

Experimental Cinemas in State Socialist Eastern Europe. Edited by Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022. 334 pp.

Two things stood out for me in the process of working on this review. First, I was pleased to note that the secondary literature on Eastern European experimental cinema was not limited to what I was finding in the book. Interest in the topic can be traced back to a large exhibition and film series at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. which was held in 2013–2014 and was curated by the two editors, Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi, who at the time were junior entrants to the field of film studies. There had been a seminar, and some of the scholarship it generated had appeared in a special issue of *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Also, the list of researchers actively working on experimental cinema today includes an array of names beyond the authors who belong to this circle. It includes Pavle Levi (*Cinema by Other Means*, Oxford UP, 2012), Alice Lovejoy (*Army Film and the Avant Garde: Cinema and Experiment in the Czechoslovak Military*, Indiana UP, 2014), Lukas Brasiskis, Eva Năripea, Mina Radovic, and others. In short, three decades after the scholarship on Eastern European film started taking shape, there is a new generation of scholars whose research tackles new ground, offering comprehensiveness and depth.

Second, alongside my reading, I was able to watch several of the films discussed in the book. Again, times have changed dramatically in this respect. When I started researching Eastern European film back in the 1990s, we were limited to what we could acquire through personal networks on VHS. Today, most of the films that the authors write about are available on DVD, can be found in online vaults, or are accessible on YouTube. It is possible not only to read about them but also to see them. And I was delighted to do so, filling gaps in my knowledge of Józef Robakowski, Vukica Đilas, and *kinema-ikon*. Previously, we only had access to scholarship on Czech artist and filmmaker Jan

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1 This issue includes also the lands of the former Soviet Union and opens with Gurshtein and Simonyi's introduction, "Experimenta cinema in State Socialist Eastern Europe." A further five articles include: Mark Allen Svede's "Selfie, sex tape, "snuff" film: Andris Grinberg's *Passporters*," (on Soviet Latvia), Cristian Nae's "Reality Unbound: The Politics of Fragmentation in the Experimental Productions of *kinema-ikon*," (on the Timisoara group), Maria Vinogradova's "Scientists, Punks, Engineers and Gurus: Soviet Experimental Film Culture in the 1960s-1990s," (on Soviet Russia), Aida Vidan's "Irresistible Irreverence: Dusan Makavejev's Amateur Films and the Yugoslav Cine-club Scene," and Sonia Simonyi "Second Looks: Archival Aesthetics and Historical Representation in American Postcard (1975)," p. 68–82 (on Hungary's Gábor Bódy). All in *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, Vol. 7, Issue 1–3, November 2016.

Svankmajer and Polish filmmaker, director, screenwriter, and multimedia artist Zbig Rybczyński. They were also the only figures in this field of the arts on whom any scholarship had been published in English.<sup>2</sup>

Turning to the book, I would say two things about the context. One thing to keep in mind is that, when it comes to experimental film, the region of state socialist Eastern Europe offers an uneven and disparate picture which varies from country to country. What we find in Czechoslovakia, with filmmakers whose work can easily be qualified as experimental (I am thinking of figures such as Jan Němec, Juraj Jakubisko, Ester Krumbachová, etc.), is profoundly different from what one finds in Albania, for example. The other thing is that, unlike the officially sanctioned cinematic output which was a subject of intense exchanges between the countries under state socialist regimes, experimental film had only a low-key presence, and for the most part there were no meaningful creative exchanges among the cineastes working in the different countries. This lack of interaction among them means there were very few cases of mutual influence. It is thus no surprise that most of the influences that have been identified in secondary literature are from well-known figures of Western film and not from colleagues nearby.

If we keep these specifics in mind, the volume's effort to cover as many of the countries in the region as possible is particularly impressive. It does this mainly through case studies. I admire this approach, as it is both politically correct and equitable. Clearly, the context of filmmaking in some countries has been more conducive to experimental cinema, and Poland,<sup>3</sup> Hungary, and Yugoslavia undoubtedly have the most to show for it. Czechoslovakia was so advanced that much of what would qualify as experimental was, in fact, part of the mainstream, at least before 1968.

Against this backdrop, it was nice to see a chapter related to Bulgaria, one of the less active or less well-known countries in terms of film experimentation. The text resurrects the legacy of Russe-based filmmaker Vladimir Iliev, who passed away while the book was in preparation for publication. The notes written by scholar Katherina Lambrinova offer a nice complement to his memoir. In this instance, however, the desire to be comprehensive may have prompted the

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2 I ought to mention Peter Hames' pioneering collection, *Dark Alchemy: The Films of Jan Svankmajer* (Praeger, 1995), which was a leading light at the time.

3 I cannot help thinking of some scenes in Krzysztof Kieślowski's feature *Camera Buff* (1979) which includes semi-documentary moments, revealing that even the national television in Poland at the time had departments charged with encouraging amateur and experimental filmmaking. A situation that is light years away from other places in the Eastern bloc.

editors to be a bit loose with their criteria or perhaps to confuse their concepts. While the work of Iliev and his collaborators is of an amateur nature, it would be too much of a stretch to qualify it as “experimental.”

Structurally, the collection is divided into four parts. It follows an unconventional approach, with a focus which ranges from individual directors to more general topics. The first part contains essays dedicated to high profile figures of the experimental scene, such as Hungarian Gábor Bódy (by Gábor Gelencsér), Croat/Yugoslav Tomislav Gotovac (by Greg de Cuir Jr.), and the Polish Workshop of the Film Form, represented by Pawel Kwiek and Józef Robakowski (by Łukasz Mojsak). These three case studies may well have seemed more substantial to the editors than the essays that explore context, and this consideration may lie behind the decision to place them first. I do not think this worked well, however, as this creates from the outset the feeling of a piecemeal approach where interesting works are discussed but not adequately contextualized.

I understand the difficulties behind this decision, however, and I sympathize. Due to the lack of interaction among the filmmakers, most of the secondary literature is limited to the case study format. It takes courage to make connections and venture generalizations, and I can see how scholars in the earlier stages of their careers are hesitant to do this, as they may fall victim to rebuke from some critical peer reviewer.

This is perhaps why the three subsequent parts continue, safely, in the same vein. The texts in the second section examine the production and distribution conditions. The essays deal with Bulgaria, Poland, and Yugoslavia, and they each explore a different corner of the experimental cinema map. Masha Shpolberg’s contribution centers on the activities of the Łódź film school and specifically on the work of Wojciech Wiszniewski (1946–1981) and his Educational Film Studio. Petra Belc’s essay casts the spotlight on the forgotten female filmmakers Vukica Đilas<sup>4</sup> and Tatjana Ivančić. All three essays in this section highlight, in part, the conditions of production and circulation of such material, and yet they are also case studies of sorts, not hugely different in structure and approach from what we saw in the first section.

Part three aims to integrate the contexts, theories, and reception. I particularly liked Aleksandar Bošković’s text on an early experimental strip produced by

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4 In my opinion, it would have been better to use the Westernised and phonetically true spelling of ‘Djilas’. This is how her name is referenced at the IMDB. The Serbian language is now mainly using Cyrillic alphabet, and the rules of transliteration would have this appear as Djilas.

director Slobodan Šijan, who, even if operating more into the mainstream, was and remains a key inspiration and driving force behind experimental film in the lands of former Yugoslavia. The essay on the Timisoara-based group *kinema icon* by Ileana L. Selejan introduces this little-known but still active group, which is now gaining traction. There is also an essay on East German experimental film by Sean Howes, though at this point I question the wisdom of continuing to include East Germany, as so much of it has been appropriated by Germanists and so much has been written about it anyhow. The volume would have gained more from an essay on the status of experimental filmmaking in the Ukraine than from yet another piece on East Germany.

The last section, “Intersection of the Arts,” brings together several disparate but highly satisfactory essays that finally broaden the horizon. Though they too take the form of the case study, they look at matters transnationally. There are texts on the Wrocław Art Scene (Marika Kuzmic), the Béla Balázs studio (Ksenya Gurshtein), and Czech experimentalist Čaroděj (Tomáš Glanc). Of these, I found the text by Sonja Simonyi on the 1979 exhibition of state socialist experimental film in Amsterdam the most interesting. A project pulled up by Franck Gribbling, an Indonesian-born American experimental filmmaker based in Amsterdam,<sup>5</sup> is linked to similar efforts by some of the big European film festivals and often involving struggles that were just short of heroic to consolidate and present work from behind the Iron Curtain in a shared and convivial setting.

In conclusion, this is a highly relevant book that broadens and deepens the secondary literature on East European film. It also shifts the generational landscape by introducing a new generation of scholars. I am truly pleased to see it all grow and evolve into a new community, one that is not only more populous but also has a significantly wider geographical spread. Given the fact that many of the experimental films discussed can now be found on the internet, educators could consider including this material in their syllabi and could plan screenings accompanied by one of the essays in the book. This would be a fitting strategy for those teaching in area studies programs, as well as cultural history, film, or languages.

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5 His work is catalogued at the Amsterdam’s Eye Filmmuseum today.