

Screen Industries in East-Central Europe: The Long 1990s

This issue of *Illuminace* has its origins in the sixth annual Screen Industries in East-Central Europe Conference (SIECE), which was held at the Czech National Film Archive in Prague from 4 to 5 November 2016.¹⁾ The conference was inspired by recent discussions about the “Long 1990s” (usually defined by historians as the period between November 1989 and September 11, 2001). Alternatively, these discussions have referred to the period as “the end of history” decade, “life between two deaths”, “time of frivolous pursuit”, etc. While issues such as the boom of cable TV or the dot-com bubble dominated Anglo-American discourses on the media industries of the 1990s, the SIECE conference concentrated on region-specific aspects, which remain strikingly under-researched. Some of the historicizing debates presuppose that the turbulent decade’s improvisational, informal, anachronistic, do-it-yourself, and ad-hoc practices, which emerged from the ruins of state-owned media institutions, gradually solidified into a system of values and norms that continue to shape current media industries, although often in an unacknowledged or hidden way. The conference participants were invited to critically test the assumption that, in many ways, the heritage of the 1990s limits how “things are done” in film and television today, and that this heritage has cemented the contemporary image of Central and Eastern European audiovisual culture in the West. At the same time, they were asked to re-evaluate the decade’s experimental ethos and its continuities with official and unofficial cultural production of the 1980s.²⁾

As an ECREA pre-conference,³⁾ the SIECE call aimed to cover the whole spectrum of cultural industries, and so it is not surprising that it hosted a more interdisciplinary composition of papers than ever before. Apart from structural analyses of 1990s film and TV

1) See 2016 SIECE 6 Conference program at <<http://www.cefs.cz/konference.html>>. The 2018 SIECE 7 Conference focuses on online distribution and internet TV, and it will take place in Prague, 22–23 May, as an ICA pre-conference.

2) See the SIECE 6 Call for Papers at <<http://www.cefs.cz/konference.html>>.

3) The SIECE 6 Conference immediately preceded the 6th European Communication Conference, held in Prague, 9–12 November 2016.

industries in particular CEE countries (Marcin Adamczak on Poland, Cladius Turcuş and Alexandru Matei on Romania, Petr Bílík on Czech Republic, Jana Dudková on Slovakia, Lina Kaminskaitė-Jančorien on Lithuania), others talked about the video game industry (Jaroslav Švelch, Tamás Beregi, Dominika Staszenko), video piracy (Michał Pabiś-Orzeszyna), the national book market (Petr A. Bílek), fanzines (Miloš Hroch), or the post-underground music scene (Tomáš Jirsa). Still others focused on specific production (Antonín Tesař on 1990s “exploitation” cinema, Anna Batori on the Hungarian “Black Series”), exhibition (Jan Hanzlík on marketing multiplexes), representational (Constantin Parvulescu’s keynote address on “the specters of Europe in 1990s East-Central European film”, Petr Bílík on 1990s filmmakers’ self-conceptions), or film-narrative trends (Radomír D. Kokeš on the director Jan Svěrák).

Of the 25 presentations delivered in 2016, we selected four to be developed for publication, each concentrating on a very different aspect of the media industries in the 1990s: the transformations of a local production infrastructure, a national production system, event-oriented exhibition practices, and nostalgic discourse in the post-1989 recording industry.

In the first two papers, Claudiu Turcuş and Konrad Klejsa (together with his colleagues) uncover reasons why 1990s institutional reforms in Romanian and Polish cinema respectively failed to create integrated production systems that would have been able to satisfy national demand and to compete on European markets and at festivals. Turcuş focuses on a longer history of organizational reforms, starting with Ceauşescu’s 1970s authoritarian centralization, whose conception of the State as the sole producer and the Party as the ultimate gatekeeper had a continuing influence upon industry practice in the 1990s, resulting in the enduring structural absence of the producer as a key initiator and co-ordinator of film projects, and consequently in the overall decline of Romanian film production. While Klejsa and his co-authors approach similar issues of legal, economic, and legitimacy crises of the post-1989 film industry, their perspective is different: they look at political-economic relationships between Warsaw and Łódź, the capital and the traditional cultural center on one side, and the hub of the post-World War II film production facilities on the other. Their explanation is innovative in terms of choosing a city’s industrial culture rather than national cinema — the day-to-day operations of the local production infrastructure rather than big-names filmmakers — as their main explanatory framework.

Jan Hanzlík draws on his long-term research of Czech post-1989 film exhibition, distribution, and marketing practices and analyzes the growing economic and cultural significance of “eventization” in both the multiplex and arthouse cinema sectors. He links the growing marketing potential of “events” to the globalization of media distribution, but points to the fact that it is not an entirely new trend, likening it to the historical phenomenon of cinema “attractions”. In the last article included in the issue, literary theorist Tomáš Jirsa, drawing on sociological theories of music production, uncovers the cultural logic of anachronistic and nostalgic stances in the production and consumption of pre-1989 unofficial music in his examination of the fascinating case of the Czech band *Psí vojáci* (Dog Soldiers).

Taken as a whole, these four studies problematize the idea of the 1989/1990 political

change as a rupture in the media industry history of the CEE region. They reveal specific, long-term continuities between older practices and the 1990s. Naturally, a volume such as this cannot include work addressing all of the important issues relating to the media landscape of the “long 1990s” and thus leaves many areas untouched (e.g. the end of grand popular narratives; Europeanization and provincialization of the post-socialist screen industries; negotiations between proponents of culture as pure business and of so-called “anticommercialism”; practices of negotiating and adapting to the new heteronomous power; tactics for defending or re-gaining symbolic capital threatened by the change of political regime; etc.). Nevertheless, we hope that the present issue will stimulate further scholarly debates and exchanges in the near future, when it is expected that the 1990s will become an increasingly important subject of historical research.

The present issue would not be possible without the extensive editorial assistance of Kevin B. Johnson. A selection of the presentations delivered at the upcoming 2018 conference in Prague will be included in the fall 2019 issue of *Illuminace*.

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