

Gendered Artistic Positions and Social Voices: Politics, Cinema and the Visual Arts in State-Socialist and Post-Socialist Hungary.  
By Beata Hock. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013. 284 pp.

Although the title aptly describes the content of the book, it does not represent a conventional historical account of the changes surrounding the social and cultural opportunities of women who have entered the field of art in Hungary since 1945. It is clear already from the outset that the book has a manifest feminist agenda: it seeks to explore possible ways of undoing conventional patriarchal hierarchies that seem to prevail in all areas of modern Western society and are particularly visible in the field of arts. However, Hock also wants to challenge the dominant master narratives of feminist thinking created in the West that focus on individual self-care through equal opportunities in the workplace and the family.

Hock's approach has been shaped by somewhat different concerns. The book has emerged as a PhD dissertation at the Central European University in Budapest, which exposes its students to a radically destabilizing effect of a multinational and interdisciplinary milieu. As Beata Hock stresses, such an environment encouraged her to deconstruct dominant cultural positions, including Eurocentrism, as well as to seek approaches beyond the disciplinary boundaries of conventional feminist studies. The book argues for a "situated feminism," which should take the actual social and historical experiences of women and men (the constructions of gender) of the societies under scrutiny into greater consideration and, thus, should be able to actualize otherwise abstract tenets of feminist politics.

Such concerns raise interesting and challenging methodological problems. It seems clear that East-Central Europe, the region with a postwar experience of state socialism, differs significantly from the historical trajectories of liberal capitalism in Western Europe and North America. Although the state in these societies doubtlessly limited personal autonomy as well as the ways of expressing subjectivities and repressed ideas of citizenship based on individual rights over one's own body, it did induce certain programs of emancipation, which transformed the lives of women. Such transformations, however, were divergent from mainstream Western development. The benefits of the communist welfare states, particularly the broad opportunities of permanent salaried jobs and relatively long periods of paid maternity leave as well as the possibilities of legal

abortion in many countries of Eastern Europe, made the experiences of socialist women very different than those of their Western counterparts.

If the master narrative of Western feminism is challenged by divergent historical conditions of Eastern European societies, how is it possible to deconstruct it? Hock has similar doubts with the application of post-colonial critique, the major global challenger of Western emancipation discourses. Postcolonial criticism, argues Hock, which claims that Western liberal individualist emancipation makes global normative demands and, hence, relates the historical experiences of non-European societies as backward and marginal to the European one, is equally misleading in the context of Eastern Europe. Although Eastern Europe is also marginalized by such normative discourses, its societies have long been inherent parts of the same Eurocentric world, where criticism, that which would radically oppose such culture, makes little sense.

Hock's book instead suggests a way to apply the categories of mainstream feminist critique, which reflect the general cultural and political expectations of women all over Europe, together with a careful localization of such concepts into the conditions and legacies that state socialist systems created in Eastern Europe. The book chooses art, film, photography and contemporary new media, since besides illustrating political and social opportunities of women for entering public spheres, it shows in sharp contrasts the strategies of developing subjectivities, which have long been in the focus of feminist studies in order to analyze the dismantling of patriarchal orders.

Whereas the first three chapters in Part I of the book deal with clarifying the theoretical and methodological implications of such concerns, Parts II, III and IV examine the political and social background of producing art by women and the actual work of women visual artists since 1945. Part II concerns the aspect of the political, which Hock understands in this book as programs of élites aimed at social transformation and the ways they communicated such goals towards target groups in society. Clearly, postwar élites put great stress on equal rights, which was visibly reflected by the legislation of both the democratic and the post-1949 communist governments. The enfranchisement in 1945, the new labour and higher education law in 1946 and the family law in 1953 dismantled the legally sanctioned privileges men had previously enjoyed in Hungarian society. Nonetheless, as Hock highlights, in the context of state socialism, which in general denied political rights, these legal frames meant little in practice. As a partial consequence, the ways in which public spheres were generated after 1989

likewise turned the superior access of men to symbolic and social capital during socialism into visible overrepresentation in public politics.

Hock observes similar tendencies in education as well. She claims that while state socialism provided broad opportunities for women to enter higher education and other forms of training, a clear gender division prevailed, which also continued to exist after 1989. Certain professions have been feminized, particularly teaching and many subjects in the humanities, whereas sciences and economic-management positions are still dominated by men. Women have remained overrepresented in undergraduate studies and lower- or mid-level management positions. Hock is not, however, unaware of the complexities of such political programs. The book reminds the reader that the major intention of communist emancipation was not the democratic participation of women, but rather the creation of a reliable and predictable workforce. Besides, a visible anti-feminist political culture, which denied civic and individual initiatives and endorsed only centralized state interventions, remained in force. Likely more importantly, the mentalities and attitudes have not changed significantly since 1945 that have largely confined the role of women inside conventional frameworks. It is also noteworthy that new social movements like feminism or queer movements appeared or started to make a broader impact in Hungary only after 1989.

Political programs of state socialism have a paradoxical legacy. Although the communist governments never really fulfilled the promises they made about emancipation, they did generate progressive, new individual types of female subjectivities. In the post-1989 decades, the expectations of those who saw the opportunities to finally realize such progressive goals often collided harshly with the ideas of those who identified these progressive visions as “communist” and offered instead within the post-communist context new types of conventional conservative gender roles.

Parts III and IV discuss the role of women and opportunities in cinema and visual arts in Hungary. As Part III highlights, women directors made their entry in the Hungarian film industry around the mid-1960s. Although since then their numbers have constantly increased, this fact conceals important structural inequalities, as Hock argues. There was only one female director, Márta Mészáros, who was able to build up an extensive individual oeuvre consisting of 21 films up to 2005, greatly superior in number to other women directors with their 5-8 works up to that year. Women directors of the late 1960s, and particularly Mészáros, explored the opportunities of constructing women’s subjectivities

independently of men. Their protagonists were ready to refuse unwanted attention and were developing lives in the absence of men.

Such concerns were also developed by other films of the period. The 1950s recognized the transformations which led to new female types independent of men. However, in general, Hungarian cinema in the 1950s, as Hock reminds the audience, represented such women as agents of the official policy of emancipation. They usually appeared as members of a category and were linked to the state as a consequence. Besides, romantic films reproduced conventional patriarchal meanings and depicted the ideal type of woman—beautiful but prudish and thus being able to tame her sexual appeal. In the 1960s, such openly sexist positions were rare, Beata Hock points out. Films of this period concentrated rather on the problems of living without men. The 1970s and 1980s were much more concerned with troubles of private and everyday life. Films recognized the loss of values and orientations, which was reflected by their choice of women protagonists. Directors were attracted to non-conventional female actors and characters, thus illustrating the demise of certainty surrounding gender categories and the trust in conventional gender types. Nonetheless, the use of women to highlight broader social problems meant also a feminization of criticism, as Hock's book claims. By linking critical voices to women in films, socio-political criticism was made private and, therefore, appeared potentially less dangerous. After 1989, however, even this particularly disguised feminist criticism disappeared or decreased to great extent. The changing structures of film production and of financing benefited men as well as topics of conventional patriarchal culture.

Lastly, Part IV turns to the analysis of gendered positions in visual arts in Hungary since 1945. Hock draws similar conclusion here as in the previous chapter. She claims that there were a few individual women who could pursue a career in art from the 1960s in Hungary, particularly Dóra Maurer and Katalin Ladik. However, as the book clarifies, their presence was far from a genuine breakthrough of women's special perspectives and role in contemporary art. Probably because of the fragmented nature of female art in late socialism, the attitude of artist towards feminism was rather special. Maurer mediated between international and domestic art since she was living partly in Vienna during that period and also transmitted contemporary feminist ideas to Hungarian fellow artists. Ladik transformed the female body in her performances from the object of gaze to the subject of speaking. Despite their visible feminist implications, these artists were nevertheless reluctant to openly engage themselves with such socio-political movements that they could not identify as art.

Due to the relative absence of feminism as a social movement and civic cultural criticism in late socialism, 1989 signified an opportunity for many young women artists to pursue more manifest programmatic feminist art. The artists of the younger generation—Hock highlights the work of Ágnes Szépfalvi (1965), Emese Benczúr (1969), Eszter Radák (1971) and Kriszta Nagy (1972)—consciously used art to express specific female experiences and also to construct visible and often provocative female subjectivities in public. However, as the book observes, they conspicuously refuse to engage themselves with broader social issues like poverty, exploitation or unequal opportunities beyond the implications these factors have on individual female experience.

Beata Hock's book is an original combination of the adaptation of Western social science and the analysis of Eastern European experiences. Due to her sensitivity to the connection of development of state socialism with their legacies after 1989, however, she avoids the trap of constructing Eastern Europe as a fundamental other of Western modernity. This book rather makes the complexities of answers to a pressing question comprehensible. Reading this book, it becomes more conceivable that the answers that élites and societies in various regions of Europe give to the challenges of the emergence of women's voices, female subjectivities and the dismantling of patriarchal hierarchies run rather convoluted roads: sometimes parallel and converging, sometime diverging and separate.

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