

Editorial

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Identity and history in documentary films from Eastern Europe.

This issue of 'Panoptikum' is devoted to documentary films from the countries of Eastern Europe. This notion is partly geographical, partly political, partly cultural, bearing a resemblance to the Kunderian reflections on Central Europe (those parts of Europe that find themselves in the geopolitical East but want to be part of the geopolitical West). What distinguishes these countries, compared to Western Europe, is the fluidity of their borders, their transience and provisionality. When we look at the constantly changing political maps of Europe in the 20th and 21st centuries, the difference is striking. The established countries of Western Europe – England, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal and even Germany – occupy a relatively fixed place on these maps. In contrast, the map of the eastern part of the European continent is subject to constant change and fluctuation. Countries appear and disappear, move territorially, pass from hand to hand, from one sphere of influence to another. These transformations of political geography inevitably connect with questions of identity. Each change of statehood means entering a new education system, a different vision of history, the imposition of a different language, and sometimes also of a different religion or ideology, not infrequently repression on the one hand and the struggle to save one's own identity on the other. All this must inevitably have had an impact on the inhabitants' states of mind and soul, on their sense of identity and on their perception of the world, leading to the crystallization of the sense of one's own separateness, peculiarity or even uniqueness in some people (messianic or besieged fortress syndromes), and uncertainty, imbalance and chaos in others.

The aim of this issue of 'Panoptikum' is to describe how these historical circumstances have been reflected in documentary film. In particular, we are in-

terested in matters of identity – how documentary film has shown the identity paradoxes of the inhabitants of provisional countries and lands, how it has registered the struggle to maintain their own identity, or even participated in this struggle, or – on the contrary – how it has shown the development of the art of mimicry, the blurring of a clear identity, the ease of change, adapting to new circumstances, adopting new patterns and attitudes. Identity is also inevitably linked to the past, to historical memory. What vision of the past emerges from old documentaries? What vision of history is built up by newer ones, especially those leaning towards the past?

This issue of ‘Panoptikum’ is about documentary cinema, but its stakes are much higher. Documentary film, that sensitive seismograph that records the oscillations and dislocations within human communities, allows us to learn about the history of a region and, through this, to better understand the contemporary meanderings of its policies and behaviour. This is not necessarily a case of films that openly set themselves the task of describing identity but more a case of those in which these issues appear, as it were, involuntarily, while recording the everyday life of now and then in Eastern Europe.

We have chosen to arrange the articles chronologically, starting with those dealing with the earliest times, and continuing through to the most recent times. This arrangement allows us to map both change and continuity. The issue thus opens with an article by Maša Guštin, dedicated to the pioneers of documentary filmmaking from the Balkan area, Yanaki and Milton Manaki, known as the Manaki Brothers. The author describes the life and work of the brothers, casting this against the backdrop of the very complicated and dynamic political situation of the early 20th century in this region. She also depicts the intricate path that the documentaries they made took to reach a contemporary audience. And finally, there is a very interesting presentation of contemporary disputes about the Manaki brothers, where they are considered pioneers of national cinematography by North Macedonian, Yugoslavian, Greek, Romanian, Turkish and Albanian researchers.

Volha Dashuk’s article entitled ‘The land of the sad songs: Belarusian national identity through Polish documentary films in the 1930s’ recounts a peculiar situation, although quite typical for Eastern Europe. In the 1930s, part of the territory of present-day Belarus belonged to Poland. Two Polish filmmakers, Maksymilian Emmer and Jerzy Maliniak, shot footage there which was later used in several documentaries. These are the only documentaries from that area from that time, and as such they not only provide an essential insight into people’s lives of that time, but also contribute to shaping the media image of the

area. This image, however, was shaped by Poles, i.e. representatives of another nation, and is not free of colonial accents. Hence the apparent paradox: films which contribute immensely to Bielarussian identity and tradition were made by others, people who did not belong to this tradition.

The above articles deal with more distant history. For the others, the main point of reference is the late 1980s and early 1990s, when most of the countries discussed in this section appeared on the map, either as a result of breaking out of the Soviet yoke (Lithuania, Latvia), the break-up of the former Yugoslavia (Slovenia) or the division of Czechoslovakia (Slovakia). For all these countries, the beginning of the 1990s marked a radical political, economic, and cultural change. Politically, they left the Soviet bloc and joined the bloc of Western states, in time joining its most important alliances – the European Union and NATO. At the same time, this meant building institutions appropriate to the free world: free media, an independent judiciary, a multi-party system. Economically, they moved from a centrally controlled communist economy to a free market. All this meant a cultural shock, an opening up to completely new customs, value systems, lifestyles. This process of transformation, painful for many, is still ongoing, generating many tensions.

A text by Zane Balčus provides an interesting perspective on these issues. It tells the story of three films by a single director, Ivars Seleckis, made over a period of more than twenty years, between 1988 and 2013, on a certain street located in a suburb of the country's capital, Riga. Balcus sets this text against the broad backdrop of the genre of longitudinal documentaries, in which filmmakers return to the same places, to the same people, over many years. At the same time, Balcus describes the three films in terms of micro-histories, where the meticulously documented fates of individuals are thrown into the background of fundamental historical changes.

Ewa Mazierska's article is devoted to films showing the shock of economic transformation and its impact on people's lives in the 1990s and early 2000s in Poland. For many people, the transition from state socialism to the version of capitalism known as neoliberalism, meant unemployment, a sharp deterioration in living standards, a lack of prospects and the need to emigrate. This was accompanied by propaganda emphasising that everyone is the blacksmith of his or her own fate, so if someone is unlucky, it is their own fault. Mazierska's article, in which one can clearly sense an aversion to neo-liberalism and sympathy for the poor, discusses a range of documentaries that showed different variants of this situation, one slightly different for large industrial workers, another for agricultural workers, another for internal and external emigrants.

Katarína Mišíková also focuses on the period after 1989, but looks at it from a different perspective. For she focuses on how Slovak documentaries from this period reflect and at the same time shape collective identities, charting the tension between dictatorship and democracy, liberalism and conservatism, the East and the West, the local and the global, resistance and resignation, ideals and reality. Mišíková borrows four types of narrative structures (romance, satire, tragedy, comedy) from Hayden White, and through their prism analyses four documentaries that she considers representative of the ways in which Slovak collective identity is shaped.

Andrej Šprah's article is devoted to Slovenian independent documentary filmmaking after 1990. In doing so, he focuses on the engaged documentary, i.e. the one that aims to effect social change, to emancipate the exploited and the underprivileged and to critique and reject universal injustices. Šprah focuses in particular on the activities of a guerilla documentary group called Newsreel Front and the three films it made about the situation on the Slovenian-Croatian border, which migrants are trying to cross. The films show the tragic living conditions of migrants in the border forests, using a guerilla mode of production, making creative use of the poetics of the so-called poor image. Šprah analyses these films in the context of the concept of tainted landscape and the dialectic of presence and absence proposed by Jean Paul Nancy.

Renata Šukaitytė writes about Lithuanian documentary films made by women. These films tell about extremely important events in Lithuanian history, such as the restoration of independence after the First World War, the fate of Lithuanian Germans after the Second World War or the political breakthrough of the 1990s. At the same time, she opposes the famous description of documentary film as a 'discourse of sobriety', which emphasises the cognitive, intellectual qualities of film, pointing out that an emotional message is equally legitimate. The films she discusses shy away from the cool, objective tone of a historical lecture, emphasising the individual characteristics of the protagonists, their experiences and emotions, which, according to the author, is a characteristic mode of expression for women. Šukaityte also draws attention to the original form of the films, in which they merge essayistic and personal approaches.

To sum up, we get a fragmentary but compelling view of the ways documentary films from certain Eastern European countries tackle the issues of their country identity in the face of turbulent historical changes which have haunted this region.