

FOREWORD

This volume, published as a special issue of the annual periodical *Place and Location: Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics*, is an outcome of the international film conference *Via Transversa: Lost Cinema of the Former Eastern Bloc*, the fifth in the series *Place and Location*, which took place in Tallinn on October 5–6, 2007. The organisers sought to bring together specialists in the field from different parts of the world in order to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the filmic heritage of the former Eastern Bloc in the era between the end of World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In the post-Berlin Wall expanded Europe, we generally agree that two contrasting systems of film production and distribution, each more or less ‘curtained’ from the other, existed during the Cold War: capitalist (free market) and socialist (command economy). The Soviet Union and its allies in Central and Eastern Europe stood on one side and Western Europe and United States on the other side of this division. Yet, one has to ask what has changed in the field of film studies now that the Soviet Union has been ‘off the map’ for almost two decades? Leaving aside the DVD releases of works by certain legendary film-makers and socialist blockbusters, how much do we really know about the cinemas of the former Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland or the Soviet Union, the latter of which is, without making any further distinctions, all too often mistakenly equated with the cinema of Russia?

Considering that currently in film studies a great deal of the East European cinematic heritage has been lost, forgotten or implicitly downgraded, the organisers of the conference attempted to encourage the exchange of ideas on those films and viewpoints which are regarded somewhat marginal, second-rate ‘low-priorities’ in academia: popular cinema, cartoon animation, documentary film-making, educational cinema, children’s films, low-brow comedies etc.—all of which indeed formed a remarkable percentage of the total output of the film industries of the former Eastern Bloc, yet are today remarkably less discussed than one might expect. Nevertheless, these were the films that many post-war generations in the Soviet Bloc experienced as an important part of their everyday lives, whether connected with their individual entertainment, ennui, escape or resistance.

Although Communist ideology, as one of the major grand narratives of the 20th century, inevitably affected film production in the countries of the former Soviet Union and its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet system brought about a vacuum of reception in current academic research on films of the former Eastern Bloc and, equally or even more importantly, a vacuum of distribution of the films, past and present, from this region, as pointed out by Professor Dina Iordanova’s keynote address during the conference in Tallinn. Today films from the former Eastern Bloc all too often tend to be critical orphans.

The fate of the film industries both in the territory of the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries was more or less the same, and in that sense the current overall ‘lostness’ of the cinematic history of the former Eastern Bloc is a question of both rapid economic changes and newly ‘de-Kremlinologised’ political histories—both mainstream cinema and the critically acknowledged art-house gems are fading away in the distance. Therefore, an oft-quoted speech from 2005 by the second president of post-Soviet Russia about the demise of the Soviet Union being ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century’ could also serve as a bitterly sarcastic comment even on the oeuvre of those film-makers who were censored or suppressed by the Soviet system—because their life’s work, too, has undoubtedly lost some of its appeal since the immediate post-perestroika years, when the socio-political demand for a certain ‘anti-Soviet paradigm’ reached its climax, both in their homeland(s) and in the free West.

By ‘lost cinema’, the organisers of the conference meant everything that has often been excluded from more general studies of the cinemas of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: e.g. popular cinema and mainstream films (as opposed to the works of the ‘great masters’), the productions of small republican studios, especially those in the three Baltic States etc. Frequently, the most valued part of the post-World War II Soviet and East European cinema is the oeuvre of particular key directors and a body of work that was denied distribution, i.e. banned films. At the same time, the knowledge of a wider context of production against which to evaluate these masterpieces-by-consensus is still fragmentary and scarce.

Where else did film-makers in the Eastern Bloc look for guidance and inspiration, receiving, by and large, their technical base and ideological instructions from Moscow? Were Paris, Rome and/or Hollywood just a distant mirage behind the Iron Curtain? Or did cinema in the Eastern Bloc inevitably take the same paths of exploration? Some of these questions, asked by the organisers of the conference, are tackled in this volume by various authors from different perspectives which all tend to suggest that exchange between the socialist and capitalist hemispheres was more common than usually imagined.

The editors had the chance to include in the volume a number of essays on related topics in order to complement the papers presented at the conference, not all of which managed to make their way into this publication. One of them was the keynote address by Dina Iordanova, which nevertheless deserves to be briefly referred to here, because it raised several extremely relevant questions and pointed out various undiscovered or ‘underdeveloped’ research avenues in the field of East European film studies. Iordanova discussed a number of concerns, e.g. the issue of (supposedly non-existent) popular culture in the Eastern Bloc versus the story of banned films (and subsequent ‘censorship marketing’), the national versus

transnational angle of investigation etc., drawing attention to the way in which studies of East European cinema have frequently resulted in somewhat limited narratives. One of her central proposals was to replace the paradigm of national cinema, which sets serious constraints on research perspectives, with a broader transnational/regional framework by looking beyond the borders of isolated national cinemas (e.g. co-productions not only within the Eastern Bloc but also with Western capitalist countries, which ultimately undermines the suggested 'division' of the Cold War; the audiences targeted not only in the (multi-national) Soviet Union and Eastern Europe but also in brotherly countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia etc.; and the movement of cinematic personnel). Indeed, as the essays in this volume vividly demonstrate, the broader (ideological) circumstances and particular problems the film-makers had to face resulted, quite unsurprisingly, in works which share a good deal of similarities.

The following essays are divided into three thematic parts, which are often concerned with overlapping topics and therefore complement one another. The first section, SUBVERSION/OBEDIENCE, opens with Katarzyna Marciniak's essay. She examines the idea of 'lost cinema' through issues of censorship, both before and after the watershed of 1989, arguing that the socialist past is still very much present in the cultural consciousness of not only the Poles but also of the other East European/ex-Soviet nations. Banned socialist films—the traumatic and haunting 'socialist shivers and screams'—exposed various manifestations of socialist 'unpleasantries', whether military brutalities or personal horrors, whereas a surprising and less well-known post-socialist practice of shelving undesired cinematic works zeroed in on some popular pro-socialist productions, such as *A Tank Crew of Four and a Dog* (1966–1970), or *More Than Life at Stake* (1967–1968). Moreover, her fascinating analysis of Ryszard Bugajski's *Interrogation* (1982) demonstrates vividly the fact that socialism's oppressions were also fundamentally defined by patriarchal ideology. Censorship, obedience and subversion are also the central themes of Andreas Trossek's and Mari Laaniste's papers, which focus on an internationally celebrated, yet still relatively little-discussed phenomenon in European film studies, namely (Soviet) Estonian cartoon animation. By analysing the policies and procedures of Soviet film censorship and the subservient/subversive moves that directors such as Rein Raamat, Priit Pärn and Avo Paistik were forced to make, Andreas Trossek examines the wider imagological process by which Estonian drawn animation leaped from the marginal position of children's entertainment into the limelight of national 'high' culture in the 1980s. Mari Laaniste continues the topic of Soviet censorship with her analysis of the success story of, perhaps, the internationally most distinguished Estonian animator, Priit Pärn, by juxtaposing the off-screen myth(s) with the on-screen evidence. Concentrating on Pärn's thorny, yet ultimately quite successful, career in the world of Soviet animation, she investigates to what extent his earlier works, regarded in

hindsight as politically controversial, can be seen as intentionally erosive of the Soviet ideological tenets. Maruta Z. Vitols, focusing similarly on the oeuvre of a single film-maker, Juris Podnieks, examines the possibly subversive subtexts of his films from the pre-glasnost years, offering an equally intriguing approach to the matter of Soviet censorship. Likewise, Natalia Zlydneva talks about ideologically elusive and formally innovative cinematic practices in Soviet educational cinema, which provided film-makers with opportunities for experimentation unthinkable in 'regular' productions. Finally, Kristel Kotta's case study of an Estonian film project from the late 1950s, aborted in the scripting stage, offers insight into the occasionally rather ambivalent procedures of Soviet cinema censorship.

The next section, SPECTATORSHIP, NATION, GENRE, opens with Katie Trumpener's study of cinema in the post-war German Democratic Republic, a country which has remained somewhat peripheral to the narratives of cinema in the former Eastern Bloc. She argues that Stalinist media policies fundamentally remodelled the nature of cinematic experience. This new filmic culture, in both its socialist realist and occasional New Wave manifestations, was defined, among other ways, by the deliberate differentiation of the modes of film-making in East Germany from Western, particularly West German, production codes. Petra Hanáková's essay on Czechoslovakian mainstream cinema of the 'normalisation period' contends that the 'crazy comedies'—box-office hits at the time of their release and still popular today, yet often dismissed by critics as empty and embarrassing products of the socialist entertainment industry—are actually hybrid examples of certain stylistic and generic features deriving from the very sources of Czech culture. Employing a comparative, transnational frame of reference, and using the genre of the Western as a case in point, Anikó Imre discusses the differences between, and parallels with, the media ecologies of the socialist and capitalist worlds, by focusing on the production and consumption of children's media culture broadcast by television stations across the Eastern bloc. Bjorn Ingvaldstad's chapter on Lithuanian national cinema provides a poignant analysis of the changing, often quite paradoxical dynamics between the nation, the national audiences and the national cinema in the context of both the structuring absence of the nation-state during Soviet rule and the post-socialist years of re-gained state independence. The section concludes with two case studies: Lilla Tóke's paper concentrates on two Hungarian comedies, *The Corporal and Others* (1965) and *The Witness* (1968), as manifestations of Švejkism and as highly characteristic examples of the broader application of the specific survival strategies employed and determined by this famous Central European literary hero; Lauri Kärk ponders the significance and the generic nature of an Estonian cult film *The Last Relic* (1969), a blockbuster across the Soviet Union, which, at the same time, managed to communicate a strong sense of cultural subversion to its national audiences in Estonia.

The last section of this volume, SPATIAL POLITICS, focuses on those cinematic representations and practises of the Cold War era that used ideologically connotative settings and politicised (architectural) locations as tools of visual communication, ready to affect the contemporary viewer. First, Eva Närepea investigates spatial representations in Soviet Estonian feature films of the late 1940s and the 1950s, considering how the cinematic depictions of spaces, places and inhabitants resonated with ideological strategies of Soviet identity-building. Then Brinton Tench Coxe examines the portrayal of Moscow in Marlen Khutsiev's *Ilich's Gate* (1962/1988), a film ultimately released as *I am Twenty* in 1965, after significant changes made under direct orders by Nikita Khrushchev. The initial version—in dialogue with the French New Wave and Italian neorealism, as Coxe demonstrates—buttressed the idea of Moscow as a transformative, intimate space, rather than supporting the official narrative of socialist realist Moscow, a theatrical and triumphant metropolis. Next, Ewa Mazierska's discussion of the 'politics of space' in the films of such Polish post-war directors as Stanisław Bareja, Krzysztof Kieślowski and Marek Koterski opens up another fascinating perspective on spatial representations of the East European cinema: her essay deals with discourses that sometimes conveyed surprisingly open criticism of communism. The final chapter by Irina Novikova traces the general similarities and shared destinies of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian cinemas in the flux of the 20th century, using the regionalist concept of Baltic cinemas. Novikova elegantly summarises the historical developments these three countries went through, starting with the establishment of nation-states after World War I, which coincided with the individual births of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian cinemas, then losing their freedom to become a part of the Soviet film industry after World War II, and finally regaining independence again in the 1990s and simultaneously entering the new domain of cinematic spaces filled with remembrance and forgetting, the making and remaking of places past and present.

Editors
Tallinn, October 2008