Over the past two decades, Cold War studies has been revolutionized—and reinvigorated—by scholars who have exposed the limitations of the superpower binary and the intense focus on the political and diplomatic manifestations of the conflict in favor of exploring the global dimensions of the conflict and emphasizing the critical role played by “soft power.” Concordia University film scholar Masha Salazkina’s *World Socialist Cinema* demonstrates the importance of the global turn but also its pitfalls. Her book, which is fascinating and frustrating in equal measure, should spark dialogues that will in turn lead to new avenues for research.

It is important to note at the start that despite the globalist claims of the title and subtitle, this book is not a study of “world socialist cinema” but rather a densely detailed history of the Tashkent International Festival of Cinemas of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the period 1968-80. Over eight chapters, Salazkina provides a case study of the Soviet Union’s film festival diplomacy in the context of its aspirations to build Soviet power in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia. The locus is not global, as the title implies, but squarely Soviet-era Tashkent as a specific site for drawing together underrepresented filmmakers. In the book’s first half, the focus is the inner workings of the festival, an orientation of particular importance to those interested in Soviet cinematic politics in the context of the cultural Cold War. The perspective shifts to show how filmmakers from the pejoratively designated “Third World” sought to use the Tashkent festival to their advantage, to bring their movies to the attention of audiences accustomed to privileging the work of a handful of white, male art film directors. Both subjects deserve more complete development than is possible in 270 pages of text, particularly given the competition from the thematic analyses of specific films in the book’s second half.

After a lengthy, tendentious, and unusual introduction in which Salazkina forewarns readers that they might not be up to the intellectual challenges of her difficult book, she tackles the real work of providing evidence to support her multi-
faceted approach to decolonizing Cold War cinemas. Chapter 1 is useful in introducing readers unfamiliar with the Soviet cultural scene to an eclectic overview of various historical contexts—cinematic, diplomatic, and ideological—but the general framework will be familiar to Soviet specialists of the period. It is followed by two chapters (2 and 3) that describe the evolution of the Tashkent International Festival from 1968 to 1980, but with so many names and film titles dropped in quick succession that I felt a “cast list” and a filmography were essential aids to keeping all the details straight. The fourth chapter, “Tashkent Festival Critical Discourses,” directly addresses Salazkina’s dissatisfaction with hegemonic Western and Soviet film criticism and will be of particular interest to scholars concerned with theoretical interventions that dismantle traditional cultural hierarchies, like Rossen Djagalov, who has previously collaborated with Salazkina and whose book, From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds (2020), has influenced this chapter. Analysis of specific films begins in chapter 5, on women’s cinema, followed by chapters on industrial films, heritage films, and war films. Each of these chapters can be read independently of the first half of the book and in any order. Salazkina’s talent for comparative film analysis is apparent in this section, and these chapters also suggest avenues for future comparative research, especially of the filmmaking traditions of the non-Russian peoples of the USSR compared to other marginalized populations like those in the Global South. The book ends abruptly, without a real conclusion, although there is a page and a half of concluding remarks at the end of chapter 8. This was an opportunity lost for the author to tie the book’s many themes together in a more meaningful way.

This extremely ambitious book is Salazkina’s second monograph, after In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein’s Mexico, her highly regarded 2009 study of Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein’s Mexican projects, set in Mexican contexts. World Socialist Cinema is clearly a labor of love that required years of wide-ranging research into the multiple global cinemas that sent entries to the Tashkent International Festival in the period under examination. The extensive notes and bibliography will provide scholars with useful leads for further research.

Despite the book’s title, however, there is not a unitary, global socialist cinema, any more than there is a single socialism. Careful review of the bibliography reveals Salazkina’s extensive coverage of the literature in Russian and English but considerably less attention to French sources (although there are some), plus a couple of titles in Portuguese. This suggests a provocative question: to what extent can we decolonize film studies if we are relying on the writings of the colonizers? It also points to the value of co-authorship in comparative studies.

There is an interesting book buried in the mass of detail: a critical study of the importance of the Tashkent International Festival to film festival diplomacy during the Cold War and, specifically, to Soviet efforts to soften their image in the less developed, nonaligned countries that the USSR sought to woo away from pernicious Western influences. Although Salazkina certainly understands these issues and offers new ways to approach them, her book does tend to lose sight of the big picture. Comprehending the worlds of socialist cinemas, while a laudable goal, is too broad and amorphous to achieve in a single volume. However, the good news for those interested in exploring any of the subjects in World Socialist Cinema is that the book is readily accessible as an Open Access e-book, liberating scholars from relying on catalogue copy, cover blurbs, or even a reviewer’s judgment when deciding what to read next.

Note
[1]. It may, of course, have been the publisher’s decision not to include a filmography, a false economy that should not become the norm.

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