
Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe: Film Cultures and Histories

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On the front cover of *Popular Cinemas in East Central Europe: Film Cultures and Histories*, framed against a pale green background, appears a cowboy-like figure, one with a sieve for a body and a horseshoe for legs. Reproducing the poster for *Limonádový Joe aneb Kinská opera / Lemonade Joe* (Oldrich Lipský, 1964) – a highly popular film from the former Eastern bloc – this cover design illustrates appropriately the key concerns of this volume. On the one hand, familiarity with the film, as well as the extremely appealing, colourful and humorous cover, highlights the focus on a little discussed aspect of filmmaking from the region, namely popular cinemas. On the other hand, reference to this film, described by Dina Iordanova as “a Czech spoof Western”[\[1\]](#), includes genre filmmaking in this region’s film cultures and histories.

The collection matches its attractive, playfully pleasing cover design with a selection of carefully written and well-argued chapters on a timely topic, popular cinemas in four, formerly communist, countries: Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia. The volume represents a first effort to map such a concept in cinemas most famous internationally for their art-house output. The topic is not without its challenges, not least because of the regional approach undertaken in this volume. Research on the popular cinemas in East Central Europe exists, albeit in local languages (mostly). This becomes evident when one looks at the bibliography of each chapter, where articles, chapters and books written in national languages dominate. This should not be surprising. Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau remarked in 1992 that “highly popular European films seldom travel well beyond their national boundaries; and when they do [...] they are repackaged for art cinemas”[\[2\]](#). In this context, the regional focus of the volume represents an exciting proposal.

Unfortunately, this proposal is not met by the essays included in this volume, which mostly rely on a country-by-country approach. Nevertheless, connections (similarities and differences) emerge gradually and across the volume from the individual chapters. For instance, it emerges not only that comedy has a tradition in the film cultures of the region, but also that genre analysis can illuminate significant continuities, as well as differences, across a longer period within one film culture. For

example, Balázs Varga convincingly argues for the importance of the operetta for the Hungarian musical comedies of the 1950s (91). He shows that, contrary to what one might expect, the genre of musical comedy under communism maintains the tradition of the 1930s instead of discarding it. He astutely points out that “[t]he idealised worlds of the musicals were well suited to the aims of Socialist Realism, namely depicting contemporary reality from the utopian perspectives of the Communist future” (91). With reference to the same period, Šárka Gmíterková argues for a continuity of the Czech star’s Oldřich Nový career into the 1950s based on the actor’s particular type of performance, which included singing, dancing and acting (70). It is not surprising, therefore, that the star played in musical comedies, the so-called operettas that Varga referred to in the Hungarian context too. At the same time, focusing on Hungarian popular cinema alone, three chapters across the volume – Zsuzsanna Varga’s “Starlets and Heart-throbs: Hungarian Cinema in the Interwar Period”, Balázs Varga’s “Transformations: Hungarian Cinema in the 1950s”, mentioned earlier, and Andrea Virginás’ “The ‘Hollywood Factor’ in the Most Popular Hungarian Films of the Period 1996-2014” – discuss the evolution and transformation of comedy in Hungary before, during and after communism.

Exceptionally within the volume, Jan Hanzlik’s “The Exhibition of Popular Cinema in the Czech Republic and Slovakia: After 1989 Within the Context of the European Union” illustrates perfectly the advantages of a regional and transnational approach between the four countries. The discussion goes beyond the bilateral cooperation stated in the title and transcends the confines of the East Central European region (as defined by the collection). Hanzlik’s chapter looks at distribution patterns after 1989 and uses data from Romania and Bulgaria, as well as Southern European countries, in order to argue for a connection between the four countries on which this collection focuses. Hanzlik succinctly summarises his findings: “film exhibition in the Czech Republic and Slovakia shares certain conditions with that in Poland and Hungary and in some ways develops differently from other countries of the European Union” (291). Thus, he provides evidence for the distinctiveness of the film industries from the region, fulfilling the stated aims of the volume.

For this reviewer, the section on popular filmmaking under communism was the most anticipated part of the collection. Inevitably, this section provides ample discussions of what the popular can mean within a centralised economy that is not market or audience driven. Paul Coates’ chapter entitled “How To Be Loved? Three Takes on ‘The Popular’ in Socialist and Non-Socialist Cinema: The Popular and The People” represents just one such attempt at defining the popular in this context and in this volume. He argues that the popular under communism may

refer to both art-house and genre films. He uses films made by Andrej Wajda as a case study in order to show how his work attempts to create “popular art cinema” (127). While this notion may seem contradictory, it is more common than one might think. Monica Filimon has previously – in her study, “Popular Cinema in the late 1960s Romania” – defined the popular as characterised by both box office success and underground fame[3], and, on this basis, discussed Sergiu Nicolaescu’s historical epic drama *Dacii / Dacians* (1966) alongside Lucian Pintilie’s dissident, art-house film *Reconstituirea / Reenactment* (1968). This approach manages to by-pass successfully the more interesting, in my opinion, issue of genre filmmaking under communism.

That is precisely the reason why I consider Gábor Gelencsér’s fascinating study of “socialist crime movie” a novelty in this field. The chapter addresses “crime movies”, a genre considered largely inexistent under communism. According to the official propaganda of the times, crime, especially murder, only afflicted the decadent western world and was entirely eradicated by socialism. In this context, this study analyses a distinct genre, the socialist crime movie. Gelencsér points out how the kind of crimes that were allowed under socialism determined the kind of crime films that were made. These films also had to convey a strict ideological message: “first, that crime did exist in state socialism but the criminal always came from abroad [...], and second that private detectives did not exist in state socialism, therefore the task of fighting crime is fulfilled by a state organisation in an organised and collective manner” (204-205). Using the example of *Dögkeselyű / The Vulture* (Ferenc András, 1982), Gelencsér shows how, exceptionally within the genre, this film, “while using generic conventions, manages to articulate a complex and relevant social meaning” (206), i.e. genuine social commentary usually associated with art-house cinema. I can only imagine how this discussion could open up the field for an analysis of Sergiu Nicolaescu’s rarely discussed, yet very popular, gangster film *Cu mâinile curate / With Clean Hands* (1972)[4] and its sequels.

The significance of this volume cannot be overstated. It represents a very successful attempt at offering a nuanced view on the popular cinemas of the region across several significant historical periods. One of the greatest merits and benefits of this volume is that it makes available scholarship and debates on the popular cinemas of the region, while also tapping into English language scholarship on the notion of the popular in cinema. It is this reviewer’s hope that more publications like this will continue to appear, not least because popular cinema from Romania, currently one of the most exciting post-communist cinemas from the region, did not make it into this volume. The absence of Romanian and Bulgarian popular cinemas, for example, attests to the variety and complexity of the former Eastern bloc and shows how far scholarship has

come in displaying the diversity of the film histories and cultures of the region.

Bibliography:

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[1]Dina Iordanova, *The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*(London and New York, Wallflower, 2003), 27.

[2]Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, "Introduction," in *Popular European Cinema*ed by Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.

[3]Monica Filimon, "Popular Cinema in the late 1960s," in*Cinema, State Socialism and Society in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1917 - 1989. Re-visioned* by Sanja Bahun and John Haynes (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 94.

[4]Sergiu Nicolaescu was a prolific filmmaker from Romania who worked almost exclusively within genre filmmaking both during and after communism. The filmmaker and his films represent a perfect example of auteur driven popular filmmaking characteristic of the region as Coates and, to some extent, Gelencsér suggest.