
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
INTERDISCIPLINARY POLITICAL AND CULTURAL JOURNAL, Vol. 16, No. 1/2014
125–128, DOI: 10.2478/ipcj-2014-0009

BOOK REVIEWS

***Magic Realist Cinema in East Central Europe*, by Aga Skrodzka, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, pp. 190.**

The 'others' are not merely the markers of exclusion or marginality, but also the sites of powerful and alternative subject-positions. Thus, the bodies of others become simultaneously disposable commodities and also decisive agents for political and ethical transformation.

(Braidotti 44)

Binaries such as centre / margin, same / other, culture / nature, feminine / masculine, sedentary / nomadic, have been transformed by the impact of globalized postmodernity. As Rosi Braidotti asserts, those in former peripheries can now voice their concerns and highlight the discontents of the old anthropocentric assumptions that have dominated the European cultural paradigm. Those previously marginalized in the dominant political imagination are now important producers in the European cultural sphere and have activated flows of socio-cultural interactions celebrating differences and the uncanny and, more importantly, revolting against the logic of Sameness. In acting against the mainstream, those from the peripheries often produce unique discourses that go beyond established divisions and schemas, thereby marking their own individuality and highlighting alternative subject positions.

It appears that this voice of revolt is a major inspiration for Aga Skrodzka's study of films from the post-communism block. Initially, one thing has to be noted; among numerous publications devoted to East Central European cinema, published in Poland and abroad, Skrodzka's book stands out as the most comprehensive study of liminal cinematic productions in the

[125]

mode of magic realist aesthetics. The publication aims to cover the most important films of this type from Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Macedonia, Slovakia and Hungary against the background of the socio-cultural processes of post-1989 Europe. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that this monograph, which predominantly belongs to the field of film studies, contains a close and thorough investigation of socio-cultural mechanisms in the context of post-1989 transitions. As the author emphasizes, the transformation of the political and economic order enabled filmmakers to redefine the Western cultural paradigm and eventually transgress the meaning of a singular European identity.

To exemplify these changes, Skrodzka explores the peripheral spaces where the processes of capitalist modernization encounter the forgotten, the excluded and the abject dimension of this part of continent. Her in-depth analysis of cinematic productions shows that East Central European artists, while facing post-communist transformations, have been recycling both old regional and new post-industrial formations to grasp the fluidity of contemporary identity. As indicated in the second chapter "They Live on Mars: The Magic of the Periphery," the filmmakers, Emir Kusturica and Jan Jakub Kolski, employ magical realism by choice to cherish cultural "otherness" and mark their alternative artistic vision of the distinctive European identity. In this regard, Skrodzka's discussion of Kusturica's *Underground* and Kolski's *History of Cinema in Popielawy* or *Johnnie the Aquarius* accentuates the subversive potential of provincial places, among others. In fact, she notes that having assumed grotesque and highly ironic attitudes, the directors distance themselves from norms, and thus become intentionally "peripheral to be able to speak of this very peripherality" (Skrodzka 55).

While tracing magic realist cinema, Skrodzka skillfully arranges the analytical material, which is accompanied by theoretical background, to define the distinguishing characteristics of this aesthetic. However, the author does not allow theory to play the dominant role in the analysis. She tailors her discussion on magic realism to explore the visual materials and symbolic motifs in the output of artistically varied film directors. Hence it comes as no surprise that the titles of all the chapters in the book refer to aesthetic elements of the films discussed. In this manner, it is easier for viewers to notice the interdependence between the categories of magical realism's symbolic representations.

The first chapter, which is devoted to the theoretical aspects and the evolution of magic realism sensibility in literary and cultural studies, is constructed through the narrative about the geopolitical situation of East Central Europe and its troubled history. Skrodzka asserts that there is no denying the fact that these aspects are inextricably linked and therefore cannot be analyzed separately. The whole chapter is enriched with images from the selected films, aptly illustrating the vernacular magic realism and “the current tensions that exist at the heart of the globalizing locality” (44).

The third chapter “Wooden Monsters, Dead Bodies and Things” traces the affinity between magic realism and miserabilist aesthetics. As the author points out, the strategies of “the aesthetics of excessive deficiency” are often applied by the directors to oppose the official discourse and undermine the importance of developing capitalism. From this perspective, Skrodzka discusses films about excluded and marginalized subjects who grapple with the aggressive strategies of the western consumer market that does everything to unify socio-cultural tastes. In this light, the aesthetics of miserabilism is a tool that initiates a critical cinematic language on technological advancement and consumer mentality.

A discussion of the similarities between the concept of carnival, children’s imagination, and magic realist aesthetics constitute the core of chapter 4. As the author points out, directors apply the child’s magical worldview to blur the line between fantasy and reality, appropriating the traditional discourse about the Other. This, combined with intertextual dialogue and carnivalesque humour, renegotiates the significance of canonical texts.

The book is enriched with a nostalgic epilogue that clarifies Skrodzka’s fascination with the multidimensional encounters in East Central Europe. The author feels especially attuned to the times of her childhood spent in Communist Poland by expressing her affection for pagan rituals from the past, her first encounter with Wojciech Jerzy Has’s films and visuals and with Bruno Schulz’s literary and visual works. The aforementioned choice of memories and cultural texts clearly implicates the imaginative, carnivalesque, hybridic socio-cultural background of Europe’s margins. The publication highlights, therefore, that the vernacular imagery melts with transnational and globalization processes. Moreover, Skrodzka’s sensitivity to the diverse cinematic images produced by the transnational filmmakers and

her ability to decode the symbolic dimensions of the artistic language shows that, though currently living and working abroad, she partly belongs to this part of the world, where “modernism and postmodernism have developed unique local formations, quite different from Western models” (Skrodzka 168).

Through its form and content, the book will be of interest to anyone who wants to delve into the complex cultural dimensions of the majority of East Central European filmmakers who formed an original magic realist discourse to revolt against the strictly unified processes of globalization. There is no denying the fact that Skrodzka’s interdisciplinary insight into the cinematic productions crosses cultural borders and social divisions, offering new ideas on the dynamics of magic realist aesthetics. This book indicates that peripheral directors have become decisive agents in contemporary European cinematography.

Works Cited

- Braidotti, Rosi. *Transpositions. On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.
- Skrodzka, Aga. *Magic Realist Cinema in East Central Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Justyna Stępień