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Publication: Popular cinemas in East Central Europe: Film Cultures and Histories
Edited by: Dorota Ostrowska, Francesco Pitassio & Zsuzsanna Varga
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Book Review

This 2017 publication is a unique attempt by scholars of Central and East European studies to help the region culturally and artistically level with the legacies of its past. The publication is ordered in an organised, chronological manner. It addresses the film industry of the region not in a vacuum, but logically presumes that culture stems from society and therefore presents the phenomenon as a part of a complex cultural, historical, political, and sociological whole. The book addresses film primarily in the countries of the Visegrad 4 and chronologically moves from the interwar period of early 20th century to post-communist film production and modern film production of the early 21st century. The individual sections divided into subchapters, discussing film in such a chronological manner make for a clear structure and form a topical timeline of film development- in short, the structure reflects the organisation of content and for the reader this presents a comprehensible, if a little dense, way to address a rather unusual topic. Even a reader with a weak background in Central and East European cinematography can follow the diligent building up of themes, historical context and country-specific importance of film to individual cultures.

The book fills an important literature gap of post-WWII film scholarship and popular cinema which, as is rightly pointed out by the editors, has suffered from an excessive focus on western cinema- in fact the term 'popular' has wrongly been nearly synonymised with it. The strength of the book lies in the thorough re-defining of several terms that have slid into a skewed typology- such as the idea of 'popular cinema', which, according to the authors, has been infected by the westernised monetary understanding of 'popular' as box-office successful and therefore merely 'best liked' by the people. Instead the authors present several different perceptions of 'popular' in the region, which, due to the specific politically defiant and identity-building function that films have fulfilled for the region in times of oppression and occupation, presents itself as a deeper notion of enduring values that transcend borders. Additionally, as Pitassio aptly points out, the notion of 'popular' should also encompass more than a 'close reading' of films and should focus on the entirety of film production, consumption and circulation; all of which affect the popularity of the enterprise. This political and industrial background to film-making, Pitassio as well as Hanzlík argue, is paramount to understanding the production and distribution of films in societies which had to level with the likes of capitalist films suddenly flooding into the countries post-1989, and the boom of commercial cinema multiplexes; all of which impacted the quality of viewed material. While it might seem as a reductionist methodological weakness that most of the chapters discuss specific countries as case studies; there are chapters like that of Paul Coates, which present an elegant summary of the problematic as a regional enterprise, encompassing several countries. That way the publication presents a suitably country-specific, yet also a holistic approach to culture. As such the volume discusses not only film, but also what Zsuzsanna Varga aptly calls the 'sister arts' of film, such a literature, theatre and elements of music as well (seen for example as the specific operetta genre of the region, invoked by Varga). Varga's chapter on the Hungarian interwar cinema fills an important void for the reader with no background in the Hungarian language,

and brings this largely unknown part of Central European scholarship to the forefront in an engaging and inspiring manner.

The volume highlights that cultural divides between the East and the West are not as important as the charming and at times also harsh idiosyncrasies, cultural realignments or appropriations of a regional nature, which together form a unique wealth of art on screen. The volume doesn't exclude the impact of western cinema, on the contrary, it presents inspiration acquired by Central and East European cinema from western themes, but also the region's adaptation of these for local audiences. Perhaps the most captivating for the reader is the plastic illustration of how films responded to the needs of the people- for example, by portraying nationalistic themes to rally the populace under Hitler's occupation, as outlined by Klímeš. The volume also manages to insert examples of original language and excellent translation of original language (Klímeš, for example, also includes a translation of a poem excerpt) which increases its authenticity and rigour of research.

The authors however highlight not only regional similarities but also stark differences. Hanzlík compares the border-to-border differences in film industry development by showing the 1992 legislative aid to film production in the Czech Republic, embodied by the establishment of the Czech Cinema Support and Development State Fund. In contrast he mentions 2009 establishment of the Slovak equivalent, the Slovak Audio-Visual Fund, with a 17-year delay on its Czech neighbour. Both Pitassio and Hanzlík list the comedy genre and satire as most popular for the Czech audience and highlight the genre as the coping mechanism with the past that the country has identified with. Pitassio's chapter stands out as a truly comprehensive and thorough summary of the post-1989 Czech production and is undoubtedly seminal to any scholars of the topic, providing insightful evaluations of films, as well as films holding up a mirror to the society's achievements and failings alike, such as the cult film *Cosy Dens* (1999).

The main weakness of the volume lies in the lack of specific focus on the country of Slovakia which here, as in many social science publications, is seen as a point of comparison to the Czech Republic or Hungary, rather than a point of focus in its own right. In light of Slovak recent production or co-production offering several films of great popularity, addressing current themes such as grand and petty corruption, campaign fraud or drug trafficking from the East (*Učitelka* (2016) *The Teacher*, *Únos* (2017) *The Kidnapping*, *Kandidát* (2013) *The Candidate*, or *Čiara* (2017) *The Line*) this country's film industry deserves close examination within the field, as an integral and a dynamic part of what Hanzlík describes to be the region's 'struggle to develop cultural policy'.

Overall, the book is an extremely informative and a truly pleasant read, fit for any audience with an interest in the topic and the region. It shows real mastering of the subject by several scholars of great accomplishment and extensive knowledge on the topic of Central and East European cinema. While there is always scope for further research into the topic and no volume can realistically be expected to envelop such a rich enterprise in a vibrant and culturally awakening region, its positives by far outweigh any shortcomings. It is not an exaggeration to call this complex undertaking a *tour de force* of scholastic inquiry into a niche and understudied field.