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Introduction to the thematic issue “Contemporary Documentary in Central and Eastern Europe”

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The concept of Central and Eastern Europe is a battleground for political and historical interpretations. Without intending to draw borders and to make exclusions, we approach Central and Eastern European documentaries from their common history, and we think the region can be regarded as a unique entity in its own term. Based on parallel historical processes, significant common features emerge that allow us to ask about the possible regional similarities, parallels and trends in the development of relevant segments of the industry and the art of cinema and documentary film. The range of historical parallels include the following: from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, first the period of state-socialist political system with its close dependence on the Soviet Union (or annexation to the Soviet Union in the case of the Baltic States), forty-fifty years later the economic-political transition that began in 1989 (or a little later in the Baltic States), building the foundations of democracy and a market economy, then joining the European integration process, and finally the accession to the European Union in the first decade of the 2000s (or the start of EU negotiations in some Balkan countries, Serbia, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia).

We consider it particularly important to publish a special thematic issue on the documentary culture of the region in English, as there is a lack of such thematic summaries in international literature. Imre Anikó edited two books on Eastern European cinema; the first one, *East European Cinemas* (Imre Anikó ed. AFI Readers, Routledge, 2005) discusses documentaries only tangentially. The later one, *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (Imre Anikó ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), contains some important chapters on documentary film, but these focus on narrower topics (including an analysis of Tamás Almási's *Ózd* series). Just like these two volumes, the documentary chapters of the *Post-Totalitarian Cinema in Eastern European Countries: Models and Identities* (Nadezhda Marinchevska ed. Sofia: Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2019) follow the author-centered approach rather than offering comprehensive, institutional descriptions. A thematic issue of *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, “Documentary Cinema in Eastern Europe” (vol. 11, no 1., 2020) stands the closest to the topic of our volume, but its articles are mainly film analyses dealing with the representation of specific topics (poverty, children, the Holocaust, trauma) and discussing both older and contemporary works.

In this thematic issue of *Apertúra*, our aim was to examine the documentary industry and the directions of contemporary documentary film in the countries of the region, so that an overall picture, although necessarily fragmentary, can emerge. One group of the articles in our issue deals

comprehensively with the documentary film industry in Central and Eastern European countries. Several common features emerge from the texts. First, in each case we are talking about the *cinema of a small nations* for which the definition of a memorable volume edited by Mette Hjort and Petrie Duncan (*The Cinema of Small Nations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007) is fully applicable. Even Poland, the country with the largest size and population in the region, is forced to face with the limitations and opportunities of small national film productions. The region's film institutions are parallel in many respects (as well as their funding, production, and distribution practices in general). Another parallel is the ways in which filmmakers relate, on the one hand, to the institutions of the European Union funding documentary film, and global production and distribution networks on the other (primarily HBO, and Netflix in the future).

The parallel regional history of film institutions began with the nationalized film industry controlled and financed by the state in the decades of communism. These institutions have undergone severe upheavals during the political and economic system change. A certain mixture of private enterprise and state aid policy (depending on the cultural policy and economic situation of the given country) has emerged everywhere in the region. State film funds financing mainly feature films were created sooner or later, also supporting documentaries, albeit with significantly less money. Where such film funds were established in a short time after the system change and the privatization of the film industry, as it happened in Hungary, the continuity of documentary film production was secured, and the production volume remained high. Elsewhere, as in the Czech Republic, although there was no complete continuity between the nationalized film industry and the development of the new state film fund operating within a market economy (the close analysis of the transition is discussed by Jitka Lanšperková), public television helped documentary filmmakers to find permanent employment. In the absence of a state film fund and public television dedicated to documentaries, as Renata Šukaitytė's study shows about Lithuania, the survival of the genre and the maintenance of continuity depended largely on the financial and artistic risk-taking of the filmmakers. We can draw a loose conclusion that where risk-taking is the highest (Lithuania), documentary filmmakers are most motivated to attend international festivals and thrive with the support of international cultural and material capital during the period of regime change.

In all Central and Eastern European countries, documentary filmmakers had to rethink their relationship with the national audience. How can they address society and how can (public service) television help in this? What is the extent to which documentary filmmakers may rely on festivals specializing in documentaries? The studies show the direction of change, how documentary filmmaking methods and styles were changing in the 2000s as new generations of filmmakers came of age. This transformation is linked to HBO Europe's regional presence, its production and financing activity, which has promoted the success of regional productions nationally and internationally. In our volume, Renata Šukaitytė's, Jitka Lanšperková's and Péter Gerencsér's articles analyze in detail the process of transformation of the Czech, Lithuanian and Slovak documentary film industry from the period of the regime change.

Several studies deal with another topic, that is, ways in which regional documentary filmmakers try to meet international demands, and the ways they enter the stage of international film festivals and global television distribution. In this respect, Eszter Zimanyi's study is instructive. It addresses the issue of regionality not primarily in terms of the specificities of local film production, but by examining how the emphasis on localism in documentary fits into the local content production and international distribution practices of large media companies, emphasizing 'local flavour' as particularly important. The question of the article is how this search for *couleur local* leads to the perpetuation of stereotypes about Eastern Europe, whether these practices influence the branding of the films of Eastern European filmmakers, and how the creators themselves react and eventually, defend themselves against it.

The articles of our thematic issue reflect the changes in the representation practices and styles within each national framework in parallel with the transformation of the infrastructural conditions of documentary filmmaking. Péter Gerencsér connects the radical renewal of Slovak cinema in the 2000s and the documentary tendencies of feature films, as well as the fictional solutions of documentaries, to the coming of age of the generation after the regime change. Ervin Török's study explores the "personalness" of contemporary Hungarian documentaries and examines how the personalness of the contemporary documentaries relates to the stylistic and representational forms of films in previous decades, especially the personalness of filmmaking practices that have become dominant since the 1970s. Simor Kamilla also examines the representational problems of contemporary documentary from the perspective of media theory and history, that is, how the visualization and individualization practices of contemporary warfare affect the representational practices of documentary filmmaking.

The articles in our volume analyze how the filmmakers who made their first films after 2000 (even more so after 2010), reflect on the new possibilities of filmmaking, the increasingly broad boundaries of documentary, and the elimination of the former strict separation from fiction filmmaking. Although the volume provides only a partial insight both into the documentary industry in transition in Central Eastern Europe, as well as the aesthetic and media problems of documentary, we hope that the readers of this issue will be compensated by the diversity of

approaches and themes in the way the international research community contributing to this issue analyses this somewhat minor but all the more exciting area of filmmaking.

The issue was edited by Ervin Török and Lóránt Stóhr.

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