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Karl, Lars and Pavel Skopal (eds.): *Cinema in Service of the State: Perspectives on Film Culture in the GDR and Czechoslovakia, 1945-1960*

New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015, ISBN 978-1-78533-738-3, 395 pp.

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Keywords

Czechoslovakia; German Democratic Republic; communism; politics; film industry; genre; cinema.

This collection of articles addresses two rather under-represented areas in the study of Eastern European cinema. First, the period between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the 1960s is one that is usually neglected in favour of later burgeoning new waves, and, second, the cinemas of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR) and Czechoslovakia (Československá Republika) are seldom discussed together. While only two of the articles in this volume are explicitly comparative, the book aims to reveal “structural similarities” (Karl, Skopal 2015: 2) between these two Soviet Bloc film industries. Chapters focus on the two major film studios in each country: Barrandov in Prague and DEFA (Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft) in Berlin; on documentary and short film production; on fairy tale and children’s cinema; the film festivals in Leipzig and Karlovy Vary; and on issues of distribution and reception.

The GDR and Czechoslovakia formed part of the “Northern Triangle” of countries, alongside Poland, seen as a bulwark at the frontier of the West, and it is a pity that this book does not include Polish film culture in its comparative study. The editors themselves point out in their introduction that Czechoslovaks had stronger links with Poland due to their resentment of Germany’s occupation during the war and their continuing scepticism over the division between “good” socialist Germans and “bad” capitalist, Western ones (ibid.: 3). The link between the GDR and Czechoslovakia is understood through the role of the USSR and its programme of “Sovietization” and the implementation of “self-Sovietization” (ibid.: 4), the process by which these countries formed their own understanding of Soviet values. The essays collected here do not engage with specific film aesthetics as such, but rather concentrate on “institutions, political discourses, film industry strategies or cinematic reception” (ibid.: 8) in order to “illustrate how the regimes used cinema culture for self-presentation in two directions: externally to the West, and internally to their own citizens” (ibid.: 7).

David Bathrick begins the book with a history of film culture in the GDR and shows how DEFA aimed to create a cinema that would be a reaction to the Nazi film industry and that would produce, in the words of Paul Wendel in 1945, “films with humanist,

antifascist and democratic content” (ibid.: 15). The GDR film industry quickly became integrated into the political structure of the communist party and by the late 1940s, film initiatives came from the Central Committee of the GDR itself, rather than from film directors or producers (ibid.: 25). Bathrick offers a detailed history of the development of DEFA and its move towards orthodox socialist realism but also sketches out an alternative “deviant” tendency in the co-called Berlin Films of the late 1950s which were more youth-oriented.

Jiří Knapík covers the same period of Czechoslovak cinema and outlines the way in which a policy of the “democratisation of culture” (ibid.: 40) after 1945 quickly came under the purview of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ). The film industry itself was the first institution to be nationalised after the end of the war, fulfilling a tendency, Knapík argues, towards nationalisation that had begun in cinematic circles in the 1930s before the Nazi occupation. Following the complete takeover of power by the KSČ in 1948, there was a purge of film personnel and strict systems of bureaucratic approval were instituted to ensure the implementation of ideological directives in cinematic productions. During the early 1950s, Western films were shown less and less, with an emphasis on screening Soviet cinema and “educating the people” (ibid.: 53). After the deaths of Stalin and of the head of the KSČ, Klement Gottwald, in 1953, came a period of liberalisation and the eventual diminishment of socialist realism as the prevailing cultural aesthetic. By the late 1950s, the film industry was relatively fractured and films were marked by a greater diversity, and this eventually led to another crackdown and purge, before the thaw of the 1960s. Knapík’s history is detailed and specific with particularly useful overviews of the development and importance of film festivals in Czechoslovakia during this period.

The second section of the book concentrates on “Production and Co-Production” and begins with Petr Szczepanik’s overview of the way in which film production teams functioned in Czechoslovakia from 1945 to 1962. Szczepanik identifies the importance of the idiosyncratic institution of “dramaturgy” to both Czechoslovak and GDR film production, where, in effect, the “dramaturge” acted as a producer for a unit of film writers, makers and technicians which was akin to the structure of producer-led teams in Hollywood during the classical studio period. This dramaturgical system provided a continuity between pre- and post-war film production. Szczepanik stresses that these dramaturgical units had considerable autonomy and should be understood as a corrective to the idea of complete central control, but, at the same time, warns against romanticising the units as heroic pockets of resistance during the 1950s (ibid.: 72-74). Szczepanik’s exemplary historical work here is extended in his recently published *Továrna Barrandov: Svět filmařů a politická moc 1945–1970 / The Barrandov Factory: The Filmmakers’ World and Political Power 1945-1970* (2016).

Pavel Skopal continues the analysis of the structure of the Czechoslovak film industry with a consideration of the rather awkward co-productions between Soviet Bloc countries which were largely unsuccessfully co-ordinated by the USSR. Mariana Ivanova’s characterisation of DEFA co-productions with West Germany and other Soviet countries provides the sense of a similarly ineffective process in the GDR. While the goals of “Sovietization” were to encourage such collaborations, in practice such co-productions in the 1950s were chaotic and short-lived. Thomas Beutelschmidt gives a rather more positive narrative of the co-operation between DEFA and East

German television (Deutscher Fernsehfunk) which seemed beneficial for the quality and quantity of both television and feature film production. However, tensions remained since the two organisations “pursued different aims and strategies” and were considered as a “partnership in competition” (ibid.: 137).

Part Three considers nonfictional cinema, beginning with Václav Šmidrkal’s analysis of the films made by Czechoslovak Army Film (Československý armádní film, ČAF) and the GDR’s Army Film Studio (Armeefilmstudio, AFS). These studios produced training films, documentaries, news and even a small number of feature films, perhaps most notably the Czechoslovak New Wave science fiction post-apocalypse feature, *Konec srpna v hotelu Ozon / Late August at the Hotel Ozone* (Jan Schmidt, 1966). Šmidrkal’s is one of two articles here that performs an explicitly comparative analysis of the two countries’ film productions, although he does pay far less attention to the GDR films. Lucie Česalková gives an introduction to the history of Krátký film (Short Film), a studio that produced around 1500 films between 1945 and 1961 and is still extant today (ibid.: 169). These films are in a broad range of genres and Česalková concentrates mainly on the studio’s advertising films.

Part Five looks at children’s cinema, and Christin Niemeyer gives an overview of the fairy tale films in the GDR and their status as part of the “national heritage” (ibid.: 191) with specific interpretations along Marxist-Leninist lines. Czechoslovak children’s cinema was rather more comprehensively developed after the end of the war and production centred around a number of film studios: Krátký film, Bratři v triku (Brothers in T-Shirts) and studios in Zlín and Brno. These tended to create short animated films, but once production was centralised in Barrandov by the end of the 1950s, feature films, particularly fairy tales set in the medieval period, became increasingly popular.

In the sixth section on film festivals, Andreas Kötzing provides a history of the International Leipzig Festival for Documentary and Animated Film. Kötzing gives an interesting account of the way in which the Leipzig festival aimed to give as positive as possible a view of the GDR. Jindřiška Bláhová’s account of the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival between 1946 and 1956, the only film festival in the Soviet Bloc during this period, shows the way in which the festival moved quickly from being geared towards national culture, to being commandeered to the Soviet Union’s “transnational and supranational interests” (ibid.: 245). Bláhová gives an engaging portrait of the morale boosting status of the festival as nationally specific and its change in response to the increased importance given to Soviet cinema.

Moving on to distribution and reception, Kyrill Khunakhovich and Pavel Skopal compare distribution and exhibition in the GDR and Czechoslovakia by considering exhibition practices in Leipzig and Brno. They argue that “both state regimes utilized cinema culture as a tool for integrating the population into the new socialist societies and promoting the citizens’ identification with the values of the society” (ibid.: 276). Western films were discouraged and Soviet films accorded a quota, even though there were often not enough of these films to fulfil that quota. Lars Karl considers the way in which Soviet war films were screened and received in the GDR (“Not well,” might be the summary). Fernando Ramos Arena’s discussion of the small Leipzig University Film Club gives a fascinating insight into the culture of film clubs.

Overall, this volume gathers together some historically valuable research that hints at interesting comparisons between cinema culture and industry in Czechoslovakia and

the GDR, but by concentrating on only these two countries, the comparison seems rather tenuous. While each article is valuable in its own right, there is a tantalising glimpse of a more coherent overview of film culture in the Soviet Bloc in general. *Cinema in Service of the State* is a valuable step towards a broader understanding of cinema in the Soviet Bloc.

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Bio

Dr David Sorfa is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Edinburgh and editor-in-chief of the journal *Film-Philosophy*. He has written on Michael Haneke, Jan Švankmajer and Czech cinema as well as a broad range of other film subjects. He has particular interests in film-philosophy, phenomenology, the work of Jacques Derrida and film adaptation. <http://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/david-sorfa>

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