"Bodies in Transition": Towards Eastern European and Russian Corporeality in Film

Ewa Mazierska, Matilda Mroz, and Elżbieta Ostrowska (eds.), *The Cinematic Bodies of Eastern Europe and Russia: Between Pain and Pleasure* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

The edited volume *Cinematic Bodies of Eastern Europe and Russia: Between Pain and Pleasure* assembles a highly important interdisciplinary approach to cinematic bodies from the Eastern European and Russian perspective.

Following upon Steven Shaviro's seminal book *The Cinematic Body*,[1] in which the interdependence of the affective and the political has brought about a new approach in understanding the somatic experience of film culture from a Western European perspective, the present book applies this theoretical focus to Eastern European and Russian screen culture. Although some scholars of the region have covered some aspects related to body and cinema in relatively recent publications,[2] the present volume breaks new ground, focusing on the representation of body/embodiment on-screen from a distinctly localized perspective. This publication aims to bring together some of the corporeal debates prompted by the so-called "affective turn" in philosophy and cultural theory, pointing specifically to historical traumas as dominant visual means of expression that have shaped the materiality of the cinematic body-image. Moreover, the volume contributes to regional theories as well as theories of the English-speaking world by reconnecting them to contemporary and Western film studies.

It is impossible to talk about corporeal experience and representation in the film of Eastern Europe and Russia without taking into consideration the cross-generationally intertwined nature of film production and film education in former socialist countries, which developed an aesthetically and culturally specific cinematic language. Hence, what stands out as a significant achievement of this volume is an attempt to approach the region as a "coherent cultural entity", to use Virginás' terminology,[3] or, as

1) Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

2) See, for instance, Andrea Virginás' edited volume that analyses different national cinemas of Eastern Europe with postcolonial and post-socialist perspectives of cinematic representations: Andrea Virginás (ed.), *Cultural Studies Approaches in the Study of Eastern European Cinema: Spaces, Bodies, Memories* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016); Anikó Imre's significant contribution to socialist and post-socialist cinema culture in editorial work: Anikó Imre (ed.), *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); or Elżbieta Ostrowska's book chapter that analyses the depiction of socialist women in Polish Socialist Realist films: Elżbieta Ostrowska, 'Women Who Eat Too Much: Consuming Female Bodies in Polish Cinema', in *Transgressive Women in Modern Russian and East European Cultures* (Routledge, 2016), p. 128–142.

3) Andrea Virginás, 'Preface', in Virginás (ed.), *Cultural Studies Approaches in the Study of Eastern European Cinema: Spaces, Bodies, Memories* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), p. ix.

the editors point out, "[…] a region with a shared history and culture, including screen culture, which remains distinct even after the fall of the Berlin Wall" (p. 2). Such examples can be found in the impact the Czechoslovak New Wave of the 1960s and the Prague Spring had on narrative and aesthetic features of Yugoslav cinema at the end of the 1970s.[4)]

The merit of the book is to move beyond predominant Cold War narratives of Eastern Europe and Russia as delayed spaces of modernity and the so-called periphery and to open a solid basis for further research of regional cinematography as a unique geopolitical, aesthetic, and sensual phenomenon in the creation of cinematic language. Essays are written by established and emerging film scholars who focus on former Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and former Yugoslavia. The volume is conceptually divided into three thematic chapters: "Wounds and Traumas", "Transgressions and Pleasures", and "Carnal Histories". The introduction presents a coherent and substantial analysis of genealogy on the theory of body in the Western and Eastern context, introducing neglected authors from Russian and Eastern European philosophy — such as Mikhail Bakhtin and his significant analyses of the carnival/grotesque collective body. While elaborating on the relation between the somatic experience on screen and the political/ideological system of communism/socialism (the editors' preferred term is "state socialism", pointing out the capitalist social organization), the central framework of deconstruction focuses on the regime's propaganda and the oppressive action of socialism/communism/state socialism on the formation of the body in a visual and everyday sense.

The editors ascribe the lack of interest in body/individuality in everyday communist life to the official oppressive politics under communism. In doing so, they conclude that in communism bodies were "becoming unified in one system, at the expense of individuality" (p. 9), arguing as well that "the sexual needs of bodies were regarded as at best of secondary importance to the spiritual need to build and develop socialism" (Ibid.). They continue to connect the "communist collective body" with the Foucauldian theory of "discipline and punishment" or, more radically, ascribing the women's miscarriage to "some forms of work in factories" (Ibid.).

Going further in elaboration, the extremely ambiguous position is illustrated in the discussion of the female body on the cover of the book and the affective agency elicited within the subtitle "between pain and pleasure" as the paradigm of the Eastern body, arguing that "The female figure in the mural is at once overtly sexualized and appears as a kind of post-communist Alice in Wonderland […]" (p. 22). These irrelevant premises leave the reader thinking over the interpretation of the image, where the emphasis only on the traumas of communism, and insufficiently (or not at all) elaborated historical and political references to the traumas of Nazism and fascism, leave the impression of a politicized interpretation. In this way, the editors at some points do not escape an oversimplified interpretation that often slips into "common knowledge"[5)] reductionism, and the reader often cannot escape the implications of a totalitarian paradigm of socialism in the very social structure of life, and therefore in the

4) This refers to the influence of new sensibilities, themes, and even stylistics of the film image which could be seen in the works of the then students of The Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU) at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s (Lordan Zafranović, Goran Paskaljević, Goran Marković, Srđan Karanović, and Rajko Grlić).

5) In this regard see Kristen Ghodsee and Kateřina Lišková, 'Bumbling idiots or evil masterminds? Challenging cold war stereotypes about women, sexuality, and state socialism', *Filozofija i društvo*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2016), pp. 489–503, p. 489; "When contemporary scholars make claims about communist intrusions into the private sphere to effect social engineering or the inefficacy of state socialist mass organizations or communist efforts to break up the family or indoctrinate the young, they often do so without citation to previous sources or empirical evidence supporting their claims, thereby suggesting that such claims are "common knowledge".

representation of the body in visual culture. The majority of essays from the collection corresponds or indirectly alludes to the experience of the socialist/communist era in terms of totalitarianism, especially in an endeavor to explain the ab-using and suspension of erotic pleasure of the body by a crude, prudish collectivism of communist ideology in the process of building the socialist future. In this vein, Mazierska argues that "The state regarded sex not as an aim in itself, but as a means of populating the country with people willing to work for socialism" (p. 117). Helen Goscilo explicitly puts an accent on the abused male body by "the prudishness of official Soviet ideology" (p. 90), arguing that "Naked flesh […] and even partially clothed bodies rarely appeared on-screen" (Ibid.).

In general, the cinematic representation of the body is reduced to a dichotomous image of communism as an anti-corporeal state ideology, in which the main imperative was to build the perfect collective body, and, contrarily, post-communism as a period associated with individuality and bodily freedom in articulating pleasures and desires. This view resonates with the omnipresent right-wing historical revisionism in most post-socialist countries, as well as in Western Europe, where left-wing politics, including its roots in socialism/communism and antifascist struggle that constitute modern Europe, are misrepresented and subjected to cultural demonization or, more radically, lead to the devastation of monuments and cultural heritage from a socialist past.

Furthermore, the volume lacks insight into the representation and corporeal experience of women's bodies in a Socialist/post-socialist context. The articles in the collection are mainly focused on the de-formation of masculine bodies by the communist ideology and "state socialism" as it is reflected in the cinematic medium. A notable exception that moves beyond the paradigm of communism as the univocal oppressive regime of life and aesthetics is traced through a few essays. Emerging scholar Nebojša Jovanović in his essay "Queering the Masculinity in Yugoslav Socialist Realist Films" looks upon a series of Yugoslav socialist realist films of the late 1940s and early 1950s through the prism of queer analysis, deconstructing two common stereotypical readings of this genre. The first one is that Yugoslav socialist realist film offered only a censored, monolithic, "aesthetically poor and politically conservative" (p. 143) representation of the body, controlled by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, and the second one is that homosocial/homosexual and queer representation can be seen as a pure excess of technical deficiency or the director's unconsciousness in cinematic language. Jovanović rejects the reading of Yugoslav socialism as a crude communist totalitarian regime and, by contrast, demonstrates that queer motifs and homosocial/homoerotic desire can be found at the core of Yugoslavian national cinema.

In an interesting connection between cinema and war technology, Dorota Ostrowska's "Aerial Bodies in Polish Cinema" look at the "socialist aerial body" in the Polish Cold War context, connecting it to Paul Virilio's body-technology discourse. She discusses the missing part of Virilio's analysis, between flying technology and its impacts on body representation in Polish aviation films in state socialism. Disability or "disabled male bodies" impacted by the flying technology are seen as a significant feature of the representation of the body in Polish cinema.

The relations between geopolitics and the body can be found in the remarkable essay "Geographies of Carnality: Slippery Sexuality in Wiktor Grodecki's Gay Hustler Trilogy" by Bruce Williams. He gives a critical postcolonial reflection on the economic and social transition of post-communist Czechoslovakia heading towards neoliberal Western market ideology. Williams looks through the lens of Grodecki's trilogy films *Andělé nejsou andělé (Not Angels But Angels*, 1994), *Tělo bez duše* (*Body Without Soul*, 1996), and *Mandragora* (1997), analyzing the Prague sex tourism industry as the site of the perverted orientalist Western gaze upon "sexualized others" Eastern bodies.

Moving from the geopolitical to the phenomenological, an inquiry between body history and the aesthetics of image is explored in David Sorfa's essay "The Touch of History: A Phenomenological Approach to 1960s Czech Cinema". Sorfa connects Jan Patočka's phenomenological work on history, freedom, and the body (as a dominant philosophical tendency against Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia) to distinctive formal features in Czech cinema of the 1960s as a new sensory experience of haptic visuality in three films: *Marketa Lazarová* (1967), *Kočár do Vídně* (*Coach to Vienna*, 1966) and *Noc nevěsty* (*Night of the Bride* / *The Nun's Night*, 1967). Sorfa argues that these stylistic tendencies possess the liberating potential to subvert the distortions of socialist realism and traumatic historical changes.

Although this volume predominantly focuses on the political/ideological formation of the Eastern body, new insights into the relationship between body and image can be found in two essays which redirect our attention towards matters of film form, scene composition, and movement of the image. These contributions bring about unique and subversive aesthetic practices in contemporary East European cinema and thereby open up new ways of approaching it in a different light.

In a remarkable essay "The 'Chemistry' of Art (ifice) and Life: Embodied Paintings in East European Cinema", Ágnes Pethő discusses the specific "aesthetics of intermediality" in contemporary Eastern European and Russian cinema, which moves the focus from the geopolitical narrative, occurred by the fall of communism, towards formal features of the image. Pethő asserts that this "poetic strategy" is specific to East European cinema, where the aesthetics of intermediality serves as a strategy to "[…] dissolve the cultural boundaries between East and West by connecting to particular, universally known references to Western art […] while maintaining their distinctively local, historical reference frames, thus operating a new, complex system of 'liminalities'" (p. 240). Likewise, Hajnal Király discusses the new sensibility in contemporary Hungarian cinema and the aesthetics of melancholia, where frequent use of bodies and corpses as central tropes reflects and embodies the symptom of the crisis and transgression in post-communist Hungary ("Playing Dead: Pictorial Figurations of Melancholia in Contemporary Hungarian Cinema").

Overall, *The Cinematic Bodies of Eastern Europe and Russia* is an important addition to film theory that brings an interdisciplinary view into the cinematic body and film embodiment from an Eastern European perspective. Despite the lack of more elaborated historical and critical approach to the questions of trauma, war, and 'regime of transition', this volume opens a very welcome move in body-image discourses of local film history and pushes film scholars to more distinctly scrutinize these questions and as such serves as a solid ground from which to challenge further political, aesthetic, and critical inquiries into socialist and post-socialist film cultures.

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