

Addressing the Russian Other

Ewa Mazierska — Lars Kristensen — Eva Näripea (eds.),
Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema: Portraying Neighbours on Screen.
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It is just about the time for academics to turn their attention to examining Eastern European cinema from a postcolonial perspective and, by re-thinking and overcoming Eurocentrism, imperialism, ethnocentrism and the well-known West-and-the-Rest¹⁾ opposition, begin to evolve a colonial discourse that omits the old 'white/Occidental' versus non 'white/Oriental' dichotomy.²⁾ There has been a great need for new approaches in film studies that transcend the conventional rhetoric of the dominant-subjected/centred-peripheral representation and, after the well-known investigations on Francophone,³⁾ Asian,⁴⁾ or Latin American cinema,⁵⁾ comes out with the postcolonial study of a less analyzed territory, although, as the editors of *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema* pinpoint, examining Eastern Europe as a geo-political territory that has been colonized by the Soviet Union is a controversial task. This is to say that

the Eastern European countries were already postcolonial when they got seized by Russo-Soviet power. Furthermore, the level of the USSR's control and oppressive measures had different faces in the Baltic States, Yugoslavia and the Central European countries, thus, the socio-political, cultural, national, economic and even religious differences among the satellite countries and the way they comprehended Marxist ideology makes it difficult to consider them as one. This diversity as well as the difference from the classical colonies and, — as the editors bravely note — the West's 'sympathy towards the Soviet political project'⁶⁾ caused the lack of postcolonial approaches towards Eastern Europe. Consequently, the primary aim of *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema* is to fill up this gap and contribute to film studies with providing postcolonial readings of Eastern European national cinemas by linking 'colonialism/postcolonialism in

1) Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

2) Robert Stam, Louise Spence, 'Colonialism, Racism and Representation', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1983), pp. 2–20.

3) Dina Scherzer, *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone Worlds* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996); Samba Diop, *African francophone cinema* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2004).

4) Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

5) Charles Ramirez Berg, *Latino images in film: stereotypes, subversion, & resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Chon A. Noriega (ed.), *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

6) Ewa Mazierska, Lars Kristensen and Eva Näripea (eds), *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema* (London: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, London, 2014), p. 16.

Eastern Europe with the concept of neighbourhood.⁷⁾ Consequently, the eleven studies of the collection are connected by focusing on the relation of ethnic groups in the post-socialist countries and the self-determination and identity of Eastern European nations.

The collection's first study addresses the post-communist representation of Poles in German cinema by mainly focusing on Kaspar Heidelberg's *POLSKI CRASH* (1993). Kirstin Kopp⁸⁾ provides a multiple, detailed spatial analysis of the film, arguing that after Germany's unification, the border with Poland had become a 'threat that is either successfully staved off by [...] Germany [...] or that seeps into East German space, exploiting its economically and socially weakened position.'⁹⁾ Accordingly, Kopp explains the socio-historical background of the Poles' negative image as primitive, dangerous *Naturvolk* in German context and examines the neighbour's representation as criminal in the cinema of the 1990s. Consequently, she argues that in *POLSKI CRASH* the Polish 'urban space becomes marked by an almost Kafkaesque illegibility of power structures and of the identities of individuals within the system,'¹⁰⁾ thus meaning a site of decay for the male protagonist. However, as Kopp concludes, there has been a shift in Poles' negative representation in the 2000s and the Eastern Other tends to be illustrated as more equal in Germany's contemporary cinema.

The next essay shows the other side of the coin and deals with the representation of Germans in Polish communist and post-communist cinema. Focusing on the latter, Ewa Mazierska¹¹⁾ brings examples that did not follow the conventional

post-war representation of Germans as aggressive, ruthless Nazi soldiers (Wanda Jakubowska's *OSTATNI ETAP* /The Last Stage/, 1948 or Filip Bajon's *MAGNAT* /The Magnate/, 1986 for instance), furthermore, when examining the post-communist Polish cinema, she draws attention to the positive images of Germans in Roman Polanski's *THE PIANIST* (2002) and Wojtek Smarzowski's *ROZA* (2001). In addition, she offers a stimulating analysis on Franz Maurer's hybrid, Polish-German, Western-Eastern identity in Władysław Pasikowski's well-known *PSY* (Dogs) (1992) who, despite his role as communist secret agent, acts as a sympathetic character that is easy to identify with. Mazierska also notes that, due to the good political relationship between Germany and Poland after 1989, the previously prevailing negative image of Germans has been taken over by Russians that now serve as main enemies and the indicators of the nation's suffering. Similarly to Mazierska, Petra Hanáková¹²⁾ investigates the role of Germans as well and concentrates on the representation of the Sudeten ethnic in Czech cinema by arguing that, albeit the last decade has somewhat changed the way films picture the German-Czech relation, it could not fully reveal the complexity of it yet. What is for sure, the ethnic Germans' negative image is continuously being challenged since the system change that Hanáková has depicted in three examples that all visualize this shift differently. Thus, whether questioning the necessarily guilt of Germans (Jan Hřebejk's *DIVIDED WE FALL* /Musíme si pomáhat/, 2000), trying to challenge Sudeten stereotypes (Marek Najbrt's *CHAMPIONS* /Mistři/, 2004) or bring new perspectives (Juraj

7) Ibid., p. 20.

8) Kirstin Kopp, "If your car is stolen, it will soon be in Poland": criminal representations of Poland and the Poles in German fictional film of the 1990s, in Mazierska, Kristensen and Närke (eds), pp. 41–67.

9) Kopp, p. 43.

10) Kopp, p. 51.

11) Ewa Mazierska, 'Neighbours (almost) like us: representation of Germans, Germanness and Germany in Polish communist and postcommunist cinema', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Närke (eds), pp. 67–91.

12) Petra Hanáková, "I'm at home here": Sudeten Germans in Czech postcommunist cinema, in Mazierska, Kristensen and Närke (eds), pp. 91–115.

Herz's *HABERMANN'S MILL* /Habermannův mlýn/, 2010) into Czech cinema, the country's filmmaking has been so far unable to break the ties with the stereotypes according to the German minority and could not explore 'the vicissitudes of national proximity as a product of colonial encounter'.¹³⁾

In the next chapter, Peter Hames¹⁴⁾ examines the Slovak romantic hero, Juraj Jánošík's figure in Czech (JÁNOŠÍK, Martin Frič, 1935), Slovak (JÁNOŠÍK, Jaroslav Siakel, 1921), Polish (JANOSIK, Jerzy Passendorfer, 1973) and finally Polish-Slovak (JANOSIK: PRAWDZIWA HISTORIA /Janosik: A True Story/, Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik, 2009) context. Accordingly, Hames follows the transformation of Jánošík who first stands for the legendary, nationalist hero but later becomes a more complex, albeit less powerful figure in Holland's adaptation. Thus, Jánošík slowly loses his connections to his Slovak identity and becomes a Hollywood-like, transnational hero.

After putting forward the post-Czechoslovak and German postcolonial sphere, the collection's attention turns to south. Accordingly, John Cunningham¹⁵⁾ discusses Romania's role in Hungarian cinema, with special focus on the post-2000 Hungarian filmmaking that produced four movies (Robert Pejo's *DALLAS PASHAMENDE*, 2004; Csaba Bollók's *ISZKA UTAZÁSA* /Iska's Journey/, 2007; Kornél Mundruczó's *DELTA*, 2008 and Peter Strickland's *KATALIN VARGA*, 2009) that are set in the neighbour country. Cunningham argues that these films shed a negative light on Romania with picturing it as an isolated, primeval territory of 'grinding poverty and hopelessness'¹⁶⁾ where people struggle for

daily living. Surprisingly, the author drops out Marian Crișan's *MORGEN* (2010) from the investigation, nevertheless it could have added new perspectives to his study on Hungarian/Transylvanian-Romanian relations. Apart from this, Cunningham's notes on Romania's representation are remarkable, albeit sometimes confrontational as none of the films deal with concrete space-time coordinates and it seems like these filmmakers concentrate on the deserted, dismal landscape, rather than treating it as a territory of the Romanian Other.

In the following chapter, Elżbieta Ostrowska¹⁷⁾ analyses the Balkan's representation in Władysław Pasikowski's *Psy 2: OSTATNIA KREW* (Dogs 2, 1994) and *DEMONY WOJNY WEDŁUG GOI* (Demons of War According to Goya, 1998). Ostrowska argues that the films' Polish and Balkan characters define each other, the former accommodating itself to West while positioning the post-Yugoslav Other as belonging to East. The author underlines this dichotomy by bringing several examples for the narrative patterns of Western war films that correspond to Pasikowski's cinematic representation. After the fascinating comparison of Western and Polish filmic iconography, Ostrowska analyses the role of mediated images in *DOGS 2*, highlighting Pasikowski's distrust towards treating war footages as commodity, thus refuting the Polish side's absolute identification with West. What is born this way is an in-between position, which is further scrutinized by the sexual representation of both films. Ostrowska offers a remarkable textual analysis on the Western, masculinist supremacy that the Polish protagonists take on but again refuses the idea of the male characters' total identification with West

13) Hanáková, p. 110.

14) Peter Hames, 'Jánošík: the cross-border hero', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Năripea (eds), pp. 115–147.

15) John Cunningham, 'From nationalism to rapprochement? Hungary and Romania on-screen', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Năripea (eds), pp. 147–175.

16) Cunningham, p. 165.

17) Elżbieta Ostrowska, 'Postcolonial fantasies: imagining the Balkans: the Polish popular cinema of Władysław Pasikowski', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Năripea (eds), pp. 175–201.

and states that 'the traditional model of Polish masculinity (...) continues to confine the Polish subject as he moves uncertainly between the Western and Eastern poles of the postcommunist ideological order in Europe.'¹⁸⁾

The next two chapters concentrate on the Balkans. Špela Zajec¹⁹⁾ examines post-Yugoslav, Serbian cinema and Serbs' self-representation as heroic figures that defended Europe from Muslim influence (BOJ NA KOSOVU /The Battle of Kosovo/, Zdravko Šotra, 1989) and whose crimes are depicted as less serious compared to other ethnicities (LEPA SELA LEPO GORE /Pretty Village, Pretty Flame/, Srđan Dragojević, 1995). As Zajec notes, in the films of the 1990s, the neighbour figure mostly attracts negative images while the post-2000 Serbian cinema has brought changes in introducing the neighbour as victim (ČETVRTI ČOVEK /The Fourth Man/, Dejan Zečević, 2007). Thus, as the author concludes, 'nationhood and neighbourhood narratives [...] in Serbia co-exist, compete with and even contradict discourses about the conception of the neighbour in Serbian cinema.'²⁰⁾ Vlastimir Sudar²¹⁾ dwells on the Neighbour's role in the Croatian film NIČIJI SIN (No One's Son, Arsen Anton Ostojić, 2008) and provides a fascinating analysis on the post-Yugoslav ethnicities' neighbourly and personal relations in the film. Accordingly, he argues that Croatia's inter-neighbour relations 'collapsed viciously in Croatia,'²²⁾ in addition, the films point out the neighbouring countries' threat that 'had

inscribed itself on the country's interior psyche.'²³⁾ Consequently, Croatia's neighbourly relations have utterly fallen through.

The book's Balkan section finishes with Bruce William's²⁴⁾ investigation on the Albanian post-colonial cinema through the textual reading of KOLONEL BUNKER (Kujtim Çashku, 1998). William reads Albania's totalitarian past as a colonial one that enforced fear and paranoia on the nation during the Hoxha regime. He argues that the film, drawing on the Polish woman's story in RAZVOD PO ALBANSKI (Divorce Albanian Style, Adela Peeva, 2007) and bunkerization, connects these 'two discourses of strangeness'²⁵⁾ that open 'ethno-nationalist sentiments and build dynamic cross-cultural lines.'²⁶⁾

The collection's final two essays concentrate on the Russian Other. Lars Kristensen²⁷⁾ examines the role of the Russian intruder into the Mongolian neighbourhood in Nikita Mihalkov's URGA (1991) and the way it creates a new, post-Soviet identity that recalls Russia's imperial past while addressing its colonizer position. Accordingly, through the outstanding textual analysis of the film, Kristensen places Gombo's and Sergei's friendship in a larger perspective, thus pointing out their shared marginality that places them between two forms of post-communism, the capitalist West and the socialist China. Consequently, the film depicts two kinds of colonialism, one 'that the Russian Empire instigated and the (neo-)colonial influence of Western

18) Ostrowska, p. 195.

19) Špela Zajec, "Narcissism of minor differences"? Problems of "mapping" the neighbour in post-Yugoslav Serbian cinema, in Mazierska, Kristensen and Nāripea (eds), pp. 201–227.

20) Zajec, p. 217.

21) Vlastimir Sudar, 'New neighbours, old habits and nobody's children: Croatia in the face of old Yugoslavia', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Nāripea (eds), pp. 227–253.

22) Ibid., p. 246.

23) Ibid., p. 246.

24) Bruce William, 'The distant among us: Kolonel Bunker (1998) in a postcolonial context', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Nāripea (eds), pp. 253–277.

25) Ibid., p. 268.

26) Ibid., p. 271.

27) Lars Kristensen, 'The "far east" neighbour in Nikita Mikhalkov's Urga', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Nāripea (eds), pp. 277–303.

hegemonies that holds sway over post-Soviet Russia,²⁸⁾ arguing that, in order to find their roots, the friends have to reject these power centres and get connected to their ancestors.

Following the representation of the Russian ethnic, Eva Näripea²⁹⁾ portrays the role of Russian females in three Estonian films. She argues that the Soviet political thaw in the 1980s gave the Baltic country a new impetus in filmmaking, such as the topic of the relationship between native Estonians and non-native Russians living in the same state. Accordingly, Näripea examines the Slavic heroines in Leida Laius's VARASTATUD KOHTUMINE (Stolen Meeting, 1988), Arvo Iho's VAATLEJA (The Birdwatchers, 1987) and HALASTAJAÕDE — AINULT HULLUDELE (The Sister of Mercy — Only for the Crazy, 1990). Similarly to Kristensen, Näripea highlights the marginalized, disempowered position of the Russian protagonists and the rootedness of the Estonian characters, thus rejecting the nationalist stereotypes and the colonialist dominant-subjected opposition. As the author correctly notes, the films testify that 'any post-colonial situation is deeply affected by other form of domination besides those induced by colonialism.'³⁰⁾

Näripea's concluding remarks address the whole Eastern European corpus of moving images as none of the neighbourly conflicts can be fully reduced to and explained with colonial motivations. However, the area's postcolonial reading can successfully contribute to a better understanding of the post-socialist cinema and the *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema* is an excellent, multifaceted first step toward this. The editors proved the effectiveness of postcolonial approaches in post-soviet film that can be broadened with the study of other national cinemas such as Bulgaria, Slovenia, Lithuania, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Latvia that are all

omitted from the book. Also, although the *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema* concentrates on the concept of neighbourhood, the approach itself might call for several further points of investigation. With the growing number of Eastern European migrants and diaspora, a new post-socialist/neo-colonized generation is being born, with hybrid and double identities, that sets the power relationship between Russia and the satellite countries in a new context, which encourages us to re-position the Other. Correspondingly, thanks to the political merge of East and West Europe and the economic integration of post-socialist territories, the issue of languages (Russian vs. English and German), human trafficking, the exploitation of Eastern European territories and the national cinema's (lack of) reaction to these have become accurate topics. This is to say that, besides working on our conception with colonial Russia and Eastern European satellite-countries, we also have to look at the area's current position within the European Union, thus analyzing the post-socialist region in a broader, post-neo-colonist framework that might help us with further investigations.

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28) Ibid., p. 281.

29) Eva Näripea, 'The women who weren't there: Russians in late Soviet Estonian cinema', in Mazierska, Kristensen and Näripea (eds), pp. 303–327.

30) Ibid., p. 320.