

Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi (eds.): *Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022, ISBN: 9789048532964, 344 p.

Kornelia Boczkowska

Keywords

experimental film, Eastern European cinema, state socialism, communism, Cold War

Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe, edited by Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi, makes an invaluable and much needed contribution to the history of avant-garde film behind the Iron Curtain, shifting the focus to the experimental film scene in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, often overlooked in other publications. The collection fills the gap in contemporary film criticism and avant-garde film studies through highlighting locally specific, national, and transnational histories and cultures of the postwar experimental film production in Eastern European socialist countries from the 1950s until the late 1980s, usually tied to particular state institutions and dependent on their support. While examining wider bodies of work and practices of Eastern European avant-garde cinema, the volume discusses a variety of aesthetic approaches, methodological concerns, and production contexts with the specific focus on the long 1960s and 1970s, which are considered the most prolific and creative period in experimental filmmaking during the Cold War resulting from greater political freedom in the post-Stalinist era.

Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe consists of thirteen chapters written by scholars, curators, interpreters, and other experts in film and media studies, art history, cultural history, and area studies. The chapters are divided into four larger sections centred around the key figures, production, support, and distribution, viewing contexts, theories, and reception as well as the intersection of the arts. The first section of the volume showcases the work of the most influential artists, filmmakers, and curators who were central for the emergence, dissemination, and circulation of the experimental film culture. In the first chapter, Gábor Gelencsér discusses Gábor Bódy's pioneering work in the post-war Hungarian avant-garde film scene and his active involvement in the running of the Balázs Béla Studio (BBS), reflecting on how his feature films, *American Postcard*, *Narcissus and Psyche*, and *The Dog's Night Song*, informed by László Moholy-Nagy's film practice and the

neo-avant-garde aesthetics, blurred the boundary between fiction, documentary, and experimental filmmaking. In the second chapter, Greg de Cuir, Jr. examines Tomislav Gotovac's *Belgrade Trilogy* (1964), produced in the Academic Kino Club in Belgrade, as representative of Yugoslavian-Croatian proto-structural cinema and the city symphony film, situating it at the intersection of avant-garde, documentary, and amateur filmmaking. In the last chapter, Łukasz Mojsak explores Józef Robakowski's and Paweł Kwiek's closely intertwined career paths and their involvement in the Workshop of the Film Form (WFF), which emerged from Łódź Film School, and the broader "soc-art" movement of the era. In his essay, Mojsak focuses on the artists' critique of state-controlled mainstream film culture and a more traditional approach to the question of authorship, highlighting their contribution to the development of the structural film movement, intermedia practices, and video art of the 1980s.

The second section of the collection offers three engaging studies on the state-funded institutions, organisations, and other administrative structures involved in the production, distribution, and exhibition of experimental films, particularly amateur film clubs and smaller film studios. In chapter four, Vladimir Iliev and Katerina Lambrinova present a historical overview of Bulgarian amateur cinema from the establishment of the Society of Bulgarian Amateur Filmmakers in 1924 until the end of the Cold War, addressing such issues as the foundation of the National Center for Amateur Artists and the Kyupsfilm creative laboratory, which provided opportunities for makers to promote their work at national and international film festivals. In the following chapter, Masha Shpolberg examines the legacy of Wojciech Wiszniewski who laid the foundations for the creative documentary movement in Poland and produced a vast body of work with the Educational Film Studio (WFO), which operated near Łódź Film School and was seemingly peripheral for the larger documentary film production. She specifically emphasises the WFO's unprecedented role in shaping the Polish documentary style of the 1970s, often associated with a second wave of documentary filmmakers, which borrowed from fiction film and the interwar avant-garde cinema, and Wiszniewski's evolving unorthodox filmmaking style, which marked the departure from cinema vérité and the introduction of a more structured, theatrical, and experimental approach to filmmaking. In chapter six, Petra Belc discusses the work Vukica Đilas and Tatjana Ivančić from the perspective of Antifilm and the fixation film, the two theoretical concepts central for Yugoslavian avant-garde and amateur cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, proposing an alternative understanding of women's filmmaking in the context socialist (anti-)feminism. While bringing attention to Đilas' Home Movies and Ivančić's diary films, often underrepresented in film criticism and omitted in the (mostly male) Yugoslavian experimental film canon, the essay sheds new light on the largely marginalised work of women amateur experimentalists, stressing the tensions between a new generation of women intellectuals' "neofeminism," the government's inconsistent emancipatory politics, and the position of women in Yugoslavian patriarchal society (157).

The third section of the volume includes three case studies concerned with film distribution,

consumption, and reception. In the seventh chapter, Aleksandar Bošković examines the production, distribution, and do-it-yourself aesthetics of Slobodan Šijan's fanzine *Film Leaflet* (1976-1979), which played a somewhat peripheral role in Yugoslavian experimental and amateur film culture of the 1970s despite its significant potential to affect a traditional understanding of the language of the film medium. Framing *Film Leaflet* as a paracinematic form, Bošković reflects on the formation and reproduction of Yugoslavian consumer culture, addressing the practices of cinema-going, film programming at the Yugoslav Cinematheque, Western commodity fetishism, the movie star phenomenon, and Americanophilia. In the following chapter, Ileana L. Selejan outlines the history and activities of the Romanian experimental arts collective kinema ikon (ki), which operated between 1970 and 1989 within the confines of the communist regime. With three fascinating studies of the group's early experiments in formal abstraction, production of documentary films for propagandistic purposes, and engagement with alternative art-making practices of the era, Selejan demonstrates that while kinema ikon successfully navigated "between regime restrictions and experimentation" (217), their interdisciplinary approach to art, media and technology, informed by the aesthetics of Fluxus and Dada, was a prime example of the transnational East-West circulation of culture. In chapter nine, Seth Howes discusses wider East German experimental film practices, which received no studio support, through a close analysis of Jürgen Böttcher's *Transformations* (1981), and the work of Tohm di Roes, A.G. Geige, and Matthias BAADER Holst. Howes convincingly argues that as 16 mm and 35 mm stock was only reserved for professional productions, many GDR makers relied on 8 mm, which had technical limitations and often lacked an audio track, and instead blended images, sound, noise, and music in new and intriguing ways, turning their films into live intermedial performances.

The final section of the collection contains four chapters, which raise the questions of the intermediality and interdisciplinarity of the experimental film practice in the late socialist period, examining the ways it intersected with the arts. In the opening chapter, Marika Kuźmicz brings attention to the Wrocław neo-avant-garde art scene, which emerged as the second (after Łódź) centre of experimental film in Poland in the 1970s. She specifically focuses on several projects made by artists who ran three distinctive groups, Permafo (1970-1981), Galeria Sztuki Aktualnej (Gallery of Contemporary Art, 1971-1975), and Galeria Sztuki Najnowszej (Gallery of Modern Art, 1975-1980), and whose practice did not recognize the division between professional and amateur filmmaking, seeking to bridge the gap between everyday life experience, conceptual art, mainstream cinema, and non-narrative film. In chapter eleven, Ksenya Gurshtein complements Gábor Gelencsér's discussion of the Balázs Béla Studio, exploring the BBS's unique status as a self-governed studio officially supported by the state, which provided non-professional filmmakers with access to tools and resources to produce some innovative and often subversive works. In her essay, Gurshtein also looks into Miklós Erdély's five cognitive films made at the BBS between 1974 and 1985 and his teaching and pedagogical initiatives at the GANZ-MÁVAG factory, Víziváros Cellar

Club, and INDIGO group. In the following chapter, Sonja Simonyi investigates the role of Work and Words, held between September, 20 and October 1, 1979 in Amsterdam, as a transnational film event and curatorial endeavour, which showcased and consolidated the dynamic art scenes of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Addressing Work and Words as a key site of cultural exchange between Western and Central Europe, which included experimental film screenings, performances, video installations, lectures, and photo exhibits, Simonyi demonstrates that it was specifically the film segment of the project that “provided an important connection between East and West during a period marked by fundamental differences, but not by outright isolation” (314). The final chapter, which also concludes the volume, is the only essay dedicated to the Czechoslovak experimental filmmaking practice from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, which was very limited as a result of increased censorship and ideological surveillance after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. In his study of the work of Čaroděj, the most influential Czechoslovak underground filmmaker, Tomáš Glanc notes that in Czechoslovakia there was no grey zone of smaller film studios that supported experimental filmmakers, making Čaroděj’s secluded community part of a “second public sphere,” which established their own production companies, festivals, and awards, but were entirely independent of state institutions, structures, and funding (325).

Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe provides a remarkably comprehensive, in-depth overview of the experimental film practice in the communist states from a broader and all-encompassing perspective. While each chapter uncovers selected episodes from the national and regional film histories through the complexities of the political and economic systems, which often suppressed experimentation, and the particularities of film production, institutional settings, and social realities relevant for each country, it also maps independent, amateur, and underground filmmaking in a comparative transnational framework, searching for links between Eastern European and world cinema. Posing larger historical, methodological, and theoretical questions about the past, present and future of avant-garde cinemas of the (former) Socialist Bloc, the collection is exceptional in its diverse and thorough approach to the study of spaces, communities, social networks, and particular sites of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of experimental film in this part of Europe. Although the volume pays less attention to some areas of research, such as women’s, feminist, or animated film, it is still an extremely valuable addition to the English-language scholarship on experimental filmmaking of the socialist period due to its focus on a segment of artistic production within Eastern European (film) culture, which remains comparatively understudied in the field. Drawing parallels between experimental film, avant-garde art making and curatorial practices behind the Iron Curtain, *Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe* offers a number of fascinating case studies and is a must read for scholars, artists, curators, archivists, film buffs, and anyone interested in (Eastern) European screen cultures and experimental filmmaking.

Kornelia Boczkowska

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan
kornelia@amu.edu.pl

Bio

Kornelia Boczkowska is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of English at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan. She has received several research grants and is the author of two books and over forty other publications on independent, experimental and documentary film. Her most recent papers have appeared in *Feminist Media Studies*, *Mobilities*, *Studies in Documentary Film* and other peer-reviewed journals. Her new book, *Lost Highways, Embodied Travels: The Road Movie in American Experimental Film and Video* (Brill, 2023), offers the first book-length study of over eighty unique and often obscure films and videos, which explore the relationship between the road movie and experimental filmmaking.

Suggested Citation

Boczkowska, Kornelia. 2024. Review: "Ksenya Gurshtein and Sonja Simonyi (eds.): *Experimental Cinemas in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*". *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* 18. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17892/app.2024.00018.364>.

URL: <http://www.apparatusjournal.net/>