documentaries that self-reflexively appropriate such stereotypes in order to defamiliarize and destabilize them, offering a more nuanced portrait of post-socialist Europe in the process. Throughout this paper, I resist the (often arbitrary) division of post-socialist Europe into regional subdivisions and eschew "Central European" as a regional descriptor.

Defining the Regional in a Globalized Media Environment

To write of contemporary "Central European" documentary demands clarification about how, precisely, such a descriptor should be defined. As global companies like Netflix, HBO, and Amazon move increasingly toward producing, rather than simply distributing, documentary films, the demarcations of a documentary's national or regional boundaries seem increasingly unstable from the standpoint of funding and production. Yet, national and regional categorizations are anything but meaningless. They are categories that, above all, function as a form of identity branding; they rely on audiences' assumptions and associations with particular geographic locations in order to generate intrigue internationally and secure the viewership of national and regional target audiences. Anikó Imre compellingly elaborates this point in her analysis of HBO's European expansion: the company's localized television production model allows reproducible storylines with transnational themes to be injected with domestic and regional histories and sensibilities. Yet, the television shows created through this practice of localization nevertheless maintain a universally recognizable HBO "quality" aesthetic that ensures local shows will successfully travel, and translate, across borders (Imre 2018). Thus, inserting local (historical, geographic, political) references, using local dialects, and relying on local talent becomes a way to change up the "flavor" of otherwise time-tested storylines and market them as nationally or regionally authentic. [3]

Relying on transnational themes to ensure broad audience appeal is, importantly, not limited to narrative fiction. HBO is also one of the main global corporations funding contemporary documentaries from Eastern Europe, having stepped in to fill the role once played by state media under socialism. While HBO does not impose heavy-handed ideological restrictions on filmmakers, documentary productions funded by the company "are expected to conform to

HBO's own dramatic, character-driven, psychological docufictional style, which is in many ways the opposite of the explorative, subdued, social-issue-based tradition inherited from socialism" (Imre 2018, 60). Similar expectations are to be anticipated from other major media developers. As such, documentary filmmakers must remain cognizant of the narrative tropes and aesthetic styles that are likely to attract global audiences *and* signal national and regional authenticity if they hope to secure meaningful international funding, distribution, and viewership—whether through HBO or another global media entity.

A Note on the Concept of "Central Europe"

Regional categorizations are not only part of companies' marketing strategies; they also carry political implications, and "Central European" is perhaps one of the more fraught regional identities to be mobilized within Europe over the past forty years. As historians James Mark, Bogdan C. Iacob, Tobbias Rupprecht, and Ljubica Spaskovska eloquently attest, dissidents and Communist reformers in Hungary, Poland, and the former Czechoslovakia evoked "Central Europe" as a regional identity in the 1980s as a means of asserting the countries' cultural and political home within western Europe rather than the Soviet Union (Mark et al. 2019). One of the best-known articulations of this regional identity was made by Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs in his 1981 essay, "The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An outline." In it, Szűcs argues for "Central Europe" as a distinct region, one that he suggests was regrettably torn from its natural home within the West by the Soviet Union (Szűcs 1983). Claiming a Central European identity has consequently been used to distance Eastern Bloc nations from their socialist pasts and advance the narrative of the region's "return to Europe". However, as Mark et al. argue in their analysis of Szűcs's essay, "Central Europe" was also:

> conceptualized as a cultural defence against a so-called Asiatic despotism brought into Europe by the 'Soviet occupier' [and] became directed against these countries' smaller near neighbours. In aiming to construct a new regional identity based on a natural cultural affinity with the West, elites were trying to smooth their pathway, ahead of other neighbouring states, back into the European fold. For them, Balkan countries to the south stood outside this Central European imaginary, positioned as not wholly European (Mark et al. 2019, 147, 149).

Drawing geographic and cultural boundaries around "Central Europe" has exacerbated what Milica Bakić-Hayden famously termed "nesting orientalisms", wherein Eastern European nations reproduce a regional hierarchy of nations considered more "western"—and therefore more modern and more civilized—and nations imagined to be more "eastern", "backward" and "barbaric" (Bakić-Hayden 1995). As Nataša Kovačević elaborates, the insistence on Central Europe as a distinct regional identity ultimately distinguishes "a redeemable Eastern Europe" from the

Balkans, the latter of which continues to be framed "as irredeemable, extreme and problematic" (Kovačević quoted in Veličković 2012, 166). For this reason, and in the spirit of the editors' call to investigate the "regional characteristics" and "topics and interpretations typical of documentaries [...] after the fall of the iron curtain," I have chosen to expand beyond what is generally considered within the geographic bounds of "Central Europe" and include documentaries from the post-Yugoslav region as well as Romania and Bulgaria within this study. Doing so is a way of insisting on the centrality of the socialist period to the formation of shared regional characteristics, histories, and identities, and refusing the internal regional hierarchies that have often been mobilized by the invocation of "Central Europe" as a unique subregion.

Regional Characteristics as Regional Brand: Common Trends in Contemporary Post-Socialist European Documentary

While little has been written in Anglophone scholarship on the regional qualities of contemporary documentaries from post-socialist Europe, certain shared observations can be traced within analyses of national documentary production from various countries in the former Eastern Bloc. Masha Shpolberg remarks that contemporary Polish documentary is marked by "a withdrawal from the political and the institutional into the domestic and interpersonal. Like many of their Anglophone analogues, these are character-driven documentaries, centered on a compelling protagonist" (Shpolberg 2016, par. 5). For Shpolberg, the shift away from the intellectual documentaries of the 1970s—which focused on systems, institutions, and concepts—to today's more intimate and personal portraits of marginalized community members encourages spectatorial identification with the characters on screen. It allows contemporary Polish documentary to appeal to audiences' emotions and inscribes viewers into a deeper relation with the world, thus emphasizing the ways in which the personal is inherently political (Shpolberg 2016).

Similarly, Andrej Šprah argues that contemporary Slovenian documentaries privilege questions about "the position of the individual in society, aspects of identity, and the conception of subjectivity" in order to critique rigid conceptions of national identity and the uncritical embrace of capitalist, neoliberal values in Slovenia after 1989 (Šprah 2017, 253). Balázs Varga, in his introduction to the Hungarian film studies journal *Metropolis*'s special issue on Hungarian documentary, also notes that the country's documentary filmmaking has been marked by the personal since the late 1990s: "Simple stories, private destinies and intimate dramas are at the heart of this new, more personal documentary wave" (Varga 2004, par. 21). [4] These studies suggest, on the one hand, that documentary filmmaking following the system change has veered away from the didactic, authoritative, and explanatory films of the socialist era to privilege instead the interiority of individual characters. With their appeal to viewers' emotions, attention to character arcs, and exploration of personal subjectivities, contemporary post-socialist European documentaries lend themselves to greater universalization and, consequently, greater mobility

across borders. Yet, many of the region's documentaries, and particularly those that have received international recognition, also tend to rely on stereotypical assumptions about post-socialist Europe to garner attention: corruption, spying, violence, family secrets and mysteries regularly feature as thematic elements in internationally lauded films from Europe's east. The Oscar-nominated Romanian documentary *Collective* (*Colectiv.* Alexander Nanau, 2019) is one of the more recent notable examples of this; the film follows two investigative journalists in Romania as they uncover a major public health scandal following the 2016 Colectiv nightclub fire, which tragically killed sixty-four people. *Collective* reveals systemic corruption throughout the Romanian government and health sector, the latter of which had, for years, been using diluted disinfectants in hospitals, causing patients to die from bacterial infections. Though the film was internationally acclaimed upon its release, is has also been criticized for reproducing a reductive "good" vs. "evil" narrative stylistically akin to Hollywood fiction—one that ultimately lacks the context necessary for understanding how and why Romania's healthcare system has deteriorated over the past thirty years. [5]

Another recent documentary of note is Hungary's *Return to Epipo* (Judit Oláh, 2020), which uncovers the sustained emotional and sexual abuse of children at a late-socialist-era Hungarian summer camp through the personal memories of the director and her childhood friends. Here, the film lures viewers with home video footage of a mysterious, idyllic, and irrecoverable past, only to reveal that the utopian vision embodied by the camp is a façade hiding dark and painful secrets. As the narrative unfolds, former attendees of the camp attempt to work through the intimately personal, yet collectively shared, trauma their abuser left them with. [6]*Collective* and *Return to Epipo* both rely on the recognizable narrative of an underdog investigator seeking truth and justice to drive their plots forward (in the former, it is the two dogged journalists working at a daily paper known for its sports coverage who unexpectedly reveal the Hexi Pharma scandal, while in *Epipo,* Oláh faces resistance from former camp members, employees, and even her parents, as she tries to make sense of her unsettling childhood memories). And while both films are compelling and, from a technical standpoint, well crafted, they also seem to instrumentalize stereotypes about (post)socialist Europe as an obscure land, rife with secrets and criminality, in order to attract viewers beyond the domestic sphere. This is illustrated by the synopses that accompany the films on international streaming platforms and film festival websites, which emphasize the films' national/regional origins. For example, Amazon's synopsis for *Collective* reads, "Follow a heroic team of journalists as they uncover shocking corruption in the Romanian healthcare system. Take an up-close look as the Gazette team methodically discovers layer upon layer of unbridled fraud and criminal malfeasance" (Amazon, "Collective"). [7] Similarly, the One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival writes of *Epipo*:

> The children of lawyers, engineers and other intellectuals growing up in communist Hungary attended the Epipo summer camp. Games, bathing, and adventure took place in a fictional country, where campers were given unusual nicknames and performed mysterious rituals. Twenty-five years later, the filmmaker, whose childhood is

> inextricably linked to the camp, reconstructs the events that took place in the camp together with other participants from the time. Using the psychodrama method, deep traumas, humiliation, manipulation and abuse come to the surface. (One World, “Epipo”)

These films promise viewers titillating secrets and horrifying discoveries about (post)socialist European countries, but ultimately cannot provide the historical, political, and social contexts necessary for international audiences to form nuanced opinions about the situations depicted. As such, they risk advancing discourses that frame the region as an unruly and ungovernable space. In *Epipo,* Pál Sipos, the camp counselor who preyed upon the children in his care, is never formally held to account for his actions, while *Collective* ends with the ousting of the film’s hero, Vlad Voiculescu, from his role as Minister of Health—an event that feels shocking due to the film’s representation of Voiculescu as an earnest public servant seeking to end governmental corruption. As *Collective* does not engage deeply with the members of the Social Democratic Party who are voted into office following the Colectiv scandal (and who replace Voiculescu), Romania’s electoral process threatens to appear just as irrational and corrupt to outside observers as the healthcare scandal itself.

Certainly, the events depicted in *Collective* and *Return to Epipo* warrant investigation and thoughtful treatment by the public, and I do not mean to suggest that the filmmakers should have avoided airing the dirty laundry of their home countries. Rather, my contention here is that in a globalized media environment, it is these familiar narrative tropes of corruption and crime, secrets and surveillance that cohere (post)socialist Europe as a region distinct from western Europe, while the latter continues to maintain its monopoly over representing the “universal”. [8] As such, these stereotypes inflect the way global production and distribution companies understand and market documentaries as authentically “Central” or “Eastern European” to international audiences. In other words, a film like *Collective* too easily comes to evidence the presumed-to-be inherent and eternal corruption of Eastern Europe at large, instead of providing audiences with a nuanced understanding of the challenges facing contemporary Romania’s healthcare sector. Yet it is the film’s reliance on these presumptions as an underlying engine of its “good vs. evil” narrative, in which morally conscious individuals (journalists, Voiculescu) take on compromised institutional networks, that ultimately helped propel the film to international acclaim.

It is, of course, no surprise that documentary filmmakers are well aware of the marketingstrategies used to sell Eastern European content abroad; they understand which thematicframeworks and topical subjects make films legible as regionally specific *and* universallyappealing. Yet this does not mean that all filmmakers uncritically accept the frameworks theysometimes find themselves working within. In recent years, I have noticed a trend incontemporary documentaries that strategically appropriate stereotypical tropes about post-socialist Europe in order to reflexively interrogate and destabilize them. In doing so, thesedocumentaries open a space for viewers to interrogate both the official histories they haveinherited about (post)socialist Europe, as well as the fervent historical revisionism of severalCentral-Eastern and Southeastern political parties currently in power.

In the rest of this essay, I offer preliminary comparative observations about three contemporary documentaries from, or about, post-socialist Europe that self-reflexively appropriate tropes associated with the region in order to unsettle viewers' assumptions about Central-Eastern and Southeastern Europe's politics, history, and identity. These tropes include surveillance and secrets, divided spaces and divided identities. *The Other Side of Everything* (2017), by Yugoslav filmmaker Mila Turajlić, unfolds a history of Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslav Serbia through the Turajlić family's Belgrade apartment, a site that has operated as a hub for political organizing for nearly a century. [9] Bojina Panayotova's *I See Red People* (2018), meanwhile, stages the director's return to her home country of Bulgaria and follows as she attempts to uncover the extent of her family's involvement with the communist-era secret police. The final film examined is an experimental short documentary, titled *Minor Border* (2014), by Austrian artist Lisbeth Kovacic. This polyvocal film essay is situated at an abandoned border crossing station between Austria and Hungary and uses the personal testimonies of migrants and local residents to poetically reflect on the persistence of borders after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Notably, the films I engage are all personal, essayistic documentaries directed by women that fall within the boundaries of what Alisa Lebow describes as first person films:

> First person films can be poetic, prophetic or absurd. They can be autobiographical in full, or only implicitly and in part. They may take the form of the self-portrait, or indeed, a portrait of another. They are, very often, not a cinema of 'me,' but about someone close, dear, beloved, or intriguing, who nonetheless informs the filmmaker's sense of him or herself. They may not be about a person, self or other, at all, but about a neighborhood, a community, a phenomenon or event. The designation 'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position. (Lebow 2012, 1)

In two of the three films discussed, the directors appear as characters in their own films and explore the above-mentioned themes through confrontations with their parents. By emphasizing

personal subjectivity and intergenerational divides within the directors' own families, these films also fall within a broader category of documentaries that Michael Renov terms "the new autobiography in film and video" (Renov 2004). According to Renov, new autobiography films tend to "undertake a double and mutually defining inscription—of history and the self—that refuses the categorical and the totalizing" (Renov 2004, 110). They question top-down historical accounts of events through a sustained engagement with, and exploration of, individual subjectivities, which are themselves sites of "instability—flux, drift, perpetual revision—rather than coherence" (Renov 2004, 110). In taking up the first person, new autobiographical form, Turajlić, Panayotova, and Kovacic emphasize the need to account for the shared history of socialism in Central-Eastern and Southeastern Europe, while also acknowledging the impossibility of arriving at a singular truth or conclusion about this shared history. Importantly, in the case of Turajlić and Panayotova's films, the directors allow their audience to witness their confrontations with their parents. In doing so, these filmmakers not only acknowledge their subjective positionalities; they also offer their own political and ideological positions up for critique.

Secrets, Surveillance, and Fragmenting Identities

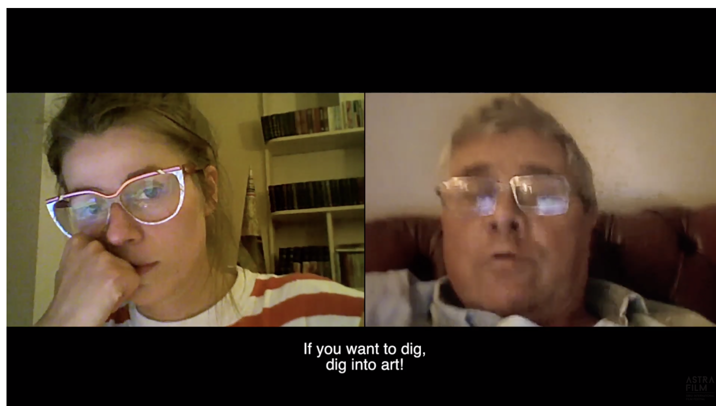
In an interview with the European public service channel *ARTE*, Bojina Panayotova introduces her documentary, *I See Red People*, with the following description:

> This is a thriller in which I set out to find potential secret agents in my family, in Bulgaria. [The "Red" in the title] of course, stands for communism, but also for the blood that rises to one's head when one has violent feelings. I was born in totalitarian Bulgaria. I came to France when I was eight years old. After a short time, there were many demonstrations against communists who were still in power, against networks of secret police that still existed. Soon I asked myself: What was it like in my family? Are there things I don't know about? So I started investigating and filming. (*ARTE* 2018)

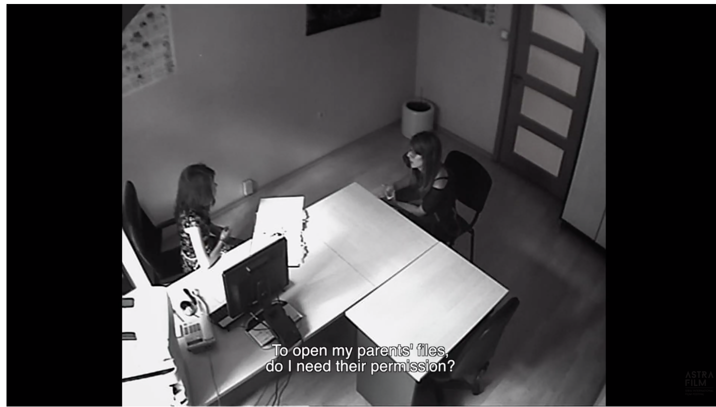
I See Red People adopts the structure of a mystery-thriller-spy film and follows Panayotova as she pressures her parents to request their personal files from Bulgaria's Archive of the Secret Police. The general premise of the film has wide international appeal: a young woman returns to the country she left behind as a child, searching for clues about her parents' pasts. Its regional specificity comes from the conceit that her parents lived under an authoritarian regime, where thousands of Bulgarians suspected of being anti-communist dissenters were sent to forced labor camps. At the outset of the film, Panayotova does not know definitively whether the secret police surveilled her parents or grandparents; however, Panayotova's realization that her family held certain privileges that other Bulgarian citizens did not have access to—both of her grandfathers travelled extensively during the Cold War, one as a film critic, the other as an employee of the Ministry of Commerce—leads her to become suspicious of their relationship to Bulgaria's totalitarian regime. "I have the impression that there are secrets," Panayotova tells her mother in

one of their many recorded Skype conversations, “as if there was something hidden”. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, and twenty years after her family relocated to France, she announces she is returning to Bulgaria, “searching for everything, recording everything, looking for what happened”.

As Panayotova’s investigation progresses, she begins recording all her conversations with her parents, her partner, her Bulgarian driving instructor, and the archivists she seeks information from. When Panayotova is informed that she is not allowed to record inside of the Archives of the Secret Police, she requests the security camera footage of her meeting with the archivists from the building instead. The brilliant irony of her film is that while Panayotova is ostensibly seeking the truth about whether her family members were spied upon or, more worryingly, informants for the secret police, she herself becomes the ultimate spy, collecting information on her parents and friends, sometimes without their knowledge or consent. *I See Red People* not only appropriates the narrative plot of a spy film; it also takes on a surveillant aesthetic: screen recordings of Skype calls, split-screen views of Panayotova’s in-person interviews, footage from cameras mounted to the dashboard of Panayotova’s car, and security camera images are woven together to emphasize the paranoid feeling of watching and being watched. The Skype calls are often glitchy, such that we are repeatedly met with fragmented, frozen, and blurry images of the director and her subjects. The instability of the images mirrors Panayotova’s frustrated attempts to get answers from her parents about her family’s involvement with the secret police. As the film progresses, Panayotova’s aggressive search for the truth alienates her further and further from her mother and father, who grow increasingly uncomfortable with her incessant filming.



Many of the scenes in I See Red People are comprised of screen recorded conversations Panayotova has with her parents over Skype.



Panayotova builds a surveillant aesthetic in I See Red People by interweaving security camera footage from Bulgaria's Archive of the Secret Police with her own recorded audio.

At the climax of the film, we learn Panayotova's mother, Milena, was indeed registered by the secret police as a collaborator while she was a college student; however, she had been recruited without her knowledge. The shocking revelation deeply troubles both mother and daughter and threatens to end the relationship between them. Indeed, Panayotova acknowledges at the end of her film that she did not speak to her parents for an extended period after her discovery. However, by including footage of the emotional, and at times hostile, arguments she has with her parents in the film, and by maintaining the camera's gaze not only on her subjects but also on herself, Panayotova unsettles the Cold War espionage tropes her film adopts. She places her parents and herself under equal scrutiny, and admits in a letter to her parents—which she narrates at the close of her film—that they are "part of the same game":

> Even if we are not aware of it, politics transform each facet of our life. I know that your file is a trace of this time of submission and lies. But to move forward, my generation has to confront this past. Even if it makes us imperfect children and offended parents. […] I will also leave holes, mistakes, and missing images behind. It's up to those who follow to blame, complete, or invent. And to break free.

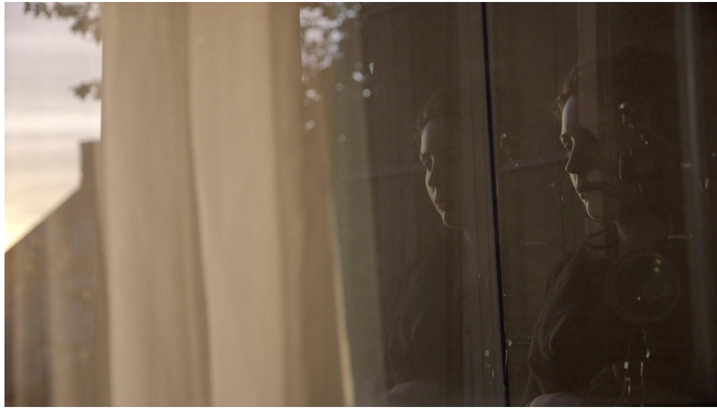
Panayotova's self-reflexive exploration of her family's past, and her own relationship to it, thus unsettles the easy assumptions international viewers may make about (post)socialist Europe and life under communism. When we learn that Milena's handler registered her as an informant simply to justify his own employment, and that his reports were based on banal comments Milena would make, the mystery and intrigue around being a spy falls away. The film's earlier scenes of Panayotova participating in anti-corruption protests in contemporary Bulgaria, wherein protestors chant "red trash!" and promise to "chase [communists] to the end, to the grave [and] look for their fathers, their sisters, their children […] with the same cruelty they have taught," suddenly sit uncomfortably with the revelation that her mother did in fact work with the secret police, however unwittingly. We come to understand that "collaboration" is not a black-and-white issue, that it is impossible to arrive at an absolute truth. Still, the film does not suggest that

Bulgaria's history should be erased or excused, nor does it imply that present-day corruption in the government should be left unaddressed. Rather, it invites viewers to do the difficult but necessary work of opening a dialogue across generations—one that insists on honest accountability without reproducing the Manichean divides and harsh punishments of an earlier era.

Like *I See Red People*, Mila Turajlić's *The Other Side of Everything* also entices viewers with the premise of a mystery. Within the family's Belgrade apartment, there is a set of doors that has been locked and sealed shut for over seventy years. What lies on the other side is, of course, not a mystery at all: the home was partitioned in two by the government in the early years of Yugoslavia's socialist republic, and a family was moved into the new apartment on the other side of Turajlić's living room. The "mystery" of the locked doors is used as a metaphor for mysteries of the psyche: how do people come to form their politics and identities? What responsibility do people have—to each other and to past and future generations—to continue struggling for a more equitable world, even when societal conditions seem to suggest this struggle will lead to failure?

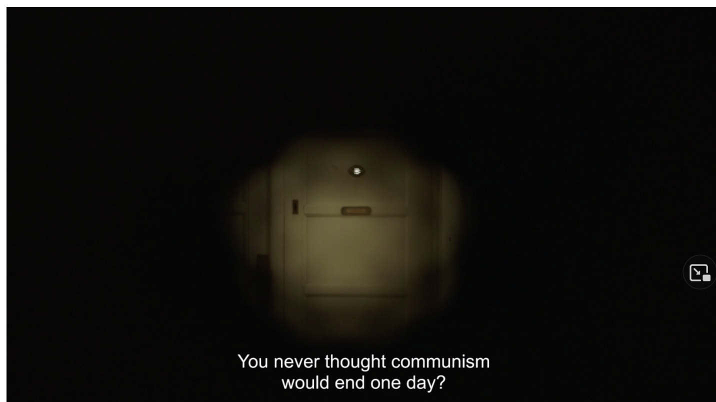
The Other Side of Everything addresses these questions through Turajlić's conversations with her mother, Srbijanka, a well-known political activist, professor, and cabinet member of Serbia's post-Milošević government. Srbijanka is a magnetic presence, with a no-nonsense attitude and fierce commitment to speaking out against anti-democratic policies and actors. She was one of the most visible members of the Otpor! Group, an anti-government youth movement that helped topple Slobodan Milošević's regime. Yet, while Srbijanka seems to move through the world with a clear determination, she is not totally lionized in the film, nor does *The Other Side* reproduce an easily identifiable "good" vs. "bad" narrative. Srbijanka's headstrong commitment to her ideals can be criticized as much as they are celebrated: throughout the Yugoslav Secession Wars, Srbijanka is presented as having prioritized her political activism ahead of her family. She refused to leave country, even though doing so might have offered her children more safety and better stability. Turajlić likewise offers her own positionality up for critique. She confesses deep uncertainty about her willingness to continue living in Serbia and fill her mother's proverbial shoes as an activist.

Mirroring the division of the apartment, *The Other Side of Everything* relies on the repeated use of fragmented or obstructed images and reflections that double the people seen on screen, suggesting not only a division between mother and daughter (in the realm of whether or how to pursue political activism), but a fragmented sense of personal and communal identity as well.



Turajlić gazes out of her family apartment's window, her image doubled by her reflection in the glass.

The film also appropriates surveillance as a visual motif: the Turajlić women are often shown looking out their apartment window at the street below, watching, it seems, for signs of political upheaval. In other scenes, vignette shadowing gives us the impression that we are spying on the apartment building's hallway through a peephole in the door. These visual motifs emphasize another central question the film poses to us: who are we living with? Have we made the effort to understand our (individual, national, regional) neighbors? These questions are advanced further when Turajlić asks Srbijanka if she could hear her next-door neighbors after the division of the apartment. The response is affirmative—Srbijanka could not only hear them but could smell their cooking. Yet, Srbijanka confesses that the two families did not socialize. The statement emphasizes the contradictory intimacy and distance between them, one that on one hand acknowledges the difficulty of accepting the partition of one's private home, and on the other comes to symbolically represent relationships across the former Yugoslavia—a shared national home that painfully disintegrated.



A vignette effect gives viewers the impression that they are peering through the peephole of Turajlić's door.

The question of who we are living with is posed in good faith, and Turajlić emphasizes in an interview with anthropologist Owen Kohl that opening a dialogue about the Yugoslav region's shared past is a primary goal of her film (Turajlić 2018). And while some domestic Serbian viewers have criticized *The Other Side of Everything* for pandering to the West and for elevating Srbijanka, a

member of the bourgeoisie, as more politically and morally righteous than her proletarian next-door neighbor, who turns out to be a fan of Milosevic's speeches (Barker 2021), the film's attention to these contradictions within individual identities is vital for unsettling easy, preconceived notions about how people's identities should or might take shape based on the circumstances of their birth. As Turajlić argues, preventing audiences from "reaching any easy conclusions" about who the characters in her films are opens the space for a productive dialogue to begin (Turajlić 2018). By framing these questions through the mysterious space of a divided apartment, and visually emphasizing fragments, shadows, and obstructed viewpoints, Turajlić both appropriates and destabilizes the filmic tropes often associated with representations of Eastern Europe. And in challenging her mother's decision to keep their family in Serbia throughout the Yugoslav Secession Wars, interrogating her mother's commitment to public, political activism, and expressing her own pessimism about present-day Serbia, Turajlić scrutinizes both herself and her mother in an effort to reach a deeper understanding of their personal and regional history. In doing so, she unsettles the official history now being written in contemporary Serbia—one that has largely erased the evidence of sustained domestic resistance to the Milošević regime—and creates a space for audiences, both domestic-regional and international, to do the same.

Where *I See Red People* and *The Other Side of Everything* offer intimate, autobiographical narratives, Lisbeth Kovacic's 2015 experimental short documentary, *Minor Border*, offers a polyvocal, poetic meditation on the creation of new borders following the fall of the Berlin wall. *Minor Border* begins with a shot of a wide, open field, marked by a small roadway sign bearing the Austrian flag, before cutting to a close-up shot of the glass doors of an abandoned tollbooth. A series of fragmented images of a roadway and a rooftop follow, until eventually we learn that we are viewing the old and disused Nickelsdorf-Hegyeshalom border checkpoint between Austria and Hungary, a checkpoint that ceased operating with the fall of the Iron Curtain. *Minor Border* takes place entirely in and around this abandoned border control station. Over the course of its twenty-five-minute runtime, we watch as the old checkpoint is dismantled by construction workers tasked with tearing it down, only to hear of how new border checkpoints are being erected in Hungary, Serbia, Macedonia, and Ukraine. While *Minor Border* visually documents the material deconstruction of a Cold War-era checkpoint, the film's narrative is framed by six voices—each speaking a different language—who recount their uneven experiences of crossing the Hungarian-Austrian border. In this way, the film offers a provocative reflection on how Europe's borders, and mobility within Europe, have shifted between the Cold War and present day.

Kovacic never shows us her subjects, nor does she offer their names. Instead, she juxtaposes their testimonies with images of landscapes that disturb viewers' spatial orientation, making it difficult to know which side of the border we are on at any given moment. Much like Panayotova and Turajlić's works, Kovacic's film makes heavy use of reflections, fragments, obstructions, and other visual distortions. Many of Kovacic's shots are either of glass windows or doors that reflect warped images of the highway nearby, such that it is difficult to tell what direction cars are driving in. Other scenes are taken from the vantage point of a moving car that crosses back and forth

between Hungary and Austria; however, we are offered only partial views through the car's windows and here, too, the direction of travel is never clearly discernable. This spatial disorientation disturbs the notion of the Hungarian-Austrian border as a fixed and stable territorial divide, while the voices of Kovacic's interview subjects attune viewers to the ways borders shift in relationship to the bodies seeking to cross them. Though we never see the interview subjects in *Minor Border*, and only one of the subjects interviewed—a Hungarian woman—identifies her country of origin, the film's credits show that the languages spoken in the film include Farsi, Pashto, Somali, Hungarian, and German. Despite being disembodied, the voices highlight how borders are differentially enacted against racialized bodies.

The first voice we hear in the film is a woman speaking Farsi. She notes, "I never take a truck, I always try to take a train, and I always come on my own. I don't want to travel with other people; when you are in company with others, you attract attention." Later in the film, the same woman remarks, "When I take the train from Budapest to Vienna, there is no police in the stations. But in fact, they are there. I believe there are conductors cooperating with the police and informing them [sic]." Here, the woman alerts viewers to the racialized policing of the Schengen zone, where infrastructures of transit (buses and trains) become the mobile border of Europe, and employees working for the transit system are deployed like spies by the police. This mobility of Europe's borders—which, Mihaela Brebenel cogently argues, turns racialized bodies *into* borders (Brebenel 2020)—is echoed by the Hungarian woman featured in *Minor Border*, who identifies herself as a labor migrant hoping to find a better source of income in Austria. She notes, "since Hungary became a member of the Schengen zone, the border has been totally open, or at least for us Hungarians. But without an EU ID or a visa, you are not allowed to cross. Those people get taken off of the trains and put in refugee camps." The woman's statement marks a shift in Hungarian mobilities after the country's inclusion in the EU and Schengen zone which seem to offer greater opportunities to Hungarian citizens. Yet, despite the Hungarian woman's ability to cross into Austria with ease, she reveals another 'border' has kept her from finding steady employment. After briefly finding work as a housekeeper and hotel maid, the woman is fired for not speaking German well enough, and states that she has not been able to find another place of employment in Austria since her termination. Thus, educational and class barriers constrain the woman's mobility, even as her Hungarian citizenship provides her with the privilege of moving between Hungary and Austria unharassed.

While *Minor Border* predominantly reflects the experiences of people attempting to move from Hungary into Austria, it does not only recount mobilities from East to West, or South to North. As one of the two Austrian subjects included in the film declares: "The traffic on the A-Road towards Hungary is mainly caused by Austrian drivers, needing a dentist in Hungary, going to a spa, having a massage done." This mapping of transit from Austria into Hungary for the sake of cheaper health and wellness services unsettles the stereotype of migration as a unidirectional flow from the East/South to the West/North. The film demonstrates how Europe's borders expand and

contract in relation to specific bodies—offering flexible mobility to subjects who carry the right passport and appear to have capital, while aggressively limiting the mobility of subjects considered undesirable. Thus, as *Minor Border* illustrates, it is bodies—rather than checkpoints—that become the markers of Europe's borders. By juxtaposing footage of the deconstruction of a Cold War-era checkpoint with poetic voice overs describing the increased, targeted policing of cross-border transit lines, *Minor Border* destabilizes the popular narrative that the end of the Cold War reunified Europe and liberated the free movement of people.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that a shared characteristic of the new generation of contemporary documentary filmmakers from post-socialist Europe is their strategic appropriation of recognizable narrative tropes broadly associated with Eastern Europe. Appropriating these tropes allows filmmakers to brand their works as authentic representations of the region and increases the probability of securing international funding, distribution, and viewership. However, many filmmakers remain cognizant and critical of these stereotypes, and find ways to destabilize them over the course of their films. Directors such as Bojina Panayotova, Mila Turajlić, and Lisbeth Kovacic have mobilized common themes such as surveillance and spying, secrets, and divided spaces and identities within their self-reflexive, first person and polyvocal films in order to propel their narratives forward while also deconstructing rigid conceptualizations of post-socialist European identities. They offer promising examples of how post-socialist European documentary filmmakers can address the specific historical, political, and cultural aspects of the region while refusing immutable articulations of national or regional identities.

[The Hungarian version of this article is published in this same thematic issue]

Jegyzetek

1. For a more comprehensive examination of documentary forms and styles, see Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
2. Examples include Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's epic examination of migration, *Human Flow* (filmed across twenty-three countries and released in 2017), American filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer's treatise on the Indonesian genocide, *The Act of Killing* (co-directed with Christine Cynn and an anonymous Indonesian director, 2012), and American filmmaker David Gelb's Japanese-language documentary portrait of a renowned sushi chef in Tokyo, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011).
3. Katalin Kis provides a thorough investigation of this phenomenon in the realm of contemporary television production in her dissertation, *Nationalisms in the Era of Global Quality TV: How SVODS Main/Stream the Local*. Kis examines the role of subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms in mainstreaming "local original" television programs to global audiences. For Kis, the SVOD promise of delivering culturally diverse programming to viewers around the world in fact exacerbates problematic, competitive nationalisms. While streaming platforms market themselves as cosmopolitan media hubs that celebrate and elevate cultural difference, they in fact flatten cultural and regional diversity by

prioritizing programming that emphasizes national identities over other forms of expression. See: Kis, Katalin. *Nationalisms in the Era of Global Quality TV: How SVODS Main/Stream the Local.* 2021. University of Southern California, PhD dissertation.

4. The original text reads, "egyszerű történetek, privát sorsok és intim drámák állnak ennek az újfajta, a korábbinál személyesebb dokumentarista hullámnak a középpontjában."
5. For a further critique of this film, see Ioana Uricaru, "Collective: The Great Romanian Oscar Hope" and Daniel Marcus, "Collective: Narrative Hope and its Refusal" in *Docalugue*, May 2021, https://docalogue.com/collective/
6. Both *Collective* and *Return to Epipo* were co-produced by HBO.
7. We can compare Amazon's synopsis of *Collective* to Netflix's synopsis of *The Bleeding Edge* (Kirby Dick, 2018), another recent documentary that exposes corruption within the healthcare industry. *The Bleeding Edge* uncovers corporate cover-ups and the lack of governmental regulations over the medical device industry in the United States. Yet, while the documentary focuses on patients affected by faulty medical devices in the U.S., Netflix's synopsis simply reads: "This eye-opening look at the fast-growing medical device industry reveals how the rush to innovate can lead to devastating consequences for patients" (Netflix, "The Bleeding Edge"). Here, corruption and scandal are detached from a national or regional identity and presented as endemic to a particular industry instead.
8. For a sustained examination of cosmopolitanism in European media cultures, see: Imre, Anikó. 2016. "The Cosmopolitan Media Cultures of Europe." In *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe: Contexts, Practices and Politics*, ed. Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
9. Turajlić was born in Yugoslavia and has stated in interviews that she continues to identify as Yugoslav. See: Turajlić, Mila interviewed by Owen Kohl. "CEERES of Interviews: Director Mila Turajlić and 'The Other Side of Everything.'" *YouTube*, uploaded by CEERES, 9 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpaMjiciwvw

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