

Book Review

Renata Šukaitytė (ed.),
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Reviewed by SUNE BECHMANN
 PEDERSEN, Lund University,
 Sweden; email: sune.bechmann_
 pedersen@hist.lu.se

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The volume *Baltic Cinemas after the 90s: Shifting (Hi)stories and (Id)entities* is a welcome contribution to the study of Baltic Cinema, which for a long time has lived a neglected life on the margins of post-communist cinema studies. In her brief introduction, the editor Renata Šukaitytė notes that despite the recent decades' surge in studies of peripheral, transnational, and small-nation cinema, and although films from the Baltic States have been screened and won prizes at the festivals in Cannes, Berlin and Venice, Baltic cinema has remained understudied. Šukaitytė proposes that a partial explanation to this is the meagre funding allotted to the study of Baltic cinema. Possibly because Baltic cinema is still a rather pristine subject of study the editor defines the purpose of the volume in modest terms. It "aims at consolidating research" and continuing the collaboration established at recent international conferences on Baltic cinema. Whether the present volume is the product of such an academic conference is unclear, but since the shortest articles merely cover seven pages and others refer to themselves as papers the volume gives the impression of loosely

edited conference proceedings. The strangely misleading title adds to the impression that limited editorial efforts have been put into this volume. About half of the films analysed in the volume's seven articles were made in the 1990s or earlier. Two of the articles deal solely with films made before the turn of the century. Thus, it is unclear what made the publishers opt for the title "Baltic Cinemas after the 90s".

The first article written by Irina Novikova concentrates on two films by the Lithuanian auteur Šarūnas Bartas: *Three Days (Trys dienos)*, 1991) and *Corridor (Koridorius)*, 1994). Bartas' filmmaking is characterized by silence punctuated by diegetic noise, long takes and static frames, much in the tradition of Tarkovsky, Tarr and Angelopoulos. Novikova scrutinizes the de-dramatizing slowness and loosely related episodic scenes of Bartas' films and finds that together they challenge what she calls popular cinema's monocular perspective on the "real". In her rich and well-written analysis she sees parallels between Bartas' films and other works of visual arts which together makes for one of the better contributions to the volume.

In the second article, Renata Šukaitytė examines the strategies used by the Lithuanian documentary filmmaker Audrius Stonys to produce trustworthy and neutral storytelling. The boundary between fiction film and documentary has become increasingly blurred in recent years. Šukaitytė clearly acknowledges that what distinguishes the two is the social contract documentaries strive to establish with their audiences and not a particular use of recorded images. Stonys' cinematography is highly aestheticized (testified by six beautiful stills accompanying the article), but according to

Šukaitytė he belongs to a tradition of Lithuanian poetic documentary in which overly artful depictions of the world are not considered "untruthful". In this anti-Soviet tradition beauty and objectivity are not opposites. Šukaitytė presents a cogent argument drawing on five of Stonys' films produced between 1999 and 2008, but in the process she reveals herself as more of a film scholar than a historian or a scientist. Few living historians or scientists would agree with her claim that the selection of evidence "poses no problem for the prospects of objectivity in history and science".

The third article by Maruta Zane Vitols is a short introduction to the Latvian auteur Laila Pakalniņa's oeuvre. A prolific filmmaker, Pakalniņa has made more than twenty documentaries, short-films and full-length features since her debut in 1988. Vitols argues that the films are united by their celebration of the everyday and the attempts to show the "extraordinary qualities of the ordinary". This is achieved through unusual framing choices, filming from unexpected angles and vantage points. Only occasionally does sparse dialogue interrupt the mundane diegetic sounds of the city. Pakalniņa assign amateurs and Latvian "film stars" similarly small roles in her fiction films which imbues them a quasi-documentary quality. Stunning long takes of Latvian landscapes play an important role in her work which generally carries few references to contemporary politics. Vitols nevertheless sees a change in Pakalniņa's latest film at the time of writing, *Three Men and a Fish Pond (Par dzimteni)*, 2008) which contained overt political comments to Latvia's current political situation.

The fourth article written by Audronė Žukauskaitė boldly declares that it "aims to reflect

the recent political and cultural changes in Lithuania and explain how these political changes relate to the more fundamental changes in the visual regime". Soon however, an alternative and much more modest aim is presented, namely to introduce Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist film criticism in the analysis of contemporary Lithuanian cinema with a special focus on two films, *Whispers of Sin* (*Nuodėmės užkalbėjimas*, 2007, Algimantas Puipa) and *The Collectress* (*Kolekcionierė*, 2008, Kristina Buožytė). The author achieves the second objective with a straightforward summary of Lacan's thoughts and its influence on feminist film theories. Her subsequent analysis of the two films makes elegant use of the presented theories to exemplify two ways of representing women in Lithuanian cinema; one is classical patriarchal (*Whispers of Sin*) and the other is more reflexive, though still fixed in the same overarching framework of identification (*The Collectress*). The two examples are illustrative of the theories' applicability, but they offer little purchase on the purported fundamental changes happening in the Lithuanian visual regime. For understandable reasons, the article loses sight of its first aim. After all, addressing that would have required a thorough diachronic study of Lithuanian cinema, politics and culture.

The fifth article by Ewa Mazierska is an analysis of the gender relationships which are at the centre of four Estonian films: *The Highway Crossing* (*Ristumine peateega*, 1999, Arko Okk), *An Affair of Honour* (*Lurjus*, 1999, Valentin Kuik), *Set Point* (*Täna öösel me ei maga*, 2004, Ilmar Taska) and *Golden Beach* (*Kuldrannake*, 2006, Jüri Sillart). Mazierska argues that each of the four films is a comprehensive re-written adaptation from vari-

ous anterior texts such as a fairy tale, a literary work, and a genre formula. The anterior texts share melodramatic traits which are reworked into what Mazierska calls "anti-melodrama". Anti-melodrama is a modernist film style which includes melodramatic facets, but ultimately undermines the emotional identification it elicits. Mazierska concludes her inspired analyses of the four films by stating that the anti-melodrama found in the works reflects the volatile contemporary situation for men and women in Estonia. The fall of Communism destabilized long established gender-roles and the recently regained independence also makes for a fragile national identity.

The sixth article by Eva Näriepa is probably the best fit for the "shifting (hi)stories and (id)entities" in the volume's title. Näriepa contributes with a comparative study of spaces, identities and historical narratives in two remarkable Estonian films: Peeter Urbla's *I'm Not a Tourist, I Live Here* (*Ma pole turist, ma elan siin*, 1988) and Ilkka Järvilaturi's *Darkness in Tallinn* (*Tallinn pimeduses*, 1993). Preceding her analysis is an exemplary overview of Estonian film history since the Second World War. In the 1960s, Näriepa argues, ethnic-Estonian filmmakers sought to construct a "nation-scape" as an alternative to the Sovietized space. This Estonian "nation-scape" often drew on Estonian literary classics and was imbued with a nostalgic, escapist atmosphere. As the artistic freedom grew in the 1980s, the liberty was used to express national sentiments more freely, which ultimately resulted in the re-establishment of the nation-state in 1991. Näriepa's lucid analysis captures the change in identification and coding of space as the Soviet Union collapsed and an independent Estonia was an-

nounced. While Urbla's film is a child of a tumultuous historical period charged with uncertainty and anxiety, Järvilaturi's film asserts the new nation with a monumentalized Estonian history. Because Näriepa situates her analysis well in its historical context and supports her argument with references to a dozen other films her contribution stands out as one of the best.

The final article by Marija Weste presents a comparison of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006) and Laila Pakalniņa's *The Shoe* (*Kurpe*, 1998) with regards to their representation of the Communist past in East Germany and Latvia. Weste argues that both films are preoccupied with the search for truth, and in both cases, the search is carried out by a *flâneur* representing the regime. Employing the idea of the *flâneur* presented by Walter Benjamin in his seminal texts, Weste argues that Donnersmarck's Stasi protagonist embodies a voyeuristic flâneur whereas the camera itself is the flâneur in Pakalniņa's film.

To conclude, this volume on Baltic cinema contains essays which deserve to reach readers abroad. They can serve as excellent starting points for readers unfamiliar with Baltic cinema, but they are also pertinent contributions to current academic debates in film studies. Generally however, the articles could have benefitted from greater contextualization. Their primary focus is on the filmic images whilst the production, distribution and reception contexts are all but ignored. Most of the films analysed are made by auteurs for a narrow audience, and so occasionally, the old "Hollywood" straw man is employed as the hegemonic and ideologically conservative op-

posite of artistic and reflexive cinema. This is a pity, especially since we never learn what role Hollywood plays in the Baltic States, or how “popular” Baltic cinema looks in comparison with the films presented here. Although the volume could have benefitted from more thorough editing, I would like to end by commending the beautiful film stills which accompany the texts. Printed in big format on high-quality paper they are not just decorative, but serve as excellent illustrations of points made in the analyses. In this respect, the volume under review surpasses most academic publications by renowned international publishers.