

THE BALKANS' EUROPOLIS: SULINA AS A SYNECDOCHE

ALEX FORBES*

Abstract

The Danube Delta is a place of historical and geographical interest which has been the subject of a number of representations on film which, despite clear differences between them, nonetheless form a coherent cinematic corpus with common themes and imagery. While situated on the very Eastern periphery of the present-day European Union, the delta and its principal town, Sulina, have had a connection to Europe as a whole in 1880s, due to the large infrastructure works conducted by the multinational Commission of the Danube established in the aftermath of the Crimean War.

The present article gives an account of films since the year 2000 which have made use of the delta as location and which have documented its history as well as the present lives of its inhabitants. In doing so, these films raise questions of history, of centrality and the periphery, of post-communism, of human development, of environmentalism, and of what is meant by 'Europe' itself.

Keywords: Romanian Cinema, Bulgarian Cinema, Hungarian Cinema, Balkan Cinema, Europe, 20th Century history, post-Communism, Eugen Botez (Jean Bart)

“Sulina is an emblem of evacuation, a film set in which the takes were made quite a while ago, and the troupe, on leaving, abandoned the scenery and costumes and wings.”
Claudio Magris, *Danube*, 1986¹

Introduction

The word 'Europolis' implies centrality, cosmopolitanism, and utopia. This paper takes stock of films since the year 2000 that have represented Sulina, the minor Danube port once nicknamed 'Europolis'. Sulina is the Easternmost city of the European Union, and the principal locality of the Danube Delta, which is the largest wetland habitat on EU territory. It has the particularity that there are no direct tarmac roads and no railways, such that the town can only

* Alex Forbes is an independent researcher based in UK. He obtained his Ph.D. in Film and Visual Culture from the University of Aberdeen (2016). Taking in categories such as European Crisis, Balkan cinema, and the post-Cold War, his work seeks to expand the definition of 'Europe'. Email address: forbesalexanderfilm@googlemail.com.

¹ Claudio Magris, *Danube* [1986], Patrick Creagh trans., London, Harvill, 2001.

be accessed by boat. *Europolis* is a 1933 novel by the Romanian author Eugeniu Botez². It fictionalises its author's observations as harbourmaster of Sulina, at the time an important port administered by a multinational European Commission.

The films we discuss in detail are *Porto-Franco 2000* (Anca Damian, 2001), *Asta e* (Thomas Ciulei, 2001), *Delta* (Kornél Mundruczó, 2008), *Europolis* (Cornel Gheorghiuță, 2010), and *Europolis: The City of the Delta* (Kostadin Bonev, 2009). Stylistic and thematic parallels exist on some level between all of these films, although their diversity and the different uses they make of the natural and human environment they find in the Danube Delta will be discussed. There are rich suggestive possibilities to the representation of the particularities of this environment, together with the paradoxical importance imposed on the isolated and limitrophic place by its labelling as 'Europolis', with its connotations of urban sophistication. Examining these films offers the opportunity to comment, firstly, on the seeming endless process of 'transition' initiated in Eastern Europe by the fall of a number of State Socialist regimes, an experience in which Sulina has taken part. Furthermore, the suggestion of the periphery as having defining importance for the centre allows the screen depiction of the Danube Delta to reflect on the present condition of Europe more generally. In particular, the region's status as 'biosphere reserve' means that its present condition may have much to tell us in a time of present and unresolved emergency of habitat, climate, and biodiversity.

Jean Bart's apparent coinage of the term 'Europolis' to describe Sulina is, as will be seen, an element in a trend of considering the delta as a whole as some form of 'paradise' and place where the rules and conventions of contemporary European civilisation may be, if not forgotten entirely, at least for a time suspended. The utopia of Bart's novel, however, is, if not entirely sarcastic, at least a nuanced and difficult one. The novel *Europolis* ends with a prophecy of the port's decline, a prophecy taken up by the Bulgarian documentary *Europolis: The City of the Delta* (*Европолис – градът на делтата*) and Romanian feature film *Europolis*. These two films hold forth with a narrative of decline and decay, while the article will try to put forward a more positive interpretation of Sulina's history and present status. Doing so will begin by elaborating on the way that, consciously or otherwise, these films' cinematic representation of the wilderness surrounding Sulina recalls earlier film representations of the Danube Delta in *Porto-Franco 2000* and *Asta e*. A visual language of the Danube Delta is created, but interpretation of this language demands appreciation of the multifaceted context in which these films exist.

Within the films discussed in detail here, Mundruczó's stands out for showing the Danube Delta but not mentioning the 'Europolis' context. The film uses the delta as setting or backdrop, but does not engage with the history of the place. It nonetheless presents some interactions with the other post-2000 film representations of this environment and therefore warrants inclusion in the present study.

***Delta* (Kornél Mundruczó, 2008)**

Delta tells the story of Mihail, a young man who returns to the delta with the intention of settling there. From where he is returning is not stated in Yvette Bíró's script, and he is wealthy by means that are not divulged. Mihail is played by Félix Lajkó, a Hungarian violin virtuoso, perhaps implying that his character, too, is a musician, and that his apparently willed outsider status has to do with an artist's search for solitude and life outside of social convention. The

² The novel was published later in French. See Eugène [*sic!*] Botez, *Europolis*, Constantin Botez trans. (into French), Bucharest, Éditions en langues étrangères, 1958.

place he returns to is represented by Sulina, but its inhabitation by a Hungarian-speaking population means that it could not possibly *be* Sulina. Although Romania has a population of 1.4 Million Hungarians, 98.9% of them live in the region of Transylvania, at the opposite corner of the country to the Danube Delta³.

Mihail's return to his mother's dockside café seems largely motivated by the obtention of a copious supply of clear plum brandy, which he takes to a remote location where he intends to build, single-handed, a wooden house on stilts connected to dry land by a narrow wooden walkway. His stepsister Fauna, however, follows him to the construction site and they live together in a small hut while building the house. The nature of their relationship is subject to interpretation, but most viewers have not hesitated to characterise it as an incestuous love affair⁴.

In any case, the local community are intolerant of this wealthy outsider and he and his sister's relationship. It seems that they are equally exasperated by the liberties he takes with rules on transporting timber and building in the delta. The *dénouement* comes at the scene of a party to celebrate the completion of the house, in which Fauna is raped (for the second time in the film) and murdered, before Mihail, too, is implicitly drowned by the same gang of local men.

Ágnes Pethő, in common with contemporary reviewers comments on the beauty of the cinematography⁵, which seems to serve as an end to itself. In her reading, the film represents the delta as 'a kind of lethal Paradise, where the unravelling tragedy is subdued by the gorgeous cinematography'⁶. Pethő is careful to point out that the film's tone is 'more elegiac than social critical'⁷, i.e. the ostracism and violent repression that the brother and sister encounter is not necessarily a critique of a closed-minded rural society, but may instead be a lamentation on the impossibility of true fraternity and durable escape from social repression.

The beautiful abstraction offered by the Danube Delta in this reading is confirmed by the impossible Hungarianness bestowed upon it by the film. This impossibility is glossed over by Anna Batori, who refers to the film's 'Transylvanian' Magyarophone characters without acknowledging that the film's setting is nowhere near Transylvania.⁸ According to Batori, the transnational setting 'accentuates the role of the pro-filmic space as national territory',⁹ but the claim, just like Mundruczó's film, leaves out the specific history of *this* pro-filmic space. It may be noted that Mundruczó has also made a Romanian-language short film set in the delta, *Short Apocrypha No. 2* (2004). The abstraction from real demographic conditions necessitated by the transposition of a Magyarophone *milieu* into the delta, however, is a difficulty for Batori's claims on the Hungarian national allegory that might be carried forward by Mundruczó's film.

Pethő's more detailed exploration of the the aesthetic concerns of the film seeks to place *Delta* in an 'undercurrent' of Eastern European cinema concerned with aesthetics and intermediality. This leads to interpreting certain scenes from the film in terms of resemblances to images from the Western art history canon, and specifically Mantegna's *Lamentation over the*

³ Bianca Botea 'Pratiques de la coexistence en milieu multiethnique transylvain', in: Klaus Roth and Ulf Brunnbauer, eds., *Ethnologica Balkanica* 11, 2007, p. 156.

⁴ See, for instance, Peter Bradshaw, 'Delta', *The Guardian*, 8th May 2009, available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/may/07/delta-film-review>, Ágnes Pethő, 'The *Tableau Vivant* as a "Figure of Return" in Contemporary East European Cinema', *Acta Univ. Sapientiae Film and Media Studies*, vol. 9, 2014, p. 8.

⁵ See Bradshaw, or for another example Rachel Cooper, 'Delta', *The Telegraph*, 7th September 2009, online: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/dvd-reviews/6081660/Delta-DVD-review.html>.

⁶ Pethő, 'Tableau Vivant', p. 57.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ Anna Batori, *Space in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema*, Palgrave, 2018, p. 186.

⁹ *Loc. cit.*

Dead Christ (1480). The notion of aesthetic 'undercurrent' carried through Europe by the Danube to its Easternmost point appears as a convincing interpretation of the setting of Mundruczó's film, while providing a helpful alternative interpretation of Eastern European cinema more broadly. The 'undercurrent' would include films by Belá Tarr, Gyógy Pálfi, and Andrei Zvyagintsev.

This would be in contrast to a 'default option' by which contemporary 'Eastern European' cinema (originating from anywhere in the pre-1989 Communist bloc) is read in terms of 'the complex changes brought along by the fall of communism, the disintegration of borders, the rise of new, precarious political constructions, the integration of post-communist states into the European Union, as well as by the growing tendencies of globalization'¹⁰.

Where the specific location and historical associations of the Danube Delta are concerned, however, I question whether such topics come under discussion by default. Rather, this reading is suggested, or moreover elicited, by the films themselves, in their preoccupation with Sulina as 'Europolis' and its use as the basis for synecdoche, its upholding as exemplar or microcosm of historical changes and developments. Furthermore, where the delta is upheld as natural 'paradise' or as somehow apart from human civilisation, the context becomes no longer simply an Eastern European one, but rather interacts with concerns over the human relationship to habitat and environment that are authentically global in scope.

***Porto-Franco 2000* (Anca Damian, 2001) and *Asta e* (Thomas Ciulei, 2000)**

The extent of the Danube Delta, the monotony of its canals and the almost incongruous nature of its human habitation provide the perfect setting for Mundruczó' to set Yvette Bíró's allegory of escape and intolerance. To documentary cinematographers, however, the environment has been a challenging subject. At the turn of the millennium, two Romanian documentaries on the Danube Delta were produced. Although there are a number of points of difference, the two films share a consciousness of the somewhat incongruous nature of human habitation in this wild and remote locality, an awareness that the timescale of the place does not synchronise with human concerns and preoccupations. Their interpretation of the delta therefore connects as much with ongoing concerns about human interactions with the environment as it does with supposedly Eastern-European specific questions of post-1989 'transition'.

In *Porto-Franco 2000*, director Anca Damian and cinematographer Toni Cartu generate a visual response to the specificity of this place, and one can see their approach reprised in subsequent films. It is composed of the alternation between the lowest possible perspective, of sea level in shots taken from moving boats, and the highest, in aerial shots. The two types of shot dissolve into one another, but the dissolve is left incomplete, such that the aerial and water-level views are given an impossible simultaneity which may, however, pass unnoticed as both types of shot, at least initially, contain only two elements, flat land and water.

In addition to some aesthetically questionable 'ambient' electronic music, the images are accompanied by a voiceover, which fills in the context of the Danube Delta, the history of the port of Sulina and the present-day post-communist status of the region. While the films' imagery constitutes a visual response to the unique delta environment, the voiceover is a text in its own right, outlining the uniqueness in terms of flora and fauna that the Danube Delta has, and furthermore interpreting that uniqueness in terms that extend the terms of reference of the discussion to questions of environmental ethics in a broad sense.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.



Fig. 1 – Incomplete dissolve in *Porto-Franco 2000* (director: Anca Damian)

The film does include a number of interviews with Sulina residents, who evoke a historical narrative from 1930s heyday to present decay, that rapidly becomes familiar to anyone who takes an interest in the films which depict this locality. The present article will in due course address the ways in which different films have articulated the idea of a double decline: firstly, Sulina was abandoned by the Western powers as international co-operation broke down on the eve of the Second World War, then the post-war Communist era brought its own harm, and finally post-communism left Sulina with nothing but relics of its former glories. While Damian, as will be seen, is able to bring a certain balance to this narrative and to find people who have something positive to say about Sulina at the turn of the millennium, material of greater interest is to be found when the film turns its attention away from the decaying port city and on to the surrounding swamp.

Towards the beginning of the film, accompanying the merged images of sea and sky discussed earlier, a number of interpretative comments are made about the environment of the delta. In an almost ironic juxtaposition, the statement that 'the land houses living creatures of all kinds' accompanies the first image of human habitation that the film shows, an aerial view of a group of thatched-roof huts. The intention may not have quite gone as far as placing humans as just another kind of 'living creature' in the delta, but the suggestion does not seem far from the films' interpretation of the biodiversity to be found there.

Present immediacy and momentary involvement are key themes of the voiceover's exaltation of the delta to the status of wild paradise. 'The memory of the Danube', it is claimed, 'is given birth by the present moment only'. It evokes the the delta as wilderness, as natural habitat, and as having some kind of existence independent of human control and outside the human gaze. The abundance of plantlife in the locality is such, it is said, that 'every second seems to repeat the creation'. Emphasis on the present, as well as on time frames that do not resemble the modern human consciousness, is a characteristic of some strands of contemporary environmentalist or ecologist thinking. At the conclusion of the film, too, the voiceover comments on the tides, flowing and returning 'to mirror when we will have gone'. In its

environmental perspective, turned towards nature and holistically situating humanity as a guest or observer of the delta, this film raises conjunctions with ecologist writing.

A good example is to be found in the parallel language used in a text republished by the Alliance for Wild Ethics, in which Per Espen Stoknes states that 'creation is continuous'¹¹ and that 'each present moment is pregnant with creation'¹². The similarity of language calls for reflection on how this documentary about a specific Eastern European place in fact raises themes and topics that are of genuinely global significance. Stoknes' essay is a call for visual art to reflect a galian understanding of the fundamental elements of life on earth: earth, fire, air, and water. 'The image comes from and arises in a context much vaster than me or us,' he writes, and 'working with images is a way of honouring the continuous creativity of the world itself'¹³. Such an objective, just as much as 'honouring' the Danube Delta, seems to motivate Anca Damian's film.

In relating those topics back to 'Europolis', emphasising the remoteness from civilisation of this location while at the same time placing it at the heart of present-day concerns, this film achieves a remarkable success. In managing to address levels of the local, in terms of one relatively unpopulated locality, the regional, in terms of the Balkan experience of post-communism, and the global, this film is capable of re-activating the utopian element in 'Europolis', one that, as will be seen, other films can bring up only under the sign of nostalgia. It furthermore has its place in a corpus of films about the Danube Delta, however, meaning that intertextual parallels and contradictions that exist between the films may be called upon to articulate scepticism, indeed perhaps cynicism, in respect of the utopian goals that it has been possible to draw out from *Porto-Franco 2000*.

In this regard, the film *Asta e* (Thomas Ciulei, 2001), contemporary with Damian's hopeful and open outlook, immediately draws perspectives on the delta back to earth and presents another side and facet of humanity's relationship to the delta: the poverty and struggle of everyday life. Where Damian's film alternates aerial and water-level cameras, the perspective of Ciulei's film is decidedly earth-bound, although it does feature a shot taken from a radio mast to offer an aerial view of the town of Sulina on a winter evening. For the most part, however, the film comprises interviews with the inhabitants of the delta, and documentary footage of their interactions. The emphasis is on the restlessness brought about by the post-communist era, but also on the connection with tradition of the delta's inhabitants, their methods of catching and cooking carp, their songs, their life stories, and so on. The film proceeds episodically, featuring a number of recurring characters: notably a fifteen-year-old boy, Ionuț, a middle-aged alcoholic, Pal, and an ageing couple, Toni and Varvara.

In a memorable scene, Pal is depicted fetching a small amount of water from a well dug in the delta swamp. It becomes clear that he wants the water to dilute the 70% medicinal alcohol he is in the habit of drinking. While this sequence does much to underline the deprivation and poverty that the film finds in the delta, a decade after the fall of communism, other parts of the film are more articulate about that condition, particularly when put into dialogue with the corpus of delta films. For instance, a lengthy sequence follows the teenager Ionuț as, carrying a belt loaded with tools, he intrepidly makes his way onto a derelict floating grain elevator, hacks from the wreck a number of lengths of heavy copper cable, and drags them through the swamp, collecting rubbish to burn in order to melt the plastic insulation from the copper cable to sell it

¹¹ Per Espen Stoknes, 'Eairth's Imagination: Rooting the Expressive Arts in the Elemental Creativity of the Biosphere', *Poiesis*, Vol X, EGS Press, 2008, republished by Alliance for Wild Ethics, <https://wildethics.org/essay/eairths-imagination> (accessed 18th June 2019).

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

for scrap. This eloquent depiction of the prevalence of rubbish throughout the delta swamps (still a salient aspect of that environment to the visitor in 2019) also reflects on the natural paradise evoked by Anca Damian's as well as Kornel Mundruczó's films. It suggests that it might be a little too easy to believe in the untouched wilderness where human beings are just one among many 'living creatures', since in reality the delta, like the planet, is filled with the evidence of the passage of humanity in the form of detritus and abandoned industrial infrastructure.

Yet, the film does indeed evoke 'nature', but this is an altogether earthier, dirtier and more conflicted 'nature' than that evoked by the placid beauty of Damian's aerial shots and ambient music. In its closing sequence, the camera tracks backwards in front of Pal, the alcoholic sage whose observations punctuate the film's representations of delta life. As he approaches the camera, looking directly into the lens, Pal claims that life in the delta isolates people such that there only terms of reference are what they see: 'reeds, rushes, water, that's all. That's the law of nature.' In this much bleaker version of 'nature', *Asta e* offers valuable balance to the utopian claims that may characterise other delta films, but this comes at the expense of awareness of the region's history. If Pal claims that in the delta, 'civilisation is limited. Very limited', other films are there to evoke a history in which, on the contrary, Sulina was the avatar of cosmopolitanism and civilised life.

***Europolis* (Cornel Gheorghiiță, 2010)**

The human context of the delta is the focus in the pair of Danube Delta films that come a decade later, the Bulgarian documentary *Europolis: The City of the Delta*, and the Romanian feature comedy simply titled *Europolis*. There are a number of common elements in these films, and some links back to those from the turn of the millennium. Both these more recent films appear to reprise the visual language of the thirty contemplative minutes of footage and voice-over that make up *Porto-Franco 2000*. The association between the three films is confirmed by their having been screened together in 2010 by the curator Constantin Fugasin, at the Divan Film Festival¹⁴.

The opening sequence of Gheorghiiță's *Europolis*, consisting of point-of-view shots taken from a boat travelling through the Sulina canals, visually resembles Damian and Cartu's cinematography, and incorporates non-diegetic music which is markedly different from that used in the rest of the film. Indeed, it more resembles, with higher production values, the ambient synthesiser sounds that accompany the introduction to Damian's documentary film of nine years earlier.

Subsequently, the same shots are reprised towards the end of the film, and revealed as having foreshadowed a narrative event, which nonetheless seems a thin pretext for the inclusion of audiovisual material which does more to illustrate and explore the Danube Delta setting than it does to advance the plot. The swamp plants and water become mirrors here, that do not return the implicit human gaze emanating from the camera, but rather reflect more trees and water, something that in the lower-resolution footage captured by Cartu, had to be done by means of the incomplete dissolve discussed above.

In the film's opening sequences, numerous clues are placed to evoke the history of Sulina for the viewer. The film opens in the town's cosmopolitan cemetery, which is also depicted in

¹⁴ See Monica Felea, 'Sulina in the Romanian and the Balkan Cinema', *Cinefil*, 14th September 2010, partially available online at http://www.trivium-films.org/presa_kbonev.php?ID=24&language=en. See also <https://divanfilmfestival.ro/2010-balcanii-program-evenimente-galerie-foto-video/>, accessed 22nd May 2020.

Damian's, Bonev's and Ciulei's films. The cemetery contains the graves of people from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy, and Russia among other nations, as well as separate Jewish and Muslim sections. Dialogue refers to Jean Bart, and a minor character is mocked for learning French out of respect for Sulina's cosmopolitan history, when the town's present will never offer him the opportunity to speak it. Equally, the status of 'Europolis' *vis-à-vis* present-day Europe is laconically evoked when a lingering panning shot over the sleepy and deserted port, half-full of rusting freighters, in the evening light, is accompanied by one wistful line of dialogue: 'such a Europe!' The film's plot, meanwhile, centres around the town's life being under the control of a nepotistic, mafia-like clique of nightclub owners and corrupt Police, who arrange matters such that if good fortune should come to anyone in the town they will get their hands on it. Again, this is a feature that becomes familiar to the serial viewer of Danube Delta films. Toni, the ageing and emasculated husband in Ciulei's *Asta e*, is seen ranting about life under Ceaușescu and castigating local elected officials. In Bonev's documentary, as will be seen, the iniquities of life under the state-socialist regime are evoked alongside those of the post-communist era.



Fig. 2 – Damian (left) and Gheorghiiță (right) view the delta from the prow of a boat.

***Europolis: City of the Delta* (Kostadin Bonev, 2009)**

Europolis: City of the Delta, shot by Dimitar Mitov and Konstantin Zankov, also turns its camera on the canals and swamps of the delta, re-iterating a similar visual vocabulary. These rather abstract, if potentially aesthetically satisfying, images of reflective water and trees waving gently in the breeze may appear difficult to connect with the interpretative line the films in question impose upon the city of Sulina. The omniscient narration of the film, written by Vladi Kirov, spells out a nostalgic regard. Elaborated through a series of interviews with Sulina residents, Kostadin Bonev's documentary pieces together a coherent historical through-line, and fills in the historical background that, one year later, would provide

local colour for Gheorghiuță's rambling comedy. The narrative runs that Sulina of the 1930s was, exactly as described by an interviewee very early in the film, 'paradise'. Before the war, Sulina's government by European Commission made it a place ahead of its time, a concentration of people from all over Europe, and the harbourmaster Eugène Botez was its chronicler. Jean Bart's novel becomes the avatar of utopian possibility that all subsequent events have seemed to conspire to render impossible in the present.

Further interviewees detail the way in which, under communism, the previously multinational society of Sulina broke down, largely because the state's desire for control over every aspect of life was intolerant of the communities of language and religion they represented. Further interviewees speak of post-communist corruption, corroborating the testimony of Toni in *Asta e* and, furthermore, establishing the factual ground for the themes of graft and bribery in Gheorghiuță's *Europolis*. The film's historical value has drawn praise from critics, and indeed it makes a valuable introductory text for the viewer who is becoming aware of the delta's somewhat unique history for the first time. At the film's conclusion, however, the notion of 1930s Sulina as 'paradise' returns, with the film seemingly taking over an interviewee's claim that 'everybody knows there is democracy now, but up until 1939 there was *real* democracy.' Discussion of the comparative democratic status of Romania pre-1939 and post-1989 is well beyond the scope of the present paper, but reading Bonev's film in the light of Jean Bart's *Europolis* casts serious doubt on the claim that Sulina under the European Commission was 'paradise'.

The structuring conceit of the novel is the uncomfortable living-together of representatives of the nations of Europe, from the United Kingdom eastwards to Turkey, sharing one living environment under the auspices of a *European Commission*, no less. The European Commission of the Danube, indeed, is referred to throughout the novel as the 'European Commission' or, simply, the Commission. The implication, then, is that the small port on the Eastern boundary of Europe is, in fact, a synecdoche for the continent itself.

Furthermore, Vladi Kirov's voice-over for Bonev's film emphasises the idea that Jean Bart's novel constituted a prophecy. Indeed, the final chapter of *Europolis* concludes with an account of the Danube channel silting up, and the port becoming abandoned. In the logic of this film, that means that the novel takes on the role of a prediction of the current state, not just of the post-totalitarian fringe of Europe, but of the continent as a whole. 'With the death of *Europolis*,' claims the voice-over, 'Europe will be slowly dying in pain'. Gheorghiuță's and Bonev's *Europolis* share a narrative of prophecy and fulfilment, of endless decline from which there is no bottom. All of Europe, according to them, would have been what Sulina was, and all of Europe will be what Sulina is now.

The book features observations on the semi-official aspects of life around the free port. No fire service was necessary in Sulina, it is claimed, because since no company would issue insurance on a wooden building, there were no fires. It is also reported that the authorities were forced to renounce their clampdown on the theft from lighters transferring wheat from Danube barges to ocean-going ships, since the lack of supply of stolen wheat brought the local populace to the verge of starvation. A central character of the novel, a Greek fallen on hard times and let down by his compatriots, attempts to get a job as a docker, but is forced to quit as Romanian dockers threaten strike action rather than accept a foreigner working amongst them. The *dénouement* of the novel's plot, finally, involves the same unfortunate Greek being shot dead while attempting to steal sacks of wheat from a barge under cover of darkness.

The 'paradise' of 1930s Sulina might exist more in the nostalgic memory of those who lived there, or in the need for a utopia that would have preceded Communism and that the later is thereby claimed to have destroyed. The building up of this avatar of a paradisaical 1930s Sulina, evoking the name of Jean Bart but setting aside the inconvenient aspects of his evocative

writing, is reflected in the inconsistency of development plans which aim to revitalise Sulina's economy. Petruța Teampău and Kristof Van Assche note an 'elitist'¹⁵ discourse on the possibilities for economic revival, and a speech from delivered by a local dignitary stating that 'not out of marsh or fish will the life of other times be revived: we have to give back to Sulina its greatness as a Danube harbour'. Such an attachment to the past is characteristic of the 2010 films studied in this paper, and one can say of their regard on Sulina, along with Teampău and Van Assche:

The almost mythical prosperity of the Danube commission period is being projected into the near future – when Sulina will be a “European” city – in a kind of cyclically repeating fate. If the Europeans came and made Sulina the beautiful, rich city it was, they can do it again.¹⁶

Of course, Jean Bart's *Europolis* stands as a reminder that the 'beautiful' and 'rich' city of Sulina's heyday was shot through with prejudice, embezzlement, graft, and struggle. I think that it is precisely for this reason that it is valuable to recall the cosmopolitan Europe in miniature that the novel describes. There is indeed a prophetic element to the novel *Europolis*. It carries forward the evocation, within the confined space of the internationally-governed free port of Sulina, of anxieties and tensions that underly Europe today. But rather than focus on decline and nostalgia, or the idea that that which is past can somehow be repeated in the same way as it was before, I think that the study of the representation of *Europolis* on screen has the capacity to direct instead towards a hopeful, forward-thinking goal.

Europolis before and after Europe

In my eyes, the decision of a number of directors to turn their cameras away from the city and on to the wilderness of the Danube Delta is the most powerfully suggestive element of their evocation of the history of Sulina's decline. In choosing to put on screen the biosphere reserve, sheltering rare flora and fauna, the films gesture towards that which can endure in the delta, which may not be a thriving and bustling human civilisation, but rather an older force on whose timescale the rise and decline of the European Commission of the Danube looks like a matter of seconds. For Damian's film, this is a place which does not follow the rules of human time, and the lack of tarmac roads and railways is an indication that a certain civilisational development never reached here. While in the wild environment of the delta 'every second seems to repeat the creation', on a human scale the isolation is such that one interviewee notes that on arrival in Sulina 'I felt as though I had been deported'. Indeed, Bonev's documentary refers to Sulina's use as a place of internal exile for political prisoners released by the Communist regime.

But the suggestion emerges that the exile might be a voluntary one. In addition to the script for the 2010 documentary, Vladi Kirov is the author of a novel set in the Danube Delta, whose title *Cartography of Paradise* refers not to the human habitat of the delta's port towns, but rather to the environment of the delta itself. Reviewing the films which have represented the swamps and marshes of the Danube Delta leads to an ambivalent answer to the question of whether this place can really be considered an earthly paradise. Jean Bart nostalgia and the desire to make Sulina great again do not survive the encounter with his writing, and with the nuanced and difficult utopia that his novel *Europolis* in fact describes. In much the same way, a

¹⁵ Petruța Teampău and Kristof van Assche, 'Sulina – The Dying City in a Vital Region', in *Ethnologica Balkana* 11, Lit Verlag, Münster, 2007, p. 262.

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

film such as Mundruczó's *Delta* shows that utopian aspirations have a limited chance of survival not only in the face of the harshness of wind and water, but also in the social environment of the delta which does not hold back its violence in order to enforce conformity. In another register, the hard-luck stories and distant stares of the interviewees in *Asta e* and *Europolis: The City of the Delta* provide ample testimony to the difficulties of life in Sulina, whether these are imposed from outside as a result of politics or imposed by harsh winters, hot summers, and economic hardship. *Europolis* points directly to the city's present status as backwater, as a place where hope fades and the future looks ever more bleak.

It is nonetheless tempting to listen to the concluding remarks of the voiceover of Anca Damian's *Porto-Franco 2000*, which reflect upon the tides, flowing and returning to where they came from 'to mirror when we will have gone'. From the point of view of Eastern Europe today, the present is marked just as much by the desire for ecological 'transition' towards conservation of resources and environments, as by the now thirty-year-old process of economic 'transition', and both these concerns risk being overwhelmed by those about demographic decline, migration and cosmopolitan living-together. Where films of the Danube Delta have the potential to address each one of those concerns, the reminder that they are of the present, and will pass like the ebbing tide, is perhaps the most comforting and utopian thought that such films could bring to mind.

