
Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema

By Anna Batori

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Reviewed by Phil Mann

Adapted from her doctoral thesis awarded by the University of Glasgow, Anna Batori's monograph *Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema* examines the configuration of disciplinary spaces in art cinema produced in post-socialist Romania and Hungary. Batori argues that through their spatial structuring such films produce implicit forms of reflection that recall and examine the socialist past. Through the paradigmatic model of vertical and horizontal enclosure, Batori asserts that the films communicate tacit forms of textual remembrance that explore the oppressive policies of the Hungarian and Romanian socialist regimes. By favouring such forms of connotative cinematic language over more explicit modes of historical engagement, the author argues that these films articulate both the region's ambivalent relationship with its recent history and an equal sense of ambivalence towards the post-socialist present. Such implicit forms of political and social reflection express a sense of cultural, political and historical in-betweenness, an uncertainty produced by the region's socio-political position between socialist and post-socialist regimes, socialist and post-socialist generations and socialist and post-socialist histories.

Vertical and horizontal enclosures refer to the recurrent modes of spatial representation found in Romanian and Hungarian cinema respectively. Built upon the principles of the Foucauldian disciplinary space, as illustrated by Bentham's panopticon, Batori argues that the tyrannised organisation of space presented in the two cinemas implicitly recalls the omniscient watching apparatus of the socialist regime. Vertical compositions are identified as frequent tropes of Romanian cinema, notably in the depiction of urban spaces, particularly Bucharest and its socialist-erected prefabricated tower blocks and microraisons. Indeed, it is here where the analysis is at its most effective, with *Moartea domnului Lăzărescu/The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005), *Politist, Adjectiv/Police, Adjective* (Corneliu Porumboiu, 2009) and *Aurora* (Cristi Puiu, 2010) best exemplifying Batori's model of vertical enclosure. Within the films examined, Batori emphasises a pronounced sense of claustrophobia produced by narrow, labyrinthine interiors, oppressive framing techniques that confine characters within the *mise-en-scène* and anthropomorphic hand-held cinematography that observes characters at a distance, often lurking behind objects. Such suffocating and observational cinematography, Batori argues, implicitly evokes the oppressive nature of the socialist regime under the ever-vigilant,

clandestine and unidirectional gaze of the *Securitate*.

Horizontal spatial enclosures, alternatively, are recognised as familiar markers of Hungarian cinema. Utilising distinctly national sites such as the *Alföld* and *tanya*, Batori argues that the post-socialist films of the so-called Black Series and Hungarian New Cinema draw upon the parabolic spatial techniques established under socialism – notably in the films of Miklós Jancsó – in which the endless rural horizons of the *Pusztta* and the enclosing, encircling cinematography imprison the films' respective protagonist(s). In her study of the work of Béla Tarr, for example, the author successfully argues that Tarr presents the distinctly national environments as decayed and dead spaces, presenting the physical landscape as a de-colonialised realm, a territory that “has already been conquered and then destroyed by the colonisers and now stands as a forgotten unit” (163). Tarr's apocalyptic representation of space, characterised by sombre black and white imagery, and run-down locations thus alludes to the aftermath of socialist colonialism and articulates the hopelessness of the system change.

Undoubtedly, the detail dedicated to the analysis constitutes the greatest strength of the book. However, perhaps more problematic is the framework upon which the analysis is built. It may be argued that the categories of vertical and horizontal enclosure are built upon, and ultimately produce, an essentialised history of Hungarian and Romanian art cinema. The author undeniably has grand ambitions, charting stylistic parallels throughout the history of not one, but two national cinemas. However, in doing so, Batori provides a somewhat selective history, an inevitability, perhaps, given the scope of the project and the limitations of a 200 page monograph. While the author acknowledges that the categories of horizontal and vertical enclosure are far from exclusive, she somewhat contentiously states that “the art films that stand outside the two types of spatial enclosure are marginal” (13). Yet, having made this statement, the author proceeds to challenge her own declaration through her analyses. While the above mentioned films of the Romanian New Wave fittingly embody Batori's conception of vertical enclosure, the study of Hungarian cinema subsequently complicates the established framework of horizontal enclosure. This is particularly apparent in the study of the post-millennial Hungarian cinema, in which Batori highlights a verticalization of space, as demonstrated in her analysis of *Delta* (Kornél Mundruczó, 2009) and *Apaföld/Father's Acre* (Viktor Oszkár Nagy, 2009). Ultimately, such inconsistencies leave the conceptual framework of vertical and horizontal enclosure feeling somewhat rigid and inflexible. How useful are these theoretical categories if the films examined deviate from their core concepts?

The model of vertical and horizontal enclosure stems from a perceived

tendency for scholars of Eastern European cinema to adopt a literary approach to films from the region. While spatial studies have been common in the scholarship of pre-1989 Eastern European cinema, whereby space was perceived as a way in which filmmakers could subvert the dominant ideology of the state and circumnavigate censorship, comparatively less has been written on the subject within the context of post-socialist cinema. Batori thus suggests that a study of the natural as well as cultural spaces of Romania and Hungary can serve as key sites of remembrance and identity formation as both nations attempt to renegotiate their national identity within the now global, post-socialist milieu. In this sense, *Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema* is unquestionably built upon a valuable premise. While Batori's model of vertical and horizontal enclosure is open to reproach, it nevertheless facilitates the disclosure of often latent social and/or historical commentary that, up until this point, has been unexplored and omitted from the current scholarship. In this way, Batori's engagement with textual forms of memory and contemplation reflect the findings of my own study of post-socialist Hungarian cinema and the continuation of encoded, Aesopian language - a mode of address that many believed would become obsolete in the post-socialist climate. Indeed, one may argue that non-representational, textual modes of representation fittingly encapsulate the entropic nature of the post-modern, post-socialist world, one lacking in fixed meaning, while simultaneously articulating the post-socialist generation's ambiguous relationship with its past and present.

Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema also serves as one of the first books to adopt a comparative approach to national cinemas from the region. There exists a tendency in Western scholarship to group the cinemas of both Hungary and Romania within larger cinematic studies of Eastern Europe, Central Europe or the Other Europe, to name but a few recurring categories. This approach is somewhat problematic as a regional perspective risks producing generalisations at the expense of specific localised focus, doing a disservice to the complicated and multifarious socialist and post-socialist vernaculars. While comparisons to other satellite states may naturally be drawn, Hungary and Romania's specific socialist experience, encompassing key national events such as the October Revolution of 1956 and the rise of Kádárism for the former and the totalitarian governance of Nicolae Ceaușescu and Revolution of 1989 of the latter, not only differ from those of neighbouring countries but also serves to complicate broader conceptions of life under socialism. This is also true of post-socialist era. Each nation has experienced a very different transition process, and while it is possible to draw comparisons, these comparisons risk producing distortions and misrepresentations that are at odds with local experiences and phenomena. In this sense, Batori should be commended for challenging generalised views of socialism/post-socialism by highlighting two extremes, Ceaușescu's authoritarian

Romania and “the happiest barrack in the socialist bloc” in Hungary.

One might argue, however, that despite being a comparative project, the study is lacking in comparative analysis. Despite falling into comparative categories of vertical and horizontal enclosure the studies of Romanian and Hungarian cinema often feel segregated and seldom does the structure of the book allow for comparative analysis between the two cinemas. Following an introductory chapter that highlights current trends in Eastern European cinema and sets out the goals of the book, and a secondary chapter examining the socialist formation of space, the chapters are broken down into strictly national categories, with the subsequent five chapters dedicated to Romanian cinema followed by three chapters engaging with the depiction of space within Hungarian cinema. Thus, given the comparative scope of the project, more could have done to integrate the studies of Hungarian and Romanian cinemas, perhaps at particular moments of their history.

Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema can ultimately be seen as a valuable study of both Hungarian and Romanian cinema. Despite the problematic nature of the vertical and horizontal enclosure framework, the work, nevertheless, provides constructive insight into the history of two small national cinemas that, despite multiple successes on the international film festival circuit, remain at the periphery of Western academic scholarship. The analysis throughout is bold, engaging and original, and, in highlighting a continuation of implicit forms of social, political and historical engagement in the cinemas of post-socialist Hungary and Romania, Batori’s work is a worthwhile addition to the study of post-socialist memory politics.