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Jazz, film, and improvised culture.

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thursday, january 19, 2017

NYJFF '17: Angel Wagenstein—Art is a Weapon

Bulgarian screenwriter-novelist Angel Wagenstein was sort of like the Alexander Dubček of Soviet-era cinema. He really believed in Socialism with a “human face” and



frequently criticized the oppressive excesses of Soviet Socialism. His films were often hailed abroad but censored at home—always a sure sign of quality. Andrea Simon profiles the nonagenarian filmmaker in *Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon* (trailer [here](#)), which screens with the Wagenstein-scripted *Stars* as part of this year's [New York Jewish Film Festival](#).

Wagenstein served with the Bulgarian Partisans, trained in Moscow, and worked with the illustrious DEFA studio in East Germany (the classic *Folomea* was based on his novel). He should have been a valued member of the establishment, but the criticisms of Stalinist Communism he not so subtly buried in his films led to his expulsion from the Party on more than one occasion.

Still sharp as a tack at ninety-four, Wagenstein has never had any illusions regarding the Soviet Union. However, as an original red diaper baby, whose revolutionary parents were exiled to Paris before WWII, Wagenstein maintains his early faith in socialism. Frankly, Simon rather glosses over his time as a member of parliament for the Bulgarian Socialist Party (the reconstituted Communist Party), merely characterizing it as “frustrating.” However, the Socialists (and absolutely the Communists before them) bear a great deal of responsibility for the current depressed and depressive state of things in Bulgaria, but Simon lets Wagenstein off the hook for legitimizing them through his well-earned prestige.

Of course, it is hard to fault Simon's somewhat deferential treatment when Wagenstein takes viewers on a tour of prisons he had been incarcerated within. The clips from his films are also



happily obliged by presenting Simon's documentary on a double-bill with *Stars*, arguably his most historically important film.

Wagenstein remains a towering figure in Bulgaria and a recognizable name in many former Captive Nations, but he is not as well-known as he ought to be in the West, so it is nice to have Simon's film to help rectify that situation. It is also good to give the anti-Communist Left their due. Their economic positions might be torturous, but they were on the right side of history when it mattered most. Together with *Stars*, *Angel Wagenstein: Art is Weapon* is highly recommended for cineastes when they screen this Sunday (1/22) at the Walter Reade, as part of the 2017 NYJFF.

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