

The Post-Colonial Phenomenon in Central and Eastern European Film Production – the Special Case of Hungarian Filmmakers in Romania

DOI: 10.46522/S.2022.02.6

Anna KÓS PhD

University of Arts, Târgu-Mureş

kos.anna@yahoo.com

Abstract: *In the last decade the phenomenon of post-colonialism, transnationalism and trans-culturalism in film production have become increasingly prominent areas of research; this is a logical consequence of globalization in general, amplified at the same time by the spread of co-production budgets increasingly common in arts that require a large financial outlay involving several countries. In my study I focus on the productions of Hungarian filmmakers in Transylvania: directors here have never been the favorites of film financing bodies (from the Soviet Union at the beginning, from the EU countries later, respectively from Romania or Hungary in general), needing the support of several countries in order to make a demanding and professional film. I am trying to find out whether the cultural characteristics of the entities participating in the funding, such as states, regions, communities, appear in the productions made in this way and if so, in what form.*

Key words: *post-colonialism, transnationalism, trans-culturalism, filmmaking.*

Foreword

Hungarian film production in Romania is a concept that, in fact, does not exist as a separate entity. There are, however, very talented and committed professionals (writers, directors, cameramen, etc.) who are Hungarian and make films in Romania, which are recognized and appreciated by various professional forums. Their films are different from those of their compatriots, and those who are working now, for example, are of the same age as those who make up the „Romanian new wave”, and yet they cannot be included in this group, because there are many characteristics that differentiate them, although they have some common features, of course. They also are unlike those contemporaries who work in the Hungarian film industry, despite the fact that they consider themselves to be their conationals, and the narration of their films is written in Hungarian, and their characters (in most cases) also speak Hungarian.



These authors are in good professional relations with both their compatriots and their conationals, often collaborating very well with one or the other, sometimes with both. However, they cannot be equated with either of these groups, having their own artistic vision, often well-defined and unmistakable, especially in comparison with the other groups.

Of course, not only Hungarian authors in Romania are in this situation. In Central and Eastern Europe,¹ there are many countries with different national communities capable, in terms of numbers and tradition, of supporting their own culture, including producing films – which is a remarkable economic achievement, given that it takes two orders of magnitude more money to make a film than to publish a book, for example.

The present paper (part of a larger work) attempts an analysis of the films made in this region strictly from the point of view of the post-colonial effect, asking the question, when and in which (inter)national relations can we talk about this phenomenon?

The post-colonial effect on culture and art

Post-colonialism is a theoretical and social approach that examines the effects and consequences of colonization on colonized territories and peoples. Post-colonialism focuses on the post-colonial period and investigates how cultural, political and economic conditions developed in former colonies. According to the theoretical framework of post-colonialism, colonization had many harmful effects on colonized territories and peoples, such as the loss of their identity and culture, economic exploitation and political oppression. Researchers who address this term seek to understand these processes and point to the inequalities that still exist today in formerly colonized territories.

The question arises, can we really speak of signs of post-colonialism in the culture and art of former socialist countries? The general definition of the concept of post-colonialism refers to the traumatic consequences on a society that has been conquered by members of another society coming from other geographical areas and the use of its resources for their own purposes – which from a strictly historical and legal point of view is not the case in this region. In the cultural sense it is defined by the existence of a superiority of the culture of the colonizing society over that of the colonized, which is also not the case.

Nevertheless, this concept can be interpreted in more than one way.

Many studies have been written about the way Hollywood colonizes the European film industry. In particular, about its effect on Romanian films, I would like to mention Doru Pop's study (Pop 2019). But, I think, in this region of Central and Eastern Europe, it is more interesting to follow the research on Soviet influences on national film productions in the post-socialist bloc of countries, about which many studies have appeared

¹¹ By this term I mean the former socialist countries, excluding the countries of the former Soviet Union.



(especially by Polish researchers) (Mazierska, Kristensen and Närepea 2014. 1–39) that provide strong arguments for the correct use of the term ‘post-colonial influence’. For example, Polish films often address the question of what impact the communist decades had on the country and society. Polish films often deal with issues of identity as well as difficulties in different areas of life, such as unemployment, poverty and exclusion. Ewa Thompson also gives examples from other European countries that have been colonized by a neighboring country:

If ‘*outramer-ish*’ invasion is prerequisite for calling a territory colonized, what should we do with Scotland or Ireland, two Celtic countries subjugated by the English? Can we really call the crossing of the narrow stretch of water separating Ireland from England an overseas invasion? That Ireland was colonized is beyond dispute and its situation slightly resembles what Poland went through. Irish national identity was preserved at the cost of significant blows to demographic, economic, and cultural development - the infamous ‘potato famines’ of the 19th century which forced a host of Irish to emigrate to the US being one example. The number of people of Irish-American descent living in the United States is currently nine times the number of Irish people living in Ireland.

Thompson 2014

It is to be noted that in researching post-Soviet-Russian cultural influence in national film productions in Central and Eastern European countries, we should not limit ourselves to the post-World War II period, as is sometimes suggested, because the action, characters, etc. in films made before 1945 or after 1990 are also characterized by different geopolitical contexts. Jenő Szűcs, a historian specializing in the development of societies in this region, convincingly argued in his famous historical essay on these countries in Central and Eastern Europe that their specific development and the beginnings of their regional separation can be dated back to the Middle Ages, being characterized as a consequence of the tension between the diametrically opposed influences of the impact of urban autonomy, of democracy coming from the West, and autocracy, characterized by the concentration of economic power, of etatism with vertical structures, coming from the East. According to him, “wherever we look, the ‘Westernised’ structures are everywhere, only deformed to some extent; sometimes incompletely truncated (as in the case of cities), sometimes disproportionately over-abundant (as in the case of the nobility).” (Szűcs 1981, 224) The historian thus defines the region as a kind of distorted, disproportionate West, and these political, economic specificities can of course also be seen in cultural development, particularly in the film productions of the above-mentioned periods.

Between 1945 and 1989, filmmaking in this region developed along Soviet lines, as a result of political pressure, with centralized state funding. The films had as their main theme the life and destiny of the working class, with the basic ideology of the society (and alignment with this ideology being the basic condition for financing production and distribution) i.e. presenting the socialist system as the most advanced of human so-



cieties. In the action and the formulation of the characters the perspective of Soviet culture and values dominates, Soviet technical solutions are used in the production. However, as with any attempt at globalization, as a counter-effect, the reactions of domestic producers to emphasize (sometimes excessively) local characteristics and problems, as well as national symbols, also appeared.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, when the Western world opened up to the region's creators, they found themselves in the midst of other globalizing trends, among which they were once again forced to search for the specific features that represent the identity of the people or ethnic group in question, and researchers are trying to find a stable point in order to create a more or less clear picture of the state of national cinema after the traumas it had suffered up to that point. The main questions that can be asked on this occasion, and which require an unequivocal answer, are whether it is possible to approximate what would have been the direction of national cinema in the country in question without these influences? If so, is it possible to return (is it worth returning) to the original route?

In the case of films that explore and reflect on the national specificity of a post-communist country, the analysis of national characters may be relevant. These films can highlight a country's traditions, values, mentalities and specific issues, with an emphasis on local identity and experiences. Through national characters, such films can provide insight into post-communist transition processes and inter-human relations in a particular cultural context.

On the other hand, in a globalized world, films from post-communist countries can also feature transnational characters and themes. These films can explore relations with other countries, migration, foreign cultural influences and transnational perspectives on common issues. Transnational characters can illustrate global connections and interactions as well as adaptation to external changes and influences.

It is noteworthy that many films can work with a combination of these two aspects, offering a complex perspective and not exclusively one or the other. Also, the featuring of national or transnational characters in a film can be subjective and may depend on the director's intentions, the historical and cultural context, as well as the preferences and perspectives of the critic or viewer.

In any case, in Central and Eastern Europe one of the most exciting areas of film research in the last ten years is the duality of signs and definitions of national filmmaking, the specific features and challenges encountered in the course of filmmaking in this region (a phenomenon which, of course, has its own literature since the beginnings of film production in that country) contrasted with the cultural orientations characteristic of the area, defined by major political currents, trans-culturalism and post-colonialism imposed by the former Soviet Union. The emergence of this line of research is probably also linked to the 'globalization' of creators and (in a similar or possibly different way, but for the same reasons) researchers.



Another aspect of the notion of post-colonialism should be mentioned. In his study *Notes on Self-colonizing Cultures* the Bulgarian author Alexander Kiossev develops the idea of self-colonizing cultures. In his perception these cultures are those that are always defined in relation to the West, which is considered a normative reference, and unlike cultures colonized by large Western nations (e.g. African countries), in the perception of self-colonizing nations the West is not seen as an adversary but as a model to be followed. This characterization seems appropriate for most Central and Eastern European nations, who, due to this split in consciousness, are prone to both excessive self-esteem (addressing rhetoric such as “Jesus himself was Bulgarian/ Czech/ Romanian/ Hungarian”) and self-hatred (declaring and claiming that “nothing will ever change here, because we are not capable of anything”). Compared to the West, nations in a 'quasi-colonial' or 'semi-peripheral' position identify with this inferior position, and their community identity and politics are therefore heavily influenced by the false conceptualizations they use to mask this trauma of inferiority.

If we refer to the relationship between the Romanian cinematography and the films made by Hungarian artists in Romania (obviously we cannot speak – unfortunately – of Hungarian film production in Romania), the situation presents similarities but also differences from those described above. The production of films made by Hungarian creators in Transylvania is affected by several influences, obviously that of Hungarian cinema and that of the Romanian film industry, but the post-colonial effect should also be mentioned if we attribute a broader meaning to this term, meaning a relationship of unquestionable subordination of power between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority. Staying within the framework of cultural and artistic life, an equal situation between the two groups of creators can only be achieved through massive funding with a positive discriminatory character. The meaning of the post-colonial concept thus becomes even more complex if we consider that in the case of Romanian films, we can also discover the post-colonialist perspective, pointing out of course that Romania was not a colony in the strict sense of the term. However, like other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Romania has also experienced various periods of domination or political and cultural influence by other powers, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire or the Soviet Union.

Transylvania, as a region with a complex history, has been under the influence of various empires and dominant powers over the years, including the Austro-Hungarian Empire, returning to Romania after the First World War. These periods can be explored from a post-colonial perspective in terms of their impact on the cultural identity and artistic expression of the Hungarian community in Transylvania.

And, to make the picture even more complex, the same domination - an air of cultural superiority of the colonizer - can sometimes be felt in the relationship between Hungarian film producers in Hungary and Hungarian film makers in Transylvania.

But anyway, the same question arises this time as in the case of national productions in other Central and Eastern European countries: what would Hungarian film production



in Transylvania be like if it had developed in a straight line, without stops and starts, starting from the cornerstone laid by Jenő Janovics? How could we define what a straight line in this development would mean? Because most probably this complex system of relations, with its counter-effect, all these external factors of influence have rather enriched than deprived the Hungarian film producers in Transylvania - after all, this is the concept on which the ideology of Transylvaniam is based.

BIBLIOGRAPY

- KIOSSEV, A, 1995. Notes on Self-colonising Cultures. In: *Cultural Aspects of the Modernisation Process* (3), TMV Oslo: Skriftserie.
- MAZIERSKA, E., KRISTENSEN, L. and NÄRIPEA, E. (eds.), 2014. *Postcolonial Approaches to Eastern European Cinema: Portraying Neighbours On-Screen*. Londra/New York: Tauris.
- POP, D., 2019. The “Transnational Turn”. New Urban Identities and the Transformation of the Romanian Contemporary Cinema. In: DUMA, D. and STOJANOVA, Ch.: *The New Romanian Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- SZŰCS, J., 1981. Vázlat Európa három történelmi régiójáról (Schița a trei regiuni istorice ale Europei). In: *Történelmi Szemle*, Budapest.
- THOMPSON, E., 2014. It is Colonialism After All: Some Epistemological Remarks [online]. *Teksty Drugie*, (1), 68. [Last access: 07.11.2023] Source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284768206_It_Is_Colonialism_After_All.