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# Czech and German cinema

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Sune Beckmann Pedersen, *Reel Socialism: Making Sense of History in Czech and German Cinema since 1989* (Lund: Media-Tryck 2015). 328 s.

With the exception of the Romanian 'New Wave', the cinemas of the former Eastern bloc have been critically marginalised since the fall of the Soviet 'Empire' and, while the academic world has paid greater attention, comparative studies remain rare. Approaches also tend to be linked to the cultural or linguistic affiliations of writers with an emphasis on critically acclaimed works.

Sune Beckmann Pedersen's study is particularly welcome because it offers a comparative analysis of two key national cinemas that are not normally seen as culturally linked – the Czech Republic and Germany. He has the advantage of having been able to examine original sources, such as press, publicity and reception, in both languages, giving his analysis a breadth that is frequently absent, and avoiding the conventional emphasis on a purely German or Slavic subject matter. In considering creative interpretations of the communist past, he foregrounds the political realities of the present, highlighting the restructuring and reinterpretation of experience and the ways in which. History is always a 'history of the present'.

The dissertation is entitled *Reel Socialism: Making Sense of History in Czech and German cinema since 1989*. The word "reel" in this sense is a pun on the film reel or spool and what was once described as "actually existing socialism", i.e. the political and social realities of life under the Czech and German communist parties. It's divided into five major sections, including a substantial theoretical introduction and four sections devoted to respectively: the development of the film industries, representations of the collapse of communism in 1989 in both countries, i.e. the Velvet Revolution or the

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November events in the case of Czechoslovakia and *Die Wende* in the case of the German Democratic Republic, the subject of nostalgia towards the past, and the representation of communist crimes.

His stated aim is to study the "history culture" of the two countries, i.e. Czech and German perspectives on the former communist regimes, through an examination of cinematic feature films. Beckmann Pedersen not only examines their subject matter but also pays attention to issues of genre, visual style, and other formal elements. At the same time, their broader significance is established through a consideration of audience response, circulation through the DVD and online markets, and the responses of Czech and German film critics and reviewers. Thus the thesis examines the wider significance of films for the history culture through an examination of inter-textual relations. Although there is reference to some Slovak films and directors in the immediate "post-revolutionary" period, the study specifically excludes consideration of the Slovak response.

The lengthy introduction on theory and methodology considers, first of all, the nature of history culture together with its significance for a sense of community and issues of remembering and forgetting, the importance of experience and its relation to expectation. His discussion references "gestic" and "genealogical" approaches, with a particular emphasis on Koselleck's concepts of the "space of experience", i.e. the remembered past, and "the horizon of expectations". He notes that "cultural artefacts are at the same time evidence of a historical consciousness and the medium through which a given understanding of the past can be disseminated". The complexity of the issue is demonstrated when he quotes David Bordwell's observation that film represents a "plurality of understanding" and that most commercial films affect a "strategic ambiguity" in their efforts to attract a wider audience.

Part One comprises a survey of the development of the nationalised industries in Czechoslovakia and the GDR and the ways in which they adapted or were adapted to a new system following the collapse of communism in 1989. The basic structure here and throughout is to discuss the two countries separately and in succession, making cross-references where appropriate. Interestingly, he quotes Charles Tilly's observation that Czechoslovakia and the GDR were the only states that experienced "revolutionary situations" and "revolutionary outcomes".

The first major analytical section deals with the films that emerged concurrently with the changes or immediately afterward. The second deals with the subject of "nostalgia", defined as a way of "looking back at events", how history is remembered, and in what ways films use the past as an arena for entertainment. Here he examines, for instance, the multi-faceted response to the revival of the communist era – and pro-regime – crime series *Tricet*

*případů majora Zemana* (*The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman*, 1974–79) on Czech television and the relationship of various German films to the phenomenon of "Ostalgie". He considers the differing perspectives offered by "Eastern" and "Western" directors, the controversies surrounding Leander Hausmann's *Sonnenallee* (*Sun Alley*, 1999), and demonstrates how a film like *Good Bye, Lenin* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) could be incorporated into "Ostalgie" in Germany and used as anti-communist propaganda in the Czech Republic.

The final analysis dealing with the representation of communist crimes draws attention to the fact that, in Germany, the principle of "legal continuity" was adopted. In contrast, the Czech Republic declared the communist regime to have been criminal and illegal. While he focuses on a range of Czech films, mostly by directors without direct experience of the reality, the German section focuses on only one – *Das Leben des Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006). Here he provides a model presentation of inter-textual relations in a film that had begun to form part of the historical debate even before its premiere. Addressing the absence of any mainstream film dealing with the history of dissidence in Czechoslovakia, he discusses two films that suggest that the dissidents "were no saints" – *Zemský ráj to napohled* (*An Earthly Paradise for the Eyes*, Irena Pavlásková, 2009) and *Kawasakiho růže* (*Kawasaki's Rose*, Jan Hřebejk, 2009). Both films suggest a rather different approach to dissident "heroes" than that adopted in Poland.

The conclusion summarises his analyses and the questions presented: Did the revolutions of 1989 represent a break or continuity – How to come to terms with a problematic past. In the case of the Czech Republic, he identifies a rapid redrawing of the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" combined with a disillusioned view of the Velvet Revolution. In Germany, he charts a development from "unification comedies" to the use of the Wall as a plot device by the 2000s. Here the emphasis is much more on differences in mentality between East and West and the subject of belonging. Whereas there are few positive perspectives on the communist past in the case of the Czech Republic, the German perspective remains more ambiguous. Germany is also identified as the prime producer of films about "reel Socialism" for mainstream cinemas and the international market – reaching out for a place in national cultures beyond the home borders through films like *Goodbye Berlin* and *Das Leben des Anderen*. This is to a lesser extent true of *Hořící keř* (*Burning Bush*, Agnieszka Holland, 2013) and *Pouta* (*Walking Too Fast*, Radim Špaček, 2009) in the case of the Czech Republic, partly because of finance from HBO.

The great strength of the dissertation derives from its original juxtaposi-

tion of the GDR and the Czech Republic. As indicated earlier, there has been little or no comparative study in this area – approaches to the German situation do not often overflow into Slavic comparisons and "East European" studies usually consider the GDR as a special case. Beckmann Pedersen deliberately situates his analysis within that of area studies, i.e. the study of contiguous geographical areas. He draws attention to the similarities between the two countries in terms of GNP, industrial development, an urban workforce, infant mortality and other socio-economic criteria. From these perspectives, he suggests, Czechoslovakia and the GDR were the most similar of the Eastern bloc countries.

While a Czech/Polish comparison would probably have led to more predictable outcomes, the Czech/German comparison is instructive on a number of levels, notably the fact that one country reunited and the other (Czechoslovakia) divided, and this has been reflected in the arena of culture. The study also gains from being conducted by someone who is at the same time outside of the two cultures but familiar with both languages. This has allowed an unusual access to research materials based on contemporary criticism, thus providing an important resource on the reception of the films in their home countries and at the time of release and a firm basis for the examination of inter-textual relations. The study also indicates a ready familiarity with the major English language political studies of Central Europe post 1989.

Besides crossing the borders of German and Slavic Studies, the dissertation also crosses those of Historical Studies and Film Studies. The lengthy and systematic account of historical methodologies was particularly useful but, I felt, associated the study more closely to the first discipline. There was a promise of "neo-formalist" analysis of films in the introduction but this was not attempted – in fact, given the large numbers of films considered in the text, this would have been an unachievable ambition.

Considering the numbers of films and resources under examination, the dissertation structure is logical and sensible, examining the two countries in parallel and making cross-references where necessary. It is also logical to consider the ways in which the two cinemas have reflected the events of 1989, with significant differences between Czech and German perspectives, attitudes based on nostalgia, and attitudes to communist crimes. However, save for the Czech "army comedies", *Tankový prapor* (*The Tank Battalion*, Vit Olmer, 1991) and *Černí baroni* (*The Black Barons*, Zdenek Sirový, 1992), there is little or no consideration of representations of communism prior to 1968, a significant absence in most of the films produced since 1989.

Given the study's considerable range, it is always possible to point to additional titles that might have been included or to the balance of discussion.

However, one area that I felt needed further justification was its emphasis on the feature film, which provides only one point of access to the history culture. The wider media culture – press, television, and documentary film – not only interacts with feature films but also shares the framework within which they operate. Documentary films frequently deal with the social, political, and historical issues missing or passed over in feature films while at the same time providing part of the wider context for debate. While this would have extended the study to unmanageable proportions, I felt that there should have been some consideration of interactions in the areas of drama documentary and documentary even if feature films are likely to have proved the more influential.<sup>1</sup>

Having said that, the discussion of inter-textual and pluri-medial networks as applied to the feature film is one of the strengths of the dissertation. While one might disagree with points of emphasis or film selection, the choice of relatively little shown or thematically "less successful" films needs more justification, this is a ground breaking study not only for its discussion of Czech and German film in the post-communist era but for its integration of the study of history and film, and the study of the history film as a guide to the history of the present. Finally, it should be commended for its accessible and lucid English style, which is refreshingly free of jargon.

1. A more detailed discussion of Agnieszka Holland's Czech-Polish *Hořici keř*, a study of the immolation of Jan Palach and its aftermath might have been relevant – as would Robert Sedláček's made-for-TV series *České století* (*The Czech Century*, 2013–2014), which dramatises key episodes in contemporary Czech history. Both, of course, were quite closely based on historical research – Sedláček worked directly with historian Pavel Kosatík as screenwriter – and also, in Holland's case, personal observation, since she had been a student at the Prague Film School during the Prague Spring. The first is, of course, mentioned, and it is likely that both fell outside the timeframe for the research.