



# Book review: Anna BATORI, “Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema”

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*Book review: Anna BATORI, Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema*

This review critiques Anna Batori’s *Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema*. The author of this innovative approach on two of the major Eastern European cinemas focuses on the functions of space and spatiality in the Romanian and Hungarian films from the socialist and the post-socialist period, continuing the concepts of space and visibility, as theorised by Henri Lefebvre. In her work, Batori describes and analyses the sense of enclosure that these cinemas favour, either vertical, in the communist buildings under Ceausescu, or horizontal, in the Hungarian Alföld.

Keywords: Anna Batori, Romanian Cinema, Hungarian Cinema, post-socialist, films, space

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It has become almost impossible to discuss Eastern European cinema without constantly going back to the pre-1989 political context. Separating the two would seem unfair, as cinema in Eastern Europe was frequently used as a means of fighting, (subtly) mocking and criticising the system and the dreary idea of ideological censorship that held directors, writers and actors captive in a space of artistic barrenness. Art was slowly becoming communist propaganda. Post-socialist and contemporary cinema to look back to those times and often attempt to tell the stories remained untold or to show the consequences communism had over the Eastern European space.

Anna Batori’s *Space in Romanian and Hungarian Cinema* explores exactly these issues, analysing Romanian and Hungarian cinema from the socialist period until today and investigating how *space* and *spatiality* function in these two countries’ film legacy.

The book begins by creating a thorough theoretical background that tackles both the problem of how Eastern Europe is perceived from the *outside* and that of the space as “a socialist product” (Batori 19), in

Romania and Hungary.

As the author states in the introduction of the book, Eastern Europe is often being referred to as “Western Europe’s other, which stands for an underrepresented, peripheral, uncanny territory” (Batori 2). The borders between East European countries do often become blurred as the region is theorised (usually from outside, from the West, and only rarely from within, Batori explains) as a discordant and sometimes incongruous part of Europe, somehow independent and exterior. Consequently, the whole territory of Eastern Europe becomes a (political and cultural) border between (*the*) East and (*the*) West. This “borderline” aspect of the region is borrowed by the Eastern European cinema too, and “only a few have attempted to examine the area from a historical-cultural context with special emphasis on filmic representation” (Batori 4).

The second theoretical aspect discussed in the beginning of the book is *space* itself, as theorised by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991). Space is, for Lefebvre, not only a physical product, passive

and unresponsive to external factors, but alive, deeply connected to everything it is surrounded by, having a life of its own. A mechanism that is constantly flowing, (inter) connecting (other) spaces, events and manifestations.

The other important Lefebvrian idea that Batori brings forward in the beginning of her book is the distinction between capitalist and socialist spaces, tackling especially the concepts of *visibility* (as transparency) and the way it functions in these two contradictory political systems. Visibility becomes, according to Lefebvre, a key element in both capitalist and socialist architecture. However, it is used to achieve two different outcomes: in capitalist architecture, the transparency of buildings, people and things “gives people a certain kind of touristic gaze while wandering among the analogue structures” (Batori 22). This liberated gaze is contrasted by what happens in socialist constructions, where the transparency and the visibility are no longer used to liberate the subject, but to enclose him into a perimeter where he loses the ability of *watching*, of *looking at*. On the contrary, the gaze does no longer reside on the outside world, on landscapes and buildings, but on the subject himself: he becomes, therefore, an object, acquiring the position of *being looked at*. This idea will later be exemplified by the author, when analysing the panoptic gaze in Romanian and Hungarian cinematography.

This same gaze is described also in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* (1977). In his post-structuralist approach to the concept of space, Foucault brings forward the idea of *discipline*, created when individuals are enclosed in cellular spaces, where each subject has his/her own place. These cellular spaces and their inhabitants are easier to be supervised as the individuals are separated, and thus the “central, invisible gaze sees everything, but is not seen by anybody” (Batori 24). The supervised inhabitants are aware of the fact that they are under surveillance but are unable to identify by whom or by what: the gaze becomes, therefore, an imperceptible, indefinite mechanism.

These cellular constructions may remind the reader of the blocks built under the Ceausescu regime. As Batori explains, these structures succeed to merge private and public spaces, and, consequently, private and public life:

The disciplinary constellation of the buildings that enabled one to have a good view of the apartments and their inner spaces through the windows that encompassed the dwellings contributed to the sense of being under constant surveillance. [...] In this way, Ceausescu's prefabricated apartment complexes became the representatives of his restrictive, psychological terror and formed a grid of tyrannised spatial relations that incorporated

the de-individualised power in space. (Batori 31)

Blocks become, therefore, a tool of *vertical enclosure* in communist Romania.

On the other hand, in socialist Hungary the situation is a bit different, and maybe even opposed to that of Romania. The Great Hungarian Plain, or the *Alfold*, a vast agricultural space and the largest flat surface in Southeast Europe (Batori 31) is, for the Hungarian people, a symbol of independence, national identity and freedom. This endless, boundless territory is so meaningful for Hungarians because it creates a connection between them and their nomadic ancestors who chose to settle there. However, the *Alfold* (or the *Puszta*) seems to lose its significance under Kádár's Hungary: it becomes more of “an oppressed, colonised territory, conquered by a foreign power” (Batori 37), which does no longer belong to the Hungarian people, but to an exterior authority. Consequently, one can describe the (socialist, colonised) *Alfold* as a mechanism used by the regime to create a type of *horizontal enclosure*.

From Chapter 3 to Chapter 7, the author dives into a detailed analysis of Romanian cinema from 1945 until today, dividing films into three categories: the socialist cinema (from 1945 until 1989), the films of the so-called transition period (the cinema of the 1990s), and the New Wave of Romanian cinema (from early 2000s until today).

As a rule, the socialist cinema of Romania is characterized by the presence of a hidden gaze, which seems intangible, abstract, impossible to locate. Batori analyses in this chapter Lucian Pintilie's *Reenactment* (*Reconstituirea*, 1968) and *Carnival Scenes* (*De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?*, 1981), Alexandru Tatos' *Sequences* (*Secvențe*, 1982) and Micea Daneliuc's *Microphone Test* (*Probă de microfon*, 1980). All these films describe a violent, corrupt regime that keeps people under constant surveillance and observation. This omniscient gaze is often created using a film-within-film technique, which reveals the filming set: someone is always behind the subject, watching and recording his/her every move. This technique also alludes to how television and media in general is manipulating the citizens and how “the eye of the *Securitate* intrudes into the most intimate realms of life, such as the private sphere of the interviewees in *Microphone Test*, the waiter's clandestine space in *Sequences*, or the omniscient gaze of the inspector in *Reenactment*” (Batori 60).

The second time period in Romanian cinema (post-1989) is essentially defined by a constant remembrance and reflection upon the socialist past. These films openly criticise the system and depict the political and economic apathy and stagnation that dominated the country in the 1990s, “portraying the psychological burdens inherited by the previous regime” (Batori 55).



The films analysed in this chapter are Lucian Pintilie's *The Oak* (*Balanța*, 1992) and Nicolae Mărgineanu's *Look Forward in Anger* (*Priveste înainte cu mânie*, 1993). Batori identifies a change of focus in these films: the emphasis does no longer lie on the exterior, abstract, hidden gaze, but on the pro-filmic, physical space. These films explore "a decaying, crumbling space with empty, large, dark industrial quarters captured from a wide, high-angle shot" (Batori 57) and "claustrophobic, enclosed spaces" (Batori 61), thus alluring to the vertical enclosure the author described in the second chapter of the book.

These claustrophobic locations will continue to dominate Romanian cinematography and will become essential in the New Wave representation of space. Together with "an impressionist aesthetics" (Batori 77) created by the jittery, handheld camera and the minimalist shooting method, the films created after 1999 share this documentary style where the camera is free and unrestricted, thus capturing the most intimate, personal experiences of the characters and creating momentary, raw scenes.

Hence, like that of *Aurora*, the spatial structure of *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* is based on narrow, prefabricated interiors and cramped corridors, while the camera takes an even stronger presence in the narrative by maximalising the jittery camera work and wobbling takes that dominate *Aurora*. In *Lăzărescu*, the handheld camera mirrors a much greater instability that is its immobility and shaking movements that often disturb the flow of the narrative and spatio-temporal continuity [...]. (Batori 109)

We encounter this approach in most of Cristi Puiu's films (there is an entire chapter about Puiu's films and the techniques he uses in order to create this documentary-like effect), Radu Muntean's *The Paper Will Be Blue* (*Hârtia va fi albastră*, 2006) and Cristian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*, 2007).

Nevertheless, there are also directors who work with "an elaborate, well-photographed cinematic iconography" (Batori 80) that do not follow the New Wave conventions. This rejection of the New Wave canon can be observed in Andrei Gruzniczki's *The Escape* (*Quod erat demonstrandum*, 2013), who works with "well-choreographed camera movements" (Batori 71) or in most of Corneliu Porumboiu's films, built on proportionality and balance. Crammed, claustrophobic interiors, as the author describes the confined, enclosed spaces of a gloomy, post-communist Romania, constitute, nonetheless, still an important aspect of these films.

With the eighth chapter of the book we begin to dive into Hungarian cinematography, essentially characterized by horizontal enclosure (as discussed

earlier). This chapter revolves around socialist parables - such as Ferenc Kós's *Beyond Time* (*Nincs idő*, 1970), Sándor Sára's *Tomorrow Pheasant* (*Holnap lesz fácán*, 1974) or Gyula Gazdag's *The Whistling Cobblestone* (*A sípoló macskakő*, 1971) - and Béla Tarr's creations.

Socialist parables (or allegories) are films that have a dual structure, "telling two stories at the same time" (Batori 143): a concrete story and an abstract one, the latter being only implied or alluded to by the former. These productions usually use the *Alföld* to create a heterotopic, de-colonised space that imprisons its inhabitants. In his "Black Series" Béla Tarr continues to depict the *Puszta* as this depressive, desolate, almost post-apocalyptic landscape, working with characters who seem decentralised and lost and who are unable to find their purpose in this gloomy, barren universe. The horizontal enclosure begins from now on to merge with vertical prison-like structures, thus creating an even more powerful effect of claustrophobia and isolation.

This tendency to depict Hungary as a deserted, dark territory can also be encountered in contemporary Hungarian cinema. Batori explains that this New Generation produces even darker, more depressive scenes, as a protest against low-quality comedies that took over Hungarian cinematography in the 2000s. These films discuss dark themes such as rape, abuse or crime, but do not seem very interested in political or historical narratives. The representation of space remains more or less the same: the *Alföld* inherits the heavy, claustrophobic atmosphere from Tarr's films, remaining a space of decay and imprisonment for its inhabitants. In Chapter 10 Batori analyses Kornél Mundruczó's *Delta* (2008) and Viktor Oszkár Nagy's *Father's Acre* (*Apaföld*, 2009), exemplifying how suffocating the atmosphere in contemporary Hungarian cinema has become and how national space becomes annihilated: "the directors abolish the national value of the pro-filmic space and, as examined above, turn it into a grave" (Batori 193).

Anna Batori's book succeeds to create a new, innovative way of approaching Romanian and Hungarian cinema, using the vertical and horizontal models of enclosure. Space becomes extremely relevant in discussing socialist and post-socialist East European cinematography as it was often manipulated by communist regimes and used to imprison the citizens. From cellular structures like the Romanian blocks of flats built under Ceausescu, to the wide, vast fields of the Hungarian *Alföld*, communism captured inhabitants in order to better control them. All these aspects can be observed in Anna Batori's thorough analysis of Romanian and Hungarian cinema.

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