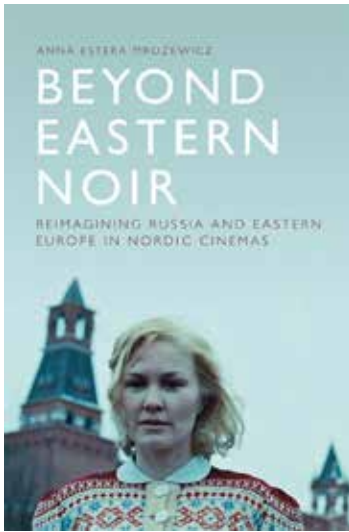


Book Review



Anna Estera Mrozewicz, *Beyond Eastern Noir: Reimagining Russia and Eastern Europe in Nordic Cinemas*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, ISBN 978-1-4744-1810-2, 230 pp.

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In her book *Beyond Eastern Noir: Reimagining Russia and Eastern Europe in Nordic Cinemas*, Anna Estera Mrozewicz explores the 'narrative constructions' of the borders between 'the North' or *Norden* (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland) and the Baltic Sea countries that were part of the former Soviet bloc (Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the area of the former German Democratic Republic). The focus is on the post-1989 documentary films, feature films and short films that depict one of the Eastern European states.

A key concept of her analysis is 'Eastern noir', which Mrozewicz defines (p. 2) as a

filmic approach that encapsulates the negative stereotypes of Russia and Eastern Europe, and thereby, establishes a clear border between good (the Nordic social democratic welfare states) and evil (the crime-ridden, gloomy and uncivilised former Warsaw bloc states). The corpus of her in-depth analysis is comprised of 65 fiction films, 40 documentary films and seven TV series that were produced in the four Nordic countries.

Mrozewicz describes the Eastern noir narratives with their emphasis on borders as dominant in the Nordic audiovisual imagination (p. 22). However, the depiction of Russia differs from the other former Eastern European countries, due to the very specific Swedish phenomenon *rysskräk* ('fear of Russia') and the perception of Russia as the 'great Other' is more frequently staged as a continuation of Cold War tropes. On the other hand, the Eastern European countries are perceived as distant neighbours, which unlike the Russians, are not 'essentially different, barbaric, despotic and culturally inferior' (p. 35). The tropes that are frequently used are soldiers and criminals. So, the hierarchical and binary approach to Russians applies, but only to a lesser degree, to the Eastern European countries that are separated from *Norden* by the Baltic Sea. The main aim of the Eastern noir depictions of the former Soviet bloc is to affirm Nordic cultural superiority. In the context of globalisation, Mrozewicz claims that the Nordic countries are seeking reaffirmation for the 'Third Way' approach that characterised the politics of the Scandinavian countries and Finland during the Cold War.

The border drawn through the cultural imagination of the Eastern European countries and the paradigm of Eastern noir is

only gradually being challenged by some films that perceive the dividing line between *Norden* and the former Soviet bloc as boundaries – a concept defined by Mrozewicz, based on Edward S. Casey, as being less rigid, allowing more breathing, and as a realm of negotiation (p. 20). Films that view Russia and the Eastern European countries through the lens of a boundary challenge the hegemonic discourse, which offers easy reassurances of cultural identities (p. 22). The boundary narratives do not make any promises to eliminate the chaos; they emphasise the complexity of transnational encounters, and are more elusive and subversive. Thus, the understanding of the border as a boundary destabilises the Nordic self-image of being innocent, inclusive and non-aggressive.

The boundary narratives are often spy films, such as Knut Erik Jensen's *Burnt by Frost* (*Brent av frost*, Norway, 1997) and *Ice Kiss* (*Iskyss*, Norway, 2008), or films about Nordic communists, such as Ville Suhonen's *Seamstress* (*Ompelijatar*, Finland, 2015), Lauri Törhönen's *The Border* (*Raja* 1918, Finland/Russia, 2007) or Jörn Donner's *The Interrogation* (*Kuulustelu*, Finland, 2009). These films blur the border by focusing on the complexity of infiltration, which negates the distinction between the infiltrator and the infiltrated.

Another trope, almost as frequently used as the spy, i.e. the Nordic man on the quest for Eastern European women, is also renegotiated in Nordic films. In detective films such as Morten Arnfred's *The Russian Singer* (*Den russiske sangerinde*, Denmark, 1993) or Per Berglund's *The Dogs of Riga* (*Hundarna i Riga*, Sweden/Denmark, 1995), the male Nordic protagonist becomes emotionally involved with

a Russian or Eastern European woman. In comedies such as Tomas Alfredson's *Screwed in Tallinn* (*Torsk på Tallinn*, Sweden, 1999), the Swedish males on the lookout for sexual encounters are ridiculed, and films such as Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya 4-ever* (Sweden/Denmark, 2002) or Pål Hollender's documentary *Buy Bye Beauty* (Sweden, 2001) fundamentally challenge the Nordic self-perception as being civilised, controlled and respectful towards women.

After the release of *Lilya 4-ever*, which was filmed in Estonia, Lukas Moodysson bluntly stated that the Eastern European countries that were raped by Soviet Communism were now being raped by capitalism and his film highlights the exploitative nature of the relations between the Nordic countries and the former Eastern bloc in the aftermath of 1989. In his documentary about prostitution in Riga, Pål Hollender goes even so far as to sexually abuse his interview partners in order to demonstrate the power of Nordic wealth over Baltic women. Mrozewicz underlines the epitomisation of guilt in these of films, but criticises the narcissism of *Lilya 4-ever* and *Buy Bye Beauty* and the reinforcement of binary divisions based on economic inequalities. As an oppositional strategy to guilt, she advocates for shame that implies critical self-evaluation. Mrozewicz points to Pirjo Honkasalo's documentary *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* (*Melancholian 3 huonetta*, Finland, 2004), which explores the impact of the Russian-Chechen war on children, as an example of a more complex and inclusive way of assuming responsibility. But the cinematic expressions of both guilt and shame are interpreted by Mrozewicz as an outlet for anxiety over an increasingly globalised reality (p. 140).

Mrozewicz complements the analysis of the depiction of Russia and the Baltic states in the Nordic audiovisual imagination with an analysis of the perception of Poland, especially the perceived invasion of the Scandinavian countries by Polish workers. Thus, the complex boundary of the Baltic Sea is porous and imports the economic inequalities that exist between the Nordic welfare states and the post-Soviet countries to the home front of the *folkhemmet* (the Swedish 'welfare state').

Beyond Eastern Noir:

Reimagining Russia and Eastern Europe in Nordic Cinemas is a book that takes a broad look at the multifaceted neighbour relationships between Norden and the countries of the former Soviet bloc in the North and emphasises the importance of a more heterogeneous representation in times of solidifying borders. However, the book would have benefitted from a more precise conceptualisation of film noir as a global cinematic expression in times of socio-economic transformation (see e.g. Fay, Nieland 2010; Spicer, Hanson 2013; Näripea, Hoyer 2018). Mrozewicz's concept of Eastern noir with its emphasis on binary divisions contradicts her own assertion that, in film noir, the distinction between what is right and wrong is disturbed. Many films that are part of Mrozewicz's corpus are only remotely related to the film noir tradition, be it in its American form during the 1940s or in its later transnational interpretation. In Mrozewicz's book, the concept of 'noir' is used too often in order to indicate an atmosphere of bleakness, without any reference to the stylistic criteria or the underlying psychological malaise that marks the complexity of film noir.

While the conceptualisation of borders and boundaries as it

relates to the Nordic audiovisual imagination is thoroughly illustrated by film examples, the geographical delineation reveals a conceptual blurriness. How can the inclusion of Denmark be justified in relation to a border situation with Russia? The overall question, i.e. what is the specific Nordic imagination in relation to Russia and Eastern Europe, could have been elucidated by a more detailed juxtaposition of the differences between the Nordic imagination and the Western imagination (in general) in relation to these countries.

Overall, Anna Estera Mrozewicz's book is a valuable contribution to the discussion of film noir, a comprehensive overview of the Nordic audiovisual imagination of the former Soviet bloc, and a thought-provoking analysis on the representation of borders in the post-Soviet era.

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