

## **Masculinity Reloaded. Subverting Discourses of Authority in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema**

**Hajnal Király**  
**hajnal.kiraly@gmail.com**

The '89 régime changes in Eastern Europe have triggered a period of transition marked, among others, by the violence of Balkanic wars, the miners' uprisings in Romania, and a chronic societal instability reflected in institutional crisis and changing social and sexual roles. The repeated waves of migration, culminating after some of the countries of the region joined the EU, have deeply affected family structures, redrawing an essentially patriarchal and hierarchical order, as well as the concepts of 'home' and belonging. As Herbert Kitschelt points out, after the fall of communism, these societies turned back to a political and administrative tradition pre-existent to the instauration of the communist régime. This generated/produced a functioning civil society only in the cases of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the former East Germany, while in all other cases, including the non-Baltic members of the former Soviet Union, it triggered a regression to pre-bureaucratic structures based on a hierarchical, patriarchal authority and nepotism. (Kitschelt 1993) The miscommunication between institutions and the generalized issue of (European) forms that these countries cannot fill with their own content, is a recurrent topic of contemporary Romanian, Russian and Bulgarian films, while Hungarian cinema is mostly characterised by representations of the existential crisis of the individual, often not anchored in a specific time-space frame, but timeless, allegorical, even mythical or biblical.

As the articles of this issue testify, these cinemas posit themselves very self-consciously through their relationship with Western (American, West European) stereotypical discourses of the region that they only apparently serve. But the refusal to deliver an image of a barbaric and chaotic East just to please the "Western gaze" is not the only subversive act these films present. They show a clear resistance to the "authority" of mainstream cinematic practices and paradigms in representing deep social and individual crisis on a discursive level. Thus parody, intermediality, stylistic excess, minimalism, fragmentation and a visual creation of a specific cultural atmosphere all become a set of tools susceptible to reveal a deep crisis of the discourse of authority and masculinity. As such, from a post-colonial theoretical point of view, representation in these films appears as a political act, an act of power of the colonized,

turning back the (Western, male) gaze. In this respect, these articles fit perfectly in one of the main research lines of our project, concerned with the figurations of otherness. Although the project focuses mainly on contemporary Hungarian and Romanian cinema, with this issue we decided to examine the topic of a falling political, social and discursive authority in a larger, post-communist context.

Mónika Dánél, in her article on a cinematic adaptation of a series of short stories by Hungarian writer Ádám Bodor, entitled *The Possibilities of Making Friends (A barátkozás lehetőségei, Gábor Ferenczi, 2007)*, analyses the possibilities of intimacy in a complex grid of observers and the observed, modelling surveillance under communist dictatorship. In her effort to describe the concept of atmosphere, she focuses on cultural interpretations of landscapes, that, together with typical interiors, in this particular film contribute to a "pervading mood of a place or a place or situation, its aura or flair." (Böhme 1993, 119) The close analysis of a scene emblematic for the possibility (of the representation) of intimacy between two men under the circumstances of authority considers the underlying atmosphere of landscape and specific situation as decisive in the transformation of a hierarchical structure into friendship. As she argues, the atmospheric depiction of short encounters in the film also manage to convey this intimacy to their (Western as well as young) readers and spectators (who weren't socialized in communism, but can be sensitive to atmosphere).

The post-communist survival of an empty authority is often thematised in the films of the New Romanian Cinema, but lately it has also appeared on the metanarrative levels of signification. The article of Zsolt Gyenge focuses on the tendencies of semantic and conceptual experimentation in contemporary Romanian cinema, most prominently represented by the films of Corneliu Porumboiu. As he argues, in *Police, Adjective (Polițist, adjectiv, 2009)* the protagonist's resistance to empty authority can be detected in his struggle to translate the visual experience of the observation to the verbal system of the institution. Relying on a solid background of theories of visual and linguistic representation (from Saussure, Foucault, J.W.T. Mitchell and Gadamer), Gyenge manages to prove that Porumboiu's films are evoking the spirit of Magritte's paintings by modelling the incompatibility of the linguistic and the visual. The boundaries of representation correspond here to the boundaries between a mainstream discursive (institutional, political, cinematic) practice and individual experimentation that characterises this generation of filmmakers refusing to accept a father figure or any authority.

The same subversive attitude towards war narratives and stereotypes can be detected in contemporary Serbian war films, analysed in Vivien Magyar's essay. As she argues, films

like *The Knife* (Nož, 1998), *Vukovar* (Vukovar, jedna priča, 1994), *The Tour* (Turneja, 2008) and *The Enemy* (Neprijatelj, 2012) are mirroring stereotypes and subvert them in order to weaken the postcolonial discourse regularly applied to Serbian film. As subversion strongly relies on ambiguity, it is often the visual style of a film that carries the subversive undertone. The self-imposed stylistic otherness revolts against discursive tyranny establishing a hierarchical relationship between East and West, Balkans and Europe, civilized and barbaric. But, as Magyar points out, beyond self-exoticisation, the reiteration of Western stereotypes of the aggressive, uncivilized, barbaric Balkan man and the exaggerated depiction of feelings and passions, there are also identifiable moments of visual "slippage" or excess (painterly or theatrical references) in all these films, which stop and divert the narrative towards cultural, male and female narratives of the colonized. . . .

Bence Kránicz in his essay deals with a similar phenomenon of subversion targeting the American superhero narrative and genre in contemporary Hungarian and Russian films. As he points out, this can be identified in the act of intermedial and transnational adaptation and implies a postcolonial and postsocialist interpretation of national versions of these narratives, their connections with local mass culture and folklore. Kránicz addresses the subject of intermediality and adaptation through the representation of the protagonist, focusing on the connections and continuity between national mass culture, folklore and contemporary national genre films. The superheroes are either popcultural agents of American military, cultural and ideological dominance over the rest of the world (in films like the Russian *Black Lightning* (*Chernaya molniya*, 2009, Dmitry Kiselev – Aleksandr Voitinsky) or national, ethnicized heroes as parodistic characters enhanced by a comic book style (the case of Hungarian *Taxidermia*, 2006 and *Sha-Man vs. Ikarus* [*Táltosember Vs. Ikarus*, György Pálfi, 2002]). In both cases the superhero character, genre and style serve as a means to define a burdened relationship to the Soviet/communist past, thus opening these films to cultural, political interpretations.

All four articles re-contextualize myths, narratives and socio-political models of masculinity in order to show how war, surveillance, the colonizing gaze, struggle for institutional power, social hierarchy and the appearance of national superheroes become symptomatic of a declining patriarchal order affirming itself either through violence or verbal/linguistic dominance. In all films analysed the subversive attitude against this also appears on a discursive level of the representation, adding a new, conceptual approach to the research of contemporary East European cinemas.

This article was supported by the Hungarian Research Fund OTKA/NKFI, project no. 112700.

## **References**

Böhme, Gernot. 1993. Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics. *Thesis Eleven*, No. 36, 113 – 126.

Kitschelt, Herbert. 2003. Postcommunist Regime Diversity. In *Capitalism and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Grzegorz Ekiert and Stephen E. Hanson, 49–86. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.