

*Paper prepared for the
Fourth Euroacademia International Conference
Re-Inventing Eastern Europe*

Krakow, 24 – 26 April 2015

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite*

Eastern Europe as Other in Silent Cinema

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Abstract

The following study will discuss depictions of Eastern Europe through the medium of silent film. My goal is to explore what distinguishes Eastern Europe from Western Europe and how early cinema has played a vital role in modern understanding of this divide. I will focus on three distinct images of the "orient:" traditional Judaism, vampires, and the nascent Soviet Union. It is beyond the scope of this study to fully delve into the cultural and ideological clashes of east versus west throughout history and even within the bounds of individual episodes in the past century. Instead, I have chosen to examine some of the most recognizable elements of what constitutes Eastern Europe in popular consciousness, and I will do it using the medium which has been responsible for much of our understanding - whether accurate or not - of the East. Like any other art form, cinema reflects the time in which it was made and betrays with varying degrees of subtlety the biases, fears, hopes, and desires of the artist. Silent cinema's brief tenure as the world's *only* non-print mass media impacted its audience in ways that are beyond the comprehension of the average person today who can access all the movies and information in the world through the phone in their pocket, yet old stereotypes have not necessarily suffered at the hands of 21st century technology and research. I could never expect to explain why this is so, but it is my intention to help clarify some reasons why contemporary cinema of the years encompassing the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and their aftermaths might be partially responsible for our perceptions.

Introduction

The 21st-century perception of "Eastern Europe" owes as much to acculturation as it does geography. In the postmodern world, the Cold War clearly divided the continent into two halves - one progressive, colorful, and comfortably familiar to the Western (read: American) consciousness; the other backward, repressive, and unsettlingly foreign. Now multiple decades removed from the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the structure still lives not simply in fragments as a tourist attraction but in the minds of those who, even if they cannot remember Communism themselves, are made to at any point differentiate Eastern and Western Europe. However, the Berlin Wall served as a tangible symbol not only of the Cold War but of a centuries-old fissure with roots cemented before the fall of Rome. David Fromkin, in a classroom exercise, asked students to divine causes of the First World War, and many of these causes are easily applied here as they too refer to a continental split:

The decision to divide the Roman Empire between the Latin-speaking West and the Greek-speaking East...The Slavs (who were to become Europe's largest ethnic group) moved into the Balkans, where the Teutons had already arrived...The formal split between Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christianity...The conquest of Christian eastern and central Europe by Muslim Ottoman (or Turkish) Empire and deprived the peoples of the Balkans of centuries of experience in self-government...

While these reasons are all true, they might prove a bit too sophisticated for research on the movies' influence on how we look at a specific culture. It is even too much to ask "where does the West start and the East begin," since much of what was historically "Central Europe" became stigmatized by years of foreign occupation well before 1945: the entire map between Greater Germany (more simply, "Anschluss Germany") and Russia would be tossed between these Great Powers for centuries; by the late 20th-century the newly-liberated former Bloc countries would all come out thoroughly influenced by both. On a personal note, I found during my semester abroad in Prague in 2006 that when asking directions, if the person I asked did not speak English, they would immediately begin speaking German, which was confusing because not only did I *not* speak German but was also confused that any Czech citizen *would* after the long struggle for independence from the Habsburg Empire (and, of course, six years of Nazi occupation). Yet the notion of "Central Europe" is not as dated as it seems; Mark Mazower points out that the term came into vogue to an extent during the Cold War as countries of justifiable longitudes "talked themselves into 'Central Europe' to distance themselves from the barbarians." He goes on to quote an

unnamed British historian on the then-recent Bosnian war: "...a primitive, tribal conflict only anthropologists can understand." At the time of Mazower's writing (my edition dates from 2000 but the original printing was in 1998), Eastern Europe was barely a decade removed from Communism and was an unfamiliar guest everywhere from the European Union to Eurovision. Original audiences of the films below would hardly be shocked by such an outcome.

Der Gelbe Schein (1918)

Director Ernst Lubitsch's early German film *Der Gelbe Schein* (*The Yellow Ticket*) is not one of his better-known works and only reached my attention by chance in the spring of 2013, when it was screened at the Coolidge Corner Theater in Brookline, Massachusetts as a collaborative presentation of both the Boston Jewish Film Festival and the Boston Jewish Music Festival (there was a live klezmer violin accompaniment). Lubitsch would become famous in Hollywood in the 1920s and well into the "talkie" era for his sophisticated comedies, but *Der Gelbe Schein* is neither sophisticated nor funny. Its star, then-unknown Pola Negri, would replace Theda Bara as one of the great "vamps" of the silent screen, but here she too deviates from her normal path by portraying the very opposite of a vamp: a bookish Jewish girl in the Pale of Settlement.

Der Gelbe Schein was released in November 1918, a date understood by us to mean the end of the First World War but at the time of shooting was intended as a propaganda vehicle for Germany to expose tsarist Russia as an anti-semitic, oppressive, regressive, and ultimately backward country - hardly a falsehood at the time. Of course, by late 1918, neither Germany nor Russia could claim any victories from the Great War; it is no coincidence that centenary commemorations are curiously absent from both countries today, and of course both countries by the war's end had undergone radical changes in government. That said, *Der Gelbe Schein* provides a rare documentary glimpse of Jewish Eastern Europe as it tends to be remembered through collective memory. It was shot in part in the predominantly Jewish Nalewiski district of Warsaw during the less "malevolent" of the two German occupations that the city would come to endure. The non-Jewish Negri

...was greatly moved by the experience of filming among a 'bearded and bewigged' population that could easily have 'stepped out of drawings of life made there two hundred years ago', and hoped that despite the prevailing anti-Jewish feelings of many of her fellow Poles, the film she was making, on the eve of her departure for Germany and world stardom, would do something to spread tolerance and understanding.

For the modern viewer, equipped with the knowledge that many "extras" in the background of street shots were in fact real residents of the town, it is almost impossible not to feel haunted by the inevitable fate of these people which awaits them in the then-unforeseen future conflict. Nearly century-old films already come with a subconscious reminder, by virtue of their age, that "everyone in this movie is dead now" but such an end as the Holocaust is a uniquely terrifying *causa mortis*. Of course, since no global catastrophe can be born in a vacuum, the Eastern Front came equipped with a history of anti-semitism that would bolster the Germans' efforts in the 1940s, and the film's very title alludes to one such criterion: the "gold tickets" in question were given to Jewish women so that they might live in St. Petersburg in the only way permitted to them at the time - as prostitutes. Gabriella Safran challenges the notion that "nice Jewish girls" really did this, but the "urban myth" of the "Jewish false prostitute" did exist, and it coexisted with the even less comfortable and more prevalent myth "of the Jew as white slaver." Safran's article is actually about a non-Jewish prostitute who provides refuge, if not actual services, to the secular Jew El'ia Isaakovich, who himself defies yet another stereotype about the moral and physical weaknesses of Jewish men, one which would not be eradicated by the mere triviality that Jews had a healthy representation in the tsar's army during World War One. In 1916, a publication called *Shchit* (*The Shield*) would speak out against "the danger it [Russia's anti-semitism] posed both to the moral equality of the Russian nation and to its reputation abroad," but to little effect.

Pola Negri's character is Lea, the adopted daughter of a dying Orthodox Jew named Scholem. She loves to learn (more than one source compares her to Yentl), which is of course out of step for women, particularly in the Orthodox Jewish community of the day, but she tells her father "I want to study every book I can find to help you in your suffering." Her dream is to study in St. Petersburg, which she is only able to do after Scholem's death, with the acquisition of a yellow ticket, *and* with the papers of her former teacher's dead sister in whose name, Sofia Storki, she is able to enroll in medical classes at the university.

While there she attracts the attention of Dmitri - and later loses it when he sees her at one of her landlady's wild parties earning her keep under her real name of Lea Raab. Safran notes that the insincerity of the "false prostitute" is in fact nullified by the *true* sincerity of choosing not to convert to Christianity and thereby do away with all the racist restrictions. Living with the stigma of the yellow ticket and remaining Jewish (arguably a worse stigma in tsarist Russia anyway) was a more honorable choice than to give up one's faith. However, we are quickly disabused of the notion that Lea is just another poor Jewish damsel in distress: when Dmitri learns her secret, she attempts suicide and is saved by her professor...who just so happens to also be her biological father. Siegbert Solomon Praver quotes Ring Lardner, Jr. regarding *The Gentleman's Agreement* in which Gregory Peck poses as a Jew to experience anti-semitism firsthand: "...you should never be mean to a Jew because he might turn out to be a Gentile." The question then becomes: is the moral of the story *really* that the Russians are inferior for their anti-semitism when a German-made movie gives a character a Cinderella moment when it is revealed that she is *not* in fact Jewish and therefore now fully entitled to a happy life? If this is so, perhaps there is no moral at all and we must accept *Der Gelbe Schein* for its value as a chronicle of a world that would only exist for a few more short years.

Nosferatu (1922)

It was tempting to discuss F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* alongside Tod Browning's even more famous *Dracula*. No one can dispute the argument that Browning's version, made in 1931 and starring Bela Lugosi, is the version that has set the standard for the image of Dracula more than Bram Stoker's novel (or the real Dracula, Vlad Tepes, from the 15th century) ever did. However, space does not permit a deviation from the silent film focus of this study, and while Lugosi's thick Hungarian accent is indeed legendary, his character is too handsome, too suave, too *clean* to meet the criteria of "barbarian" that, for the purposes of my research, an Eastern European must be. Of course, it does not hurt that *Nosferatu* is more faithful to the Stoker novel. *Dracula* lives as a Halloween icon but *Nosferatu* is almost too scary even for that. The star of the aforementioned *Der Gelbe Schein*, Pola Negri, rose to fame as an "ethnic" beauty; "Her public image, molded primarily by Lubitsch in their Berlin years, was based on casting her as the savage, oversexed and irresistible Other." Yet her variant of "Other" was still safely contained inside a woman who is stunningly beautiful even by modern standards. It is the same with Lugosi's portrayal of Dracula. The fear generated by the vampire of *Nosferatu* penetrates even deeper because it does not stop at his hideous appearance.

Brenda Gardenour's analysis of *Nosferatu* vis a vis the medieval blood libel against Jews is hardly far-reaching. Julius Streicher had to have seen the film in order to fashion his ugly caricatures for *Der Sturmer*. *Nosferatu* is hardly a man of the 20th century, of course. His grotesque features - rat-like teeth, gnarled hands, emaciated body, sunken eyes, hooked nose, large ears - are not in line with the modern German *mann* of the Weimar Republic. Even if Jews were already somehow at fault for Germany's defeat in the First World War, thus responsible for the country's financial ruin in the early 1920s, the film takes place in a safely *judenrein* German city that looks like a Grimm Brothers fairy tale. Bremen is thus not simply the most beautiful setting of the films discussed in this study; it is the only one which is aesthetically pleasing. "Was it he who brought the plague to Bremen in 1838?" ponders local historian Johann Cavallius at the film's outset. This is our spoiler for the film's ending, but is it really even a spoiler when everyone already knows that bloodsucking Jews spread disease? Streicher teaches young Aryans in his children's book *Der Giftpilz* that the Jew is

...the most most poisonous mushroom in existence. Just as poisonous mushrooms spring up everywhere, so the Jew is found in every country in the world. Just as poisonous mushrooms often lead to the most dreadful calamity, so the Jew is the cause of misery and distress, illness and death.

Nosferatu is not German and Roman Polanski's 1967 spoof *Dance of the Vampires* makes him a very obviously stereotyped Jew, complete with the accent that would have been impossible to showcase with 1922 technology. But we know even in the earlier depiction that he is "not from around here:" the Black Death spread westward from Asia; so too did much of European Jewry. Polanski's "blond-haired, blue-eyed, buxom Christian maid, Magda" lies in step with the traditional bloodlust of Jews for Christian blood; Murnau's Ellen Hutter (played by a brunette yet hardly threatening Greta Schroder) is no less a target for *Nosferatu*. Gardenour suggests that the blood libel has its origins in medieval medicine - that the Jewish male does not have the properly "male" physiognomy that allows for a strong and healthy countenance,

making him essentially female (Jewish women pay the price for deicide in their own way, by having worse menstrual cramps and labor pains than Christian women). Christian blood is therefore not sought merely in a malicious way - it is vital - and only the most sick, defective sort of being could *require* the blood of someone else, their own blood being just *that* inferior.

It is necessary to stress that anti-semitism can certainly be sussed out of *Nosferatu*, but the vampire tradition itself is deeply Eastern European; other cultures might have their variants but much of the superstition that clouds the Eastern European tradition and mindset stems from the belief in vampires. Most famous for these beliefs, of course, is Romania, although the earliest vampyric folklore seems in fact to date to the Bulgarian Empire during the 10th-century C.E. The Bulgarian Empire was fairly heterogeneous at the time and included a number of other Slavic (and non-Slavic) groups which would one day claim their own vampire mythology - Serbs, Macedonians, Croats, Wallachians, Magyars, Albanians, and Greeks. Perkowski's article shows up in a database which dates the relevance of its content between the tenth century and 2009, and the ethnicities listed are definitely not lacking for material during this long period. The Magyars (Hungarians) have the famous bloodthirsty daughter Elizabeth Bathory, who died in the early 17th century after a long solitary confinement for killing young women and bathing in their blood. As recently as this past October, a 13th-century "vampire grave" was unearthed in Bulgaria. A "vampire princess," Eleonore von Schwarzenberg, lived and died in Cesky Krumlov in the present-day Czech Republic. Yet not only has the novel *Dracula* and its myriad of film adaptations done the most to permanently link the Wallachians (Romanians) with vampires - not even including the bloodlust of the Vlad "Dracul" Tepes, the 15th-century "impaler" of invading Turks and other enemies - but there is evidence from disturbingly recent times that the vampire is not just a sort of Romanian Mickey Mouse.

Jan Perkowski's article seems to vacillate between liberating the Romanian people from this stereotype of succumbing to dumb superstitions, but at the same time the news articles he cites - all from the last couple of decades - do little to bolster his argument. He assures the reader that "the Romanian folkloric vampire is not long for this world" even after citing a news story from 2002 about a Romanian man who ran a dagger through his mother's heart for fear she was a vampire. Sadly, the news source provided for this story is a tabloid paper called *World Weekly News*, which stunts Perkowski's credibility in my eyes, but he mentions a 2005 article in the *Telegraph* about a man named Gheorghe Marinescu who, along with some accomplices, dug up a body from a graveyard and drove a stake through its heart. The act was committed in a small village but this does not preclude the more urban, educated classes from maintaining a healthy fear and respect for vampires:

Marotinu de Sus, in the south-west, is far from the only village in Romania to take the threat of vampires seriously. In many rural communities like it across the country, belief in vampires is pervasive and superstition often governs people's lives....Deep superstition and belief in the paranormal and pagan permeates all levels of society in urban Romania as well. Maria Tedescu, a 21-year-old law student in Bucharest, said: "We all have our little superstitions, like taking three steps back if a black cat crosses your path to stop something bad happening. But vampires are different. It's not something to be taken lightly. I know it may sound silly and I can't totally explain it, but I think they exist. I always wear a crucifix... just in case."

It is worth noting that the "vamp" genre which dominated silent films throughout the 1910s and early (pre-flapper) 1920s grew out of Theda Bara's character in *A Fool There Was* (1915), the title of which comes from Rudyard Kipling's *The Vampire*. Typically "exotic" more than beautiful (Bara was Jewish, born in Ohio, and aged thirty at the time of her film debut), "vamps" were a safe venture into the "unknown" for audiences struggling with the fast-changing world of the day. Murnau's vampire is simply pure evil.

Conclusion: *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924) and "Real" Eastern Europe

___ People might argue about which countries belong to the still-undefined entity of Eastern Europe, but it is safe to conclude that Russia, which spreads from Europe across Asia, cannot be categorized as "Western" at all - even in terms of its culture. Early Russian films, such as the beautifully shot works of Yevgeny Bauer, are not necessarily "Russian;" in romantic tragedy *After Death* (1915), Andrei's old aunt is spotted serving him tea from a samovar, while Andrei himself wears a Russian-style hat in his outdoor park scene with love interest Zoia. Bauer did not have a monopoly on this style of film - many European countries made fine quality movies during the 1910s - but it was and continues to be his hallmark.

Unfortunately he died young in 1917 and with him of course died the Russia of the Romanovs and Anna Karenina which would continue to be worshipped in Western (particularly American) cinema through to the 1930s. Even here it seems inappropriate not to at least mention Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* (1939) in which "Garbo Laughs." Stoic Ninotchka (played, of course, by Greta Garbo) is young enough to have dim (if any) memories of antebellum Russia, but she *is* young enough to eventually open up to the notion that Paris, ever the capital of civilization, might not be such a horrible place.

Ninotchka is a parody of the austerity of the Soviet Union, but it is a Hollywood parody, and censorship pressure both from the Hayes Code and MGM studio head Louis B. Mayer (the film was made by MGM) would never have allowed for any deviation from what is today taken for granted as classic Hollywood magic. Fifteen years earlier, an early Soviet propaganda film not only mocks Americans but exposes them as truly insipid and dumb. *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* makes no attempt to be an attractive movie, which almost makes it hard to watch; even though it is a comedy, humor in old films - old *Hollywood* films - stems out of comfort. *Mr. West* is not a comfortable movie any more than modern comedic television shows are truly "comfortable." We have the unique luxury of viewing this movie at a safe distance from postwar Russia and we can laugh because we are educated enough to find humor that, while directed at us, no longer is pertinent for relations between Russians and Americans, no matter how much it once was.

Nothing about Lev Kuleshov's satire is politically correct. Mr. West's wife tosses a live cat across the room towards the end of the film, something which would never be shown in a "proper" Western movie. And speaking of Western, Mr. West's best friend and companion in the film is a cowboy named Jeddy, who dresses like Tom Mix and shoots wantonly at everything in sight. West himself wears huge eyeglasses and is introduced (at least in the version of the film I am using) with "Yankee Doodle Dandy." Heretofore, Eastern Europeans were presented to a Western audience as something outside of their understanding, but Kuleshov sets the precedent for the Soviet propaganda which would quickly become famous and flips the tables on the Russian public by making *them* normal and *us* "outsiders." Indeed, to this day Russia is set apart from Europe and North America; as recently as the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the media had a field day making fun of the hotel rooms where the reporters and athletes had to stay. Even if the criticism was justified, it was also not unexpected. Subtitled "A Yankee's Curiosity Punished and Rewarded," the audience can already surmise that the film will have a happy ending, and it does. Mr. West is never actually disabused of his belief that Russians are anything but barbaric, bearlike Soviets, but he does request his wife in the final scene to "Burn all the New York magazines and hang a portrait of Lenin in my office." All the while he is ripped off at every turn by the "helpful" Russian thugs who pretend to help him while at the same time acting like the very Russians he is warned about in the beginning. They are an ugly lot with bad teeth, a level of realism that even modern Hollywood tends to avoid. But it is that realism that separates the truth of Bolshevism versus the lies and deceit of a capitalist society, of course!

Conclusion

Europe has continuously set the highest standard for culture around the world since, ironically, the late 15th-century, when overseas cultures began to be robbed of their *own* cultures *by* Europeans. This statement is in no way a self-hating attack towards Europeans, but even the most staunchly right-wing fascist knows that the "primitive," the "other" he wants to eliminate did in fact exist in the past, and some level of culture is precisely what *allows* humans *to* exist. The Jewish Museum in Prague is Hitler's failed attempt at making a museum of an extinct race, and most of its contents is ritual-oriented.

Perhaps it is simple enough to say that Eastern Europe could not have the far reach of Western Europe because geography denied it the ability to colonize. Spanish, Dutch, French, English, and Portuguese influence would dominate the world; Polish influence would dominate Chicago. Perhaps the perpetually stable borders of Spain, the Netherlands, France, England, and Portugal made it easier for countries to dabble in world domination and not such things as national identity. Perhaps these countries got a head start just because they adopted Christianity sooner. The world may never know. Suffice to say that the invention of the moving picture, by helping along other new turn-of-the-20th-century technologies in making the world smaller, would ultimately be more of a "window to the West" than St. Petersburg ever could have been to Peter the Great - and for us, a window to the East as well.

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"Der Gelbe Schein (1918)", 1918, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP8NnuWdcsk>

"Nosferatu (1922) - Full Movie" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcyzubFvBsA>

"The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (1924) (Ru, En Subs)" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OhvT-UV82o>

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