

**Report on the International Conference**  
***Contact Zones: Transnational Encounters, Dialogues and Self-Representation in***  
***Contemporary Eastern European Literature, Cinema and Visual Cultures***  
**(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary, 28-30 September 2017)**

Bence Kránicz and Emanuel Modoc

[kranicz.bence@gmail.com](mailto:kranicz.bence@gmail.com)

[ermodoc@gmail.com](mailto:ermodoc@gmail.com)

The study of transnational cultures has been on a rising tide in the field of academic research since its proliferation in the nineties. While transnational communities and diasporic cultures are far from being a new sociological phenomenon, the rise of transnationalism today is influenced by what Steven Vertovec described as “the scale of intensity and simultaneity of current long distance, cross-border activities” (Vertovec 1999, 448). Moreover, the recent technological developments in the field of communication (telecommunications, global travel, Internet) further stimulate contemporary transnational communities. Aspects such as border-crossing, bricolage, cultural syncretism, hybridity or spatial displacements need not necessarily involve the creation of radical new identities that are in a critical position towards the colonial discourse, such as in the case of postcolonialism. That is why transnationalism is concerned with a wider range of cultural dimensions that span from social morphology and new iterations in reconstructing place and locality to the ability to create new types of consciousness that envelop multiple identifications with more than one nation.

This was the crux of all subjects discussed during the conference organised by the Contact Zones research group as part of their ongoing research project *Space-ing Otherness: Cultural Images of Space, Contact Zones in Contemporary Hungarian and Romanian Film and Literature*. The conference was hosted by Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, between 28 and 30 September 2017, in collaboration with the Romanian Cultural Institute in Budapest, the Ekphrasis Research Centre for Trans-disciplinary Studies and Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, both from Cluj-Napoca. While most topics were general, ranging from our shared Communist heritage, which can be traced in post-Communist literature, or topographies of “eastness” in transnational narratives to issues of authorship, industry and festivals in Romanian and Hungarian cinemas, some other recurrent features also surfaced, such as the

transnational encounters between Romanian and Hungarian cinemas and literatures, shared diasporic communities and, most important of all, a comparison and differentiation between Romanian and Hungarian cultures, be it cinema, literature or visual cultures.

Ágnes Pethő's (Sapientia University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) keynote lecture that opened the conference, titled *Changing Strategies of In-Betweenness. Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European Cinema*, as well as Doru Pop's presentation (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) comparing contemporary trends in contemporary Hungarian films focusing on cultural and aesthetic similarities, were eloquent demonstrations in this respect. While the former reassessed the implications of using the theoretical instruments of intermediality in scholarly research applied to Eastern European and Russian cinemas, the latter analysed the cultural strategies employed in Romanian and Hungarian cinemas with regards to the development of the film consumption, reception, and the overall progress of their respective film industries. Similarly to Doru Pop's endeavour, Hajnal Király's (ELTE) presentation on Romanian and Hungarian cinemas' preference for family (melo)dramas constituted a very good example of how two cultures that stylistically stem from different aesthetic traditions can thematically be analysed in their similarities. Zsolt Győri from the University of Debrecen also approached new Hungarian and Romanian films through their genre connections. He argued that the gangster characters of recent Hungarian cinema are not only underdogs but cheap parodies of the Western gangster, as if the postsocialist society itself could not produce its own heavy-weight criminals. On the other hand, new Romanian films tend to embed the gangster figures into social dramas, provoking questions of masculinity using the stylistic manners of the Romanian New Wave. Balázs Varga of ELTE and Elzbieta Durys of the University of Lodz also aimed to highlight the national, or specifically Eastern European elements in the transnational genre crime fiction.

With regard to literary studies, Mihaela Ursa-Pop's (Babeş-Bolyai University) keynote lecture approached the transnational features of György Dragomán and Radu Pavel Gheo's novels. She elegantly demonstrated her thesis of a shared community and, more than that, a shared peripherality between the two authors, that make them belong to a culture that is rather transnational/translational than simply national. Other lectures that dealt with Hungarian and/or Romanian literature covered topics such as the historical avant-garde of the two countries (by

Emanuel Modoc of Babeş-Bolyai University), the dialogue on solidarity between state and literature in Hungary (Teri Szűcs of ELTE used Szilárd Borbély's *To the Body – A Testhez*), or historical contact zones of World War I as seen through contemporary novels (by Júlia Vallasek of Babeş-Bolyai University). Andreea Coroian-Goldiş and Alex Goldiş, both from BBU, described the 'collective novel' and the 'polyphonic novel' in Romanian literature, respectively, while less known and canonical writers of the two countries were also subjects of different papers (Tímea Jabloczay of King Sigismund University, Budapest, talked about the works of Erzsébet Szénesi, Stefan Firica of the University of Bucharest introduced Aglaja Veterányi, Edit Zsadányi of ELTE focused on László Krasznahorkai's *Sátántangó* from the aspect of the postcolonial subaltern).

Apart from using the more frequently applied frameworks of film and literature studies, the interdisciplinary approach of the conference inspired some lecturers to base their arguments on different theoretical grounds, or work with different works of art in their analyses. The intermedia artist Szabolcs KissPál's keynote lecture gave example to both: his project *From Fake Mountains to Faith* not only documents the fictionalisation of historical memory in the aftermath of the Trianon peace treaty after World War I, but also effectively builds a pseudo-museum of nationalism, where historical facts and cultural imagination interweave (KissPál's work was analysed by Mónika Dánél of ELTE in a previous panel). The representation of national identity through art and architecture in the former Yugoslavia is the core of Jasmina Cibic's work, according to Flóra Gadó from ELTE, while Diana Melnic and Vlad Melnic of Babeş-Bolyai University focused on Eastern European identity in video games. As seen in these lectures, the examinations of geographical, social and theoretical contact zones were also expanded to analyses of different media and different modes of representation and interpretation. Melinda Blos-Jáni's (Sapientia University) lectured about animating oral histories through the medium of photography in Eastern European documentaries, while Beja Margitházi's (ELTE) talk on different modes of using the archive in documentaries and Bence Kránicz's (ELTE) paper on the differences between interpretations of the human and nonhuman in Hungarian experimental cinema and genre literature were also examples of this multi-layered approach. The concept of the "Other Europe" was debated in Orsolya Rákai's (Hungarian

Academy of Sciences) presentation about traces of climate theory in discussions about Central Europe, or Anna Bátori's (University of Glasgow) analysis of city-texts in the Balkan.

Other panels were organised around the topics of historical and personal trauma, with special focus on Holocaust narratives (Miklós Sággy of the University of Szeged detailed contemporary Hungarian approaches, Lóránt Stóhr of the University of Theatre and Film Art in Budapest talked about Holocaust documentaries), and female trauma (Judit Pieldner of Sapientia University analysed Polish and Czech films, while Katalin Sándor of BBU talked about Jasmila Zbanic's oeuvre). As arguably the most debated social issue of contemporary Europe, migration was examined in several papers (notably by György Kalmár of the University of Debrecen in connection with the masculine identity, by Horea Poenar of BBU who talked about figures on the threshold, and by Michael Gott of the University of Cincinnati, who was focusing on New Czech Cinema). The later works of New Romanian Cinema also inspired presentations (by Teréz Vincze and László Strausz of ELTE, Zsolt Gyenge of Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest), and a separate panel focused on the positions of Eastern European cinema in the global film industry and festival circuit (with papers by Andrea Virginás of Sapientia University, Natália Fábics of MOME and Ileana Nicoleta Sălcudean of BBU). Scholars such as Balázs Zágony of BBU, Alina Gabriela Mihalache of UB and Ferenc Boné of Sapientia University detailed modern historical events of Eastern Europe, while others chose to talk about lesser-known films of Eastern European cinema, such as *Aglaja* (Éva Szabó of the University of Debrecen), *A Village Romance* (Fanni Feldman of UD), *Lokis* (Jason Hartford of the University of Chester), or contemporary Romanian and Irish short films (Cristina Diamant of BBU).

The conference also hosted a number of events that complemented the academic lectures, in the form of roundtable discussions. The first roundtable discussion, *Intersections of Space, Cultures, and Accented Literatures*, chaired by Mihaela Ursa-Pop, hosted writers Andrea Tompa and Radu Pavel Gheo and problematised issues on narrative displacements, intersections of space and culture and notoriety through translation. The second roundtable discussion, *Regional and Transnational Film*, chaired by Doru Pop and Balázs Varga, hosted Oana Giurgiu and Ágnes Kocsis in a dialogue about the importance of co-productions and their role in the transition of regional cinema towards transnational cooperations. Other topics of the

discussion included their shared experiences as female directors, inquiring to what degree is there a cinema for men or for women only, as well as the critical reception received for approaching subjects such as Oana Giurgiu's documentary on Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janko's Dada movement and their Jewish identity. This roundtable discussion was followed by a screening of Oana Giurgiu's *Aliyah Dada* at the Urania National Cinema and a short Q&A session with the director.

Book and journal launches rounded up the conference. Beside the new issues of *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Film and Media Studies*, *Ekphrasis*, *Metropolis* and the organising group's own *Contact Zones*, two recently published books were also presented. Both László Strausz's (ELTE) take on New Romanian Cinema (*Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017) and Doru Pop's novel *Szocialista Szappanopera* [*Socialist Soap Opera*, Lektor Publishing House, 2017] clearly demonstrate that the goal of the conference – to encourage dialogue between nations and perspectives of Eastern Europe – is, in many ways, already reached. The dialogue remains open in the follow-up proceedings of the conference, in articles to be published in the journals of the organisers, as well as in a volume containing a selection of contributions of both the conference participants and of the members of the organiser research group.

Link to the official website of the conference:

<http://contactzones.elte.hu/archives/category/events>

### **Reference**

Vertovec, Steven. 1999. Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 447–462.