

Fall 12-31-1995

Fragments and Images from the East and the West

Clay Steinman
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl>

Recommended Citation

Steinman, Clay (1995) "Fragments and Images from the East and the West," *Macalester International*: Vol. 2, Article 25.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol2/iss1/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester International by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

FRAGMENTS AND IMAGES FROM THE EAST AND THE WEST

Clay Steinman

I. Introduction

The summer we went to Hungary, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis exhibited *D'Est*, an installation by Chantal Akerman, a Belgian filmmaker whose parents were Polish Jews. She is perhaps best known for her 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Much of that film consists of long takes of the title character performing the “daily gestures of a woman,”¹ such everyday chores as making a meal, with Akerman’s camera unmoving in medium long shot. *D'Est*, the installation, consists of a seventy-minute film of landscapes and interiors shot by Akerman in Russia and Poland in the early 1990s. The film runs continuously; a viewer can begin to watch at any moment, making the course of the resulting narrative contingent upon the moment of arrival (and departure). The installation also includes eight banks of television monitors, three in each, which present four-minute segments of the film. Finally, it includes a small room, its walls black, a single monitor on the floor. On-screen are images of movement through urban space, accompanied alternately by the sound of a passage from the Book of Exodus, in Hebrew and English, and by Akerman’s comments about her work on the film, which link it obliquely to the Holocaust.

I am thinking about the installation, and about its title, as I try to write about our time in Hungary, about ways that time might prove to matter in my teaching and research and in my participation in the Macalester community. An arrogance might be read in Akerman’s title (“From the East”), to the extent that it

carries with it the promise of knowing once and for all—and of telling once and for all—what has been happening in that part of the world since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. The installation's response to that risk of arrogance, that risk of seeming to claim impartiality for itself, is to break down the film into elements that, on the video monitors, perpetually reassemble themselves into new collages. Moreover, the installation's floor plan is arranged so that one can spend moments walking by different banks of monitors, making choices about which of the several available simultaneities to absorb, as each plays out in its own time (just as one walks through them in one's own time) the surface of experience recorded by Akerman's camera. Much of the film consists of scenes of people in chairs in waiting rooms and the like, cannily shot at the level of those seated, "at human level—waist high or near a face."² Sometimes the people face the camera, other times they look screen right or screen left. Watching them wait, sitting there in the Walker, rhymed with the action in the film, in a peculiar, perpendicular way.

Although it limited our experience of Eastern Europe, the seminar's physical concentration in Budapest (combined with private trips most of us took) enabled us to know that city well enough to begin to get a sense of what it might offer to its residents, and to our students who might choose to study there for a term (a choice I hope more of my advisees will make, now that I have a clearer sense of what they might learn). Yet we were not there as tourists. Our task was to try to understand what had followed Soviet Communism in East Central Europe and the impact of globalization on the region. Perhaps this volume might begin to accomplish that, or to point to ways that it might be accomplished. For her part, Akerman feared that her preconceptions of Eastern Europe might take over her film, making it unacceptably solipsistic. "I will not attempt to show the disintegration of a system, nor the difficulties of entering into another one," she wrote, for "she who seeks shall find, find all too well, and end up clouding her vision with her own preconceptions." Yet, she says, this cannot be helped. At best, "it will happen indirectly."³ Transition and globalization open up a city like Budapest to investigation by U.S. spectators; its sign systems start to make sense, positively. Under Soviet Communism, cities like Budapest could easily be described negatively by what they

were not (not vibrant in a commercial sense, not as well maintained as the wealthy parts of U.S. cities, etc.). Now we can recognize in Budapest the ways it is becoming like a Western city (the Hilton and Pizza Hut, the familiar products for sale, the interests Hungarians have in what interests us). Indeed, much current writing on East Central Europe traces its coming into familiarity, into accessibility.

The official speakers we met, as well as the people met more casually, helped us understand East Central Europe today by reducing its universe of situations and practices to narratives we (and they) could understand. Each narrative had its own partiality, although everyone I met and most everyone I have read tells a narrative of difficult recovery from the abuse of the USSR. The totalitarian cultural and political systems, the devastation of the environment, the emphasis on heavy industry to the detriment of consumer products—these were accomplished in service to a foreign power, against traditions, complicated and diverse traditions, of East Central European nationalism. Yet despite the initial euphoria after the Communist governments collapsed after 1989, this narrative of abuse has no twelve-step happy ending. Yes, according to Bedřich Moldan and Janos Vargha, the physical environment has improved over the last several years. But as the economists in this collection report, this is due to economic slowdowns that in U.S. terms would be considered depressions. Recovery from these depressions has not begun to match the magnitude of the post-1989 slump, and there is no strong environmental movement to contest more pollution and harm if the economy rebounds. And yes, as the economists say, there is a class of entrepreneurs developing in these countries. But there is no vibrant labor movement to contest their attempts to secure (for themselves and their foreign investors) quick returns by exploiting and endangering workers. Nor is there an active women's movement (see the essay by Enikő Bollobás). In every country of Eastern Europe, except for Czechoslovakia,⁴ voters have turned on the center-right parties elected to succeed communist rule and have restored to power former Communists, often in coalitions.

In part, we were told, this lack of a new political culture should have been expected. In Hungary, for example, the non-communist forces did not win power. "The old system collapsed

because it ran out of energy,” Tamás Réti told us. It was designed to serve the USSR, not to produce sustainable economic growth to benefit those living within it. Once the Soviet Union withdrew, elites had no choice but to give up social and political control. Those parties were elected who promised social change without pain, according to Réti. In part they did so because they believed—as did Soviet Marxism!—that a change in the economic system would necessarily produce changes in other spheres. Egged on by Jeffrey Sachs and other neoconservative economists (see Ruthann Godollei’s essay), they believed that by selling off national assets to Western capital and moving larger portions of the economy into private hands, general welfare and a vibrant democracy would result.

Perhaps they would have been proven right if there had been more privatization, as Sachs and others maintain. It is unclear whether democratic systems could (or should) support the consequent pain. In any case, these first governments could not keep their promises and were for the most part voted out. However, the governments that replaced them had no genuine alternatives (except going faster here, going slower there), increasing by their actions the spread between rich and poor, squeezing those in the middle ever harder, and creating spaces in which corruption could flourish.⁵ And social-democratic and socialist alternatives, according to our speakers, lacked the required political constituency and remained too tied in voters’ minds to the old regime to be considered seriously. Most of our speakers seemed unwilling to separate for analytical purposes the relative contributions of Soviet domination and central planning and the welfare state to their countries’ current difficulties.⁶ This constricts the range of policy alternatives available for public discussion, especially when Western assistance tends to be limited to private investment.

II. Political Economy of Media

My own field is media studies, and I was especially interested in changes in newspapers and television. While I had hoped that the end of Soviet domination would mean a flowering of media alternatives (as occurred, for example, in France after liberation from the Nazis), what I found in Hungary was a reproduction of

general political-economic trends.⁷ In the newspaper business, private owners, many of them from abroad (the most sensational paper, which includes a daily photograph of a topless model, is co-owned by Gannett⁸), have created and begun serving a market for British-style tabloids.⁹ In television, the only question is how fast previously-owned state media will be privatized. The situation remains fluid.¹⁰ As we left Hungary, the country still had two state-owned television stations. One (Channel 1) is mostly news-oriented; the other (Channel 2) concentrates on cultural affairs but includes occasional U.S. series such as *Dallas* (brought to Hungary by the channel's communist managers in the mid-1980s). Both channels have some commercials, but in general, programs are not interrupted by commercial breaks. Journalists and professional broadcasters at both channels have been struggling for years for professional autonomy. This was particularly a problem for Channel 1 under the first postcommunist regime, when the center-right prime minister, dissatisfied with coverage of his government, fired the head of the news division. Many Hungarians, particularly those in cities, have access to cable or satellite television, which offer foreign networks (including the French cultural channel) and a range of locally owned private, commercial channels, in which programs are interrupted for advertisements. Those with cable — which costs almost as much in Hungary as in the United States although salaries are five to ten times lower — can also receive Duna TV, a satellite channel designed primarily to serve Hungarian minorities outside Hungary. Duna TV is run by a government-controlled foundation and is commercial-free. As we were leaving, members of the government proposed selling off Channel 2 (the frequency and rights to broadcast, not the programming, staff, or equipment) and moving the channel to satellite/cable, which would make it inaccessible to many or most Hungarians. Still to be determined was the extent of foreign ownership that might be allowed. The government may have no choice but to sell the channel; it evidently cannot afford the ongoing subsidies it requires.

Many experiences of the seminar will undoubtedly find their way into the courses I teach, but perhaps the most important involved what I was able to learn about Hungarian television. For my students in Introduction to Mass Communication, the

Hungarian cultural channel offers a model of broadcasting different from U.S. commercial networks dependent on advertising; different from PBS, which depends mostly on corporate sponsorship; and different from local PBS stations, which are dependent on the tastes of local elites. Even more so than PBS, the Hungarian cultural channel aims programming at discrete audiences (such as the young, retired people, or farmers). This produces programming that by design is not always attractive to audiences advertisers covet. (This is not niche programming: aiming a show at farmers is not the same, for example, as aiming it at what in the United States would be the audience for Country Music Television.) This makes impossible the full-evening viewership that U.S. commercial networks treasure. In this context, high ratings and demographics do not determine programming, although shows with no constituency or those judged “tired” by the Channel 2 staff are let go. Also important for my teaching, I think, will be the beginning sense I was able to gain of the specificity of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, specificity unavailable as one encounters the flow of international news in the media. Moreover, I was exposed to views about the former Yugoslavia (by Ivan Vejvoda and several others I met informally from that country) that I had never heard clearly articulated — and that have led me to see U.S. news coverage as tragically oversimplified. Not only will this help me teach analyzing the news with more sophistication but it has also already whetted my appetite for doing more with Hungarian and Czech movies in my film courses and bringing more international films to the Macalester community.

III. A Model of Collegiality

The experience of being with such bright and articulate colleagues from Macalester also gave me a better sense of what is available to students at the college and provided a model for informative discussion that while organized around rigorous questioning of assumptions remains amicable and supportive. Informal conversations were particularly worthwhile, allowing me to test new ideas derived from the seminar among colleagues with different forms of expertise. And several of us were privileged to meet with Sándor Orbán, a knowledgeable

Budapest journalist who is an alumnus of the World Press Institute, a Macalester affiliate. Meeting with Orbán gave us helpful background. It also prompted us to consider ways of involving WPI participants more in the education of our students, perhaps by sponsoring internships that might be rooted in a combined study of international affairs and journalism.

The seminar also contributed significantly to my current research, a book on television and the environment.¹¹ My views about the relationship between economic growth and environmental health were transformed. With the help of Bedřich Moldan and Gary Krueger, I was able to develop a more detailed sense of the possibilities for growth that would improve the environment (replacement of older cars and refrigerators, for example). I also developed a keener sense of the need for vibrant environmental movements to act as a check on elites with other priorities (Moldan and Vargha were particularly helpful here). And from Moldan I learned of the ways U.S. multinationals find profit in East Central Europe from lax environmental regulation.

A theme running through my scholarship over the last two decades has been the relation between economic systems and media texts, and this has to do with larger issues of social theory and transformation. Although I spent a year (1986) learning about media in the People's Republic of China, most of my work has been about market-driven media, within a critique that asks what media and social relations might be possible in a world based neither on the market nor on authoritarian state control. The end of the 1980s appeared to be a moment of imagination, a time when people throughout the once-communist world, East and West, would have a serious chance at last to develop new forms, a "third way."¹² Yet this postcommunist alternative, tyrannically suppressed in China, outflanked in Eastern Europe by much more powerful forces, has yet to win a place. Of course, this was not the only vision of change abroad in the late 1980s—far more common was the notion that the end of communism meant transforming national systems "by enabling people to be their natural selves,"¹³ as if Soviet communism had made people less than human, and that to be truly human was to be a productive participant in capitalist workplaces and markets—as if the national success stories of capitalism did not depend first of all

on access to enormous resources. One version of the events of 1989, by János Kornai, seems to echo many of the accounts we heard:

The general public experiences the joys of a political turn for the better in the months when the system is changing, but its economic situation does not alter in such a short space of time. It has been tired by the earlier periods and finds it hard to believe in new promises, even if they are made under an utterly different political system.¹⁴

This exhaustion leaves little room for hope, and so makes political-economic vision difficult.¹⁵ Justifiable hostility toward the communist era continues to discredit wholesale more than a century of history of working-class movements that the communists (but also Western Europe's Social Democrats) claimed as their antecedent, keeping it outside the range of useful recollection. Aside from Czechoslovakia, no Eastern European country can claim a history of any length of commitment to democratic practices and values. Even much of the heritage of the 1956 revolt has been rejected as too red (such as its advocacy of strong unions and industrial democracy).¹⁶ As a result, the only discourses left to people who seek hints of solutions in the past are nationalist and racist.¹⁷

We encountered these far more than I had expected. Jeszenszky's paper and even more his comments to us, for example, tout a Europeanness for Hungary that devalues those who live to the south or to the east. Several of our speakers spoke of Hungarians as if they were a biological group—leaving Gypsies and Jews in limbo in their vision. Informally, we heard and saw racism against people of African descent as explicit as it comes. And even from those who saw themselves as antiracist and anti-anti-Semitic, we heard familiar prejudices against Jews.

I say all this believing that, as I argued earlier, our sense of the situation was at best preliminary, and unavoidably partial. If my academic training and experiences abroad have taught me anything it is that such partiality must be kept in mind. Writing of *D'Est*, Michael Tarantino notes that in the film "both landscape and society are seen from the point of view of an outsider."¹⁸ Perhaps this is why the passage Akerman includes from Exodus

at the installation's end repeats the commandment against making and idolizing craven images. It may be that even for a seminar as productive as ours,¹⁹ the most one can expect to (re)learn is the "opacity of things and events,"²⁰ to appreciate, in a new way, the plain human value of learning what one can of the struggles of others whose acquaintance earlier one had not been able to make.

Notes

1. Chantal Akerman, quoted in Michael Tarantino, "The Moving Eye: Notes on the Films of Chantal Akerman" in Kathy Halbreich and Bruce Jenkins, eds., *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est*, (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1995): 51.
2. Catherine David, "D'Est: Akerman Variations," in *Bordering on Fiction*: 61.
3. Chantal Akerman, "On D'Est" in *Bordering on Fiction*: 32.
4. Czechoslovakia may have succeeded only in postponing its economic problems. See Shailagh Murray, "The Gap: Czech Trade Deficit Is Troublesome Sign for Struggling Region," *Wall Street Journal Europe* 25 July 1995: 1+.
5. See James Hansen, "Hungary Beats 'Mexico' Rap," *International Herald Tribune*, 22 July 1995: 9+.
6. This seems most pronounced in the essays by Enikő Bollobás and Géza Jeszenszky.
7. See Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
8. "New Warrior in Tabloid Fray?" *Budapest Sun* 20 July 1995: 5.
9. Interestingly, one of the main but less sensational tabloids is owned by the Posta Bank, a quasi governmental body.
10. The information that follows was gathered from interviews, most significantly with Alfréd Wiegmann, a staff director at the cultural channel of Magyar Television, 20 July 1995. I am grateful to Sándor Herceg for arranging the interview and to Hajnalka Vancsik for translating. Like many of the informal meetings I was fortunate to attend, this one would not have been possible without the help of Dan Keyser, Hajnalka Vancsik, and Eva Szendrényi.
11. Mike Budd and Steve Craig, *Mapping the Wasteland: Television and the Environment of Commercial Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996 forthcoming).
12. See, e.g., Charles Derber et al, *What's Left: Radical Politics in the Post Communist Era* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).
13. Christopher G. A. Bryant and Edmund Mokrzycki, introduction to *The New Great Transformation: Change and Continuity in East-Central Europe*, Bryant and Mokrzycki, eds., (London: Routledge, 1994): 8.
14. János Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992): 563.

15. And it has its parallel in the United States. R. W. Apple Jr., "Poll Shows Disenchantment with Politicians and Politics," *New York Times* (National Edition) 12 August 1995: 1+.
16. Andrew Arato, "Revolution and Restoration: On the Origins of Right-Wing Radical Ideology in Hungary" in *The Great Transformation*: 107.
17. For a related viewpoint, see Arato, *ibid.*
18. Tarantino, *Bordering on Fiction*: 52.
19. With appreciation to Anne Sutherland for organizing an environment that could be so productive.
20. David, *Bordering on Fiction*: 58.