

Cultural Studies Approaches in the Study of Eastern European Cinema: Spaces, Bodies, Memories. Edited by Andrea Virginás. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, 291 p. ISBN: 1-4438-0059-7¹⁸

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In the introduction, the volume's editor, Andrea Virginás, describes the collection as a project that represents a generational perspective. Most of the authors present in the book are members of the “early-to-mid-career generation of Eastern European film scholars who were formed in the post-communist period” (p. iix.). This is the first generation that started their university studies after the fall of communism and has been exposed to all the new ideas and trends present in the Humanities since the 1990s. This exposure has its special geopolitical structure – the many ideas that have become increasingly available to East European scholars were not always applicable to the post-communist situation. Hence the modernisation of the Humanities studies in Eastern Europe has not been and is still not an easy task. The real scholarly discussion about the film culture of Eastern Europe between Western and Eastern scholars has just been started. And the present volume – where almost all the authors are natives of the countries they study – is another proof that this new generation of Eastern European film scholars is ready to participate in and contribute to this discourse.

The introduction characterises the concept of the volume as having a double perspective: treats the post-socialist East European region as a coherent cultural entity, but also uses a transnational approach. However, considering the articles featuring in the volume, this double perspective does not seem too evident. What makes the volume – and consequently the region represented in it – a seemingly coherent entity is the fact that the authors and the editor are in tune with the current international trends (the spatial, bodily and memory turns in the Humanities) and produce the reception of these ideas in relation to their native film cultures. But in reality, I see only a few actual traces of the transnational approach in the volume – the

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fact that it collects articles from different nations about different nations' cinemas does not make the "approach" transnational. I believe "transnational" is a methodology that must be used in research and presented in the articles themselves. Naturally, this does not lessen the value of the published articles, it only makes the label mentioned in the introduction somewhat misleading.

Anikó Imre's essay "The Case for Postcolonial, Postsocialist Media Studies" (published originally in *Boundary* in 2014) serves as a methodological introduction to the volume. Imre argues that the postcolonial and the post-socialist approach are interconnected and must be studied as such. In her opinion it is the European postcolonial tradition that is at the root of the current European crisis: the post-colonial status of the Eastern European countries causes tension. She suggests the inclusion of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and media and communication studies in the methodology of studying the post-socialist situation – disciplines that are able to discover information about the everyday reality in post-socialist countries. In this framework she proposes to study popular (post) socialist TV from a post-colonial perspective – especially early socialist historical adventure series, and also virulent forms of racism in reality TV.

She argues that during the Cold War the positioning and reception of East European art cinema was a tool in maintaining the postcolonial *status quo* by positioning socialist film cultures strictly in the framework of national cultures, while the Western films represented universal meaning and values. In the East-West connection the traditional postcolonial paradigm remained present – after the iron curtain, the neoliberal free market ideology helped to reinforce the reappearance of the hierarchy. In order to understand cultural racism that is present in the East-West European context, the cultural studies approach seems to be a proper tool. Imre stresses the importance of the cultural studies approach and proposes the study of popular culture in order to understand the post-socialist everyday and cultural racism.

However, the texts in the collection do not really follow these suggestions. The essays included in the volume can sometimes be labelled as 'cultural studies', but they practice a different approach compared to the one suggested by Imre. For example, most of the articles study art cinema and so they stick to the film culture that is traditionally contributing – according to Imre – to the old, postcolonial paradigm. Although the theme of East-West relations is present in

many of the articles, in general I am not sure how the article by Imre can be understood as a general methodological introduction to the volume. But again, this does not lessen the value of the articles themselves.

The first chapter, "Postcolonial, Postsocialist Spaces (of the Nation)", upholds in its title the theme of postcolonial, although the articles do not use postcolonial methodology, but provide interesting and enlightening analyses in relation to real and cinematically created post-socialist spaces.

The article of Zsolt Győri, *Concrete Utopias: Discourses of Domestic Space in Hungarian Cinema*, provides a historical account of how housing discourse has been developed and practiced in Hungarian socialist and post-socialist cinema. The films that the article discusses have been selected and arranged in order to ensure the plasticity of the historical perspective of the theme. Since cinema is a perfect tool to register social and spatial relations, films seem to be perfect material to better understand the meaning, symbolism and ideological constructedness of panel buildings. These (often) monumental constructions, that are still very much part of the Eastern European landscape, had once been the forerunners and symbols of the communist future. Győri intends to work out the relationship between the ideological and cinematic construction of domestic space. He also provides a historical account of the housing film from the early strategies of ideological education through the criticism of indoctrinating strategies towards full-blown identity crisis of individuals and communities represented in the spaces of panel buildings. The article positions itself as a preliminary step to the theoretisation of space relying on the dialogue between architecture and cine texture – which is a really intriguing proposition.

Jana Dudková in her article titled *From Heterotopias to Non-Places: The (National) Identity Reviewed through Spaces of Contemporary Slovak Cinema* analyses Slovak cinema in connection to the conceptual framework provided by the work of Marc Augé on the concept of so-called "non-places". The text seems to be struggling to use the chosen theoretical framework as a stable structuring element in the argumentation. Hence Dudková's work is more like a loosely structured, although informative survey of a certain motif in the Slovak cinema that could be a springboard for further research into the topic.

In her article *Fragile Diegetic Spaces and Mobile Women: Coping with Trauma in Hungarian and Romanian Films*, Andrea Virginás continues her earlier research about the relationship between traumatised women and spatial constructions present in films. She considers the contemporary (new) waves in Hungarian and Romanian cinema as responses to the historic trauma of 1989. She argues that in films such as *Tamara* (2004); *Bibliothèque Pascal* (2010); *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days (4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile; 2007)*; *Katalin Varga* (2009) there are places and spaces that are able to speak for themselves and on behalf of the traumatised female characters. She follows this line of thought in relation to further films and argues that the female traumas represented have unique post-socialist characteristics. These films make possible to re-experience traumas that revive the socialist past in the post-socialist present. The article concentrates on the formal and narrative analysis of the filmic constructedness of using concepts such as the 'impossible objective shot' formulated by Francesco Casetti. This essay, by concentrating mainly on formal and narrative constructions in art films, is in my opinion a fine example of the missing cultural studies approach that characterises many of the essays in the volume.

The essay of Edward Alexander titled *The Titular Nation in (Post-)Yugoslav Cinema* builds on the very special position of former Yugoslavia in relation to the concept of transnationalism. It is a unique case since the former Yugoslavia existed as a national film culture that was composed of a mosaic of interacting, overlapping (national) elements. The essay poses a very interesting question: what happens when a film that comes from an ex-Yugoslav state defines itself as a decidedly national narrative using the name of the nation in its title. Alexander conducts two case studies, and demonstrates how the films *Slovenian Girl (Slovenka, 2009)*, and *A Serbian Film (Srpski film, 2009)* uses the national as brand names, and how this strategy influences the reception of the films. The interesting analysis demonstrates how these films use certain allegories in order to thematise the nation and national, and how these allegories become more and more camouflaged and displaced as the films travel outside of their places of origin. The author provides an interesting discursive analysis about the constructedness of national space and place.

The second chapter entitled *Subjectivities Embodied in/through Spaces* is the strongest part of the volume. Its articles create a certain coherence where the arguments are able to

support each other across the boundaries of individual texts. This is the part where I feel that the collective spirit of the volume is really at work and most rewarding.

György Kalmár's essay titled *Apostate Bodies: Nimród Antal's Kontroll and Eastern European Identity Politics* represents the East-West cultural dynamics by analysing the Hungarian cult movie *Kontroll* made one year before Hungary's entrance into the European Union in 2004. According to Kalmár the film provides images of national and/or European identity, while creatively juxtaposes Eastern and Western narrative patterns, characters, perspectives and ideologies. In order to redefine Hungarian post-communist masculinities, the text analyses the male bodies on the screen in relation to the ideological crisis of post-communist Hungary. All the important characters are male – male bodies embody social-cultural allegory, and the mystical serial killer symbolises the collapse of the ideological belief that is needed in order to maintain a working society. The author points out that 'apostate' bodies similar to those present in *Kontroll* in the West are only imaginable in non-mainstream, art house films. In Hollywood one can only find examples of such marginal masculinities in times of major historical crises like World War II, for example.

The essay by Katalin Sándor: *Corporeality and Otherness in the Cinematic Heterotopia of Bibliothèque Pascal* analyses the brothel-library of Szabolcs Hajdu's film as a heterotopic social space and demonstrates the overly interesting relationships between body and heterotopic spaces in the film. This text again is connected in many ways, directly and indirectly, to the East-West relationship. For example, Romania's entrance into the European Union is present in the film.

The author very creatively demonstrates how the story of Mona, the central character, displays discursive cultural practices of defining, shaping, and disciplining the body, and how the social, economic, and cultural inequalities manifested through the instrumentalisation of the Other's body (as female, Eastern European, foreign, etc.). Sándor's essay points out the spatial and bodily logic that helps Hajdu to speak about actual social problems of the region by using a non-realistic, stylised language that positions him in the mainstream of Hungarian cinema's contemporary artistic trends.

Mihaela Ursa in her text *Monstrous Maternity as Disembodied Materiality in Romanian New Wave Cinema* gives a summary about how the body of the mother has been charged with

different ideological meanings during the last 50 years in Romanian history and cinema – starting with the moment when the body of the mother was made into a field of communist propaganda –, and argues that an ideological change can be detected in contemporary Romanian cinema in relation to this theme.

One of the focal points of the text is a parallel analysis of a 1970s film about abortion and *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. However, it was not clear for me what is the final conclusion that this comparison can contribute to. But the essay is clear about the recent turn to a negative image in relation to mother figures, and about the fact that this phenomenon can only be understood in a wider social-political context. As Ursa argues, the negative image is an effect created by the erosion of the image of the mother-nation in general. The motherland does not take care of her children – Romania has the greatest migration rate in times of peace in Europe. The society in which thousands of children are left behind is the context for the films where negative maternal images dominate.

Eszter Ureczky's essay *Post-bodies in Hungarian cinema: Forgotten Bodies and Spaces in Ágnes Kocsis's Adrienn Pál* provides an intriguing view into another Hungarian film. The author analyses the film by following the metaphors of forgetting, illness, and spaces. Ureczky argues that the alienation of reality is demonstrated by the fact that the spaces in the film are not real, lived spaces. The stages of the quest conducted by the main character in the film create a chain of heterotopic spatial signifiers, and the whole pilgrimage demonstrates that lived spaces are absent from her life. This essay provides a truly creative and enlightening reading of the visual and cultural motifs of bodies (in pain), forgetting, illness, and spaces present in the film.

The last part of the volume, titled *Cultural Memory – Work in Post-socialist Cinemas* is a rich collection of knowledge on the history and memory of the region. The essays not only speak about film history but through their argumentation the reader learns how the film contributes to the historical memory of different nations.

In her article, Elzbieta Durys analyses the issue of memory in the Polish film, *Aftermath (Pokłosie, 2012)*. Durys points out that traditionally Polish cinema plays an active role in the national politics of memory and helps to maintain a culture of Polish national myths of victimisation and heroism. *Aftermath* proves to be an important example because it breaks the usual stereotype. The essay analyses how the director of the film uses the language and

strategies of popular culture (for example the conventions of the thriller genre) in order to break old stereotypes. According to Durys, *Aftermath* is the only film so far that openly questions the mythologising dimension of Polish national identity.

Claudiu Turcus's essay *Paradigms of Rememoration in Post-communist Romanian Cinema* discusses post-1989 Romanian cinema and analyses how the films of the period construct the memory of communist times. The author raises the issue of self-colonisation in relation to the New Romanian Cinema: could the success of this trend represent a certain case of East European Orientalism?

The author creates a typology of representation of communism in New Romanian Cinema and concludes that the strategies of filmic rememoration of communism used in films invalidate both dichotomous approaches and unilateral ideological perspectives. While the Romanian cinema of the 1990s was preoccupied with condemning communism, the appearance of the New Romanian Cinema brought about a new period of a more neutral, nostalgic and ironic disavowal of communism. The new director generation gave memory work a different character: made it into a more democratic, self-questioning, plural process. According to the author the cinematic rememoration is filtered through the themes of trauma, community, and revolution, and there are enough elements in the films that save them from self-colonisation. He quotes the example of *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* where the components that help the film to embody a non-orientalist, realistic voice of the East are the authentic background, and the poetics of naturalness and intimacy.

The article of Katarína Misíková about cinematic memory in Slovak cinema after 1989 seems to be struggling with one of the most crucial and almost invincible tasks of scholars studying so-called "small cinemas". To argue for general trends and motifs present during a relatively extended period of time, the scholar of a film culture that is relatively small and unknown to the international audience naturally feels the urge to educate the reader about the films and film history of their field. In order to support the main argument, the scholars might find themselves entangled in recounting film history and listing and describing films while holding loosely onto the main argument. In my opinion this is what has happened here, hence we get an informative account of Slovak film history, but get less information about the unique features of memory work done by contemporary Slovakian cinema.

In his article *Making and Breaking the New Wave Canon in Romanian Cinema*, Doru Pop situates the New Romanian Cinema in the double framework of Europeanness versus local cinema movement. According to Pop the cinematic canon in Europe was traditionally defined by the names of great auteurs, and New Romanian Cinema followed this trend: it had been canonised through the names of the directors who collected many prestigious awards at international film festivals and had become great auteurs themselves. And the author points out how the authorial tactics of self-reflexivity and artistic self-awareness led to a certain self-canonisation process, that included the implicit canonisation of themes, narratives and visual practices, and ultimately led to the loss of originality.

The most problematic point of the article is the concept of canon itself. It seems to me that it is too early to speak about or use the concept of canon as something relatively closed in relation to New Romanian Cinema. When the author speaks about *Aferim!* (2015) as a de- or re-canonisation of the New Romanian Cinema, the concept of canon and canonisation gets really foggy. How can a single film canonise other films, or a cinematic trend? I believe canonisation is done by various cultural institutions such as film festivals, education, monographs and edited volumes (such as the book discussed here), but can't be done by single films. The New Romanian Cinema as an ongoing, contemporary phenomenon should rather be referenced as an open trend at the moment, which needs to be going through and is going through the canonisation processes by these various institutions. In this sense the clearest canonisation gesture of the text is the list composed by the author as his personal "best of" list of the New Romanian Cinema films that is attached to the article as some kind of appendix. While this gesture signals the clear intent of the text to become part of the canonisation process, it does not eliminate the methodological problem related to the concept of canon and canonisation – probably by the label of canon the author simply means the "most typical" films. This volume has fine examples of how different texts that concentrate on similar themes and discuss films that come from the same geopolitical region are able to support each other's argumentation. The essays collected here are proof that the generation of East European film scholars the authors represent is ready to not only participate in, but lead the international discussion about the film culture of this part of Europe.