Chuck Norris vs. Communism

Abstract
This is a film review of Chuck Norris vs. Communism (2014), directed by Ilinca Calugareanu.

Author Notes
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The advent of new technologies has revolutionized the way we communicate. As we enter a time when many countries are censoring their citizens’ access to the internet, this documentary film provides a poignant take on 1980s Romania and the advent of the popularity of the VCR.

Highly illegal under the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the VCR provided an escape from the government-sanctioned television which was extremely censored. Romanian government censors rejected most Western popular culture; some programming was rejected on the basis of the fact that food was abundant and homes were large. In an attempt to maintain a sort of “cultural purity” and the control of communism, access to popular culture was tightly controlled. VCRs were attainable via countries such as Germany and cost the same as a car at that time. Entrepreneurs held home-based viewing parties and created an underground economy of illegal
film watching. The films they watched were primarily action films starring Chuck Norris, and Jean Claude van Damme. The VCR and its illegal culture was predominately a male-driven enterprise, with men running the import business, and delivering and showing the films. The exception to this was Irina Nistor, the woman who translated the films and dubbed them into Romanian. She translated all but a few of the films that were illegally imported in this time period, obviously at great risk to herself, as she worked in the government censorship office.

While the interviewees talk about their exposure to the films and the building of young male identity though the depictions of maleness in films, a second theme comes through, that the films allowed for an escape from the dominant ideology of the government.

The government at that time also had staunch ideas about religious expression. Irina Nistor talks about the secret police being aware of her activities, warning her from time to time. Regardless of this, her activities were more or less under the radar, until she translated *Jesus of Nazareth*. In that film, she mentioned saints, and God, rather than saying “the one above,” which was very inflammatory at the time. Ceaușescu was destroying churches and villages but the Romanian people were still interested in religious expression; interviewees remarked that many people cried during the crucifixion scene in the film. Another underground filmhouse host was arrested when he showed a film about Nero and remarked that Nero’s destruction was not very different from the behaviour of their current leadership.

Interviewees remarked that “video nights helped us survive,” and the film goes so far as to suggest that the exposure to videos may have helped to contribute to the eventual Romanian revolution in 1989 when Ceaușescu fell, by implanting “seeds of freedom.” The film is a great example of how popular culture, which can be seemingly trivial, can impact a generation and challenge the dominant ideology.