

## Szolnok Conference 04: Trans-Europa Express

### Nation – In Fashion Again?

By Balázs Varga

The question of national cinema has been present from the very beginnings of film history. But before I get tangled in the difficulties of defining it ('national' as a construction; what makes cinema national; do we consider the notion of national a productional, cultural or other category), I would like to make some remarks on the relationship between film history and national cinema.

Cinema is usually called the most international form of art, and if that's true the universal and global nature of motion picture culture works against national peculiarities. This apparent contradiction is usually resolved by stating that outstanding movies stand their own ground both in national and international context, or by putting the productive tension between national and universal into the focus of filmic expression.

While expounding the first statement we should elaborate on how this dual, both national and universal context works, whether the same elements of a movie become valued on the local and international market. And while expounding the second statement we will have to examine whether the stability or rather, the critical nature, liability and continuous revision of the self-image can make a nation's cinema interesting in a given moment.

These ideas should be examined in a historical cross-section as well. From this point of view there are deep dividing lines between modern and postmodern cinema. To cut it short, while during the modernist period movies were the medium of national self-knowledge or self-consciousness in the postmodern era national stereotypes represent the connecting point between national and global culture. In the first case it is the critical attitude and autonomy, in the second case the integrative features are the determining factors.

The conflict between national peculiarities and the universal language of motion picture culture became the sharpest during the fifties and sixties, in the most important period of modern cinema. In these years the relation between centre and periphery was redefined. All of a sudden the world opened up. What was periphery before, is the centre now. The festivals, critics and not the least the audience discovered the Eastern-European and Latin-American cinema. In the sixties movies were the most capable to represent and ride on the spirit of the era, but modernist cinema was still tied very strongly to different cultural traditions everywhere in the world. Therefore accomplishment and differentiation were present parallel to each other in this period.

For the so called developing countries the conflict of modernization (joining the circuit of the world market) and tradition was decisive. It is not by chance that folklore had such a fertilizing effect both on new Latin-American cinema (magical realism) and on the modernist artists of the European periphery (Angelopoulos, Iosseliani, Paradjanov, Jakubisko, Jancsó).

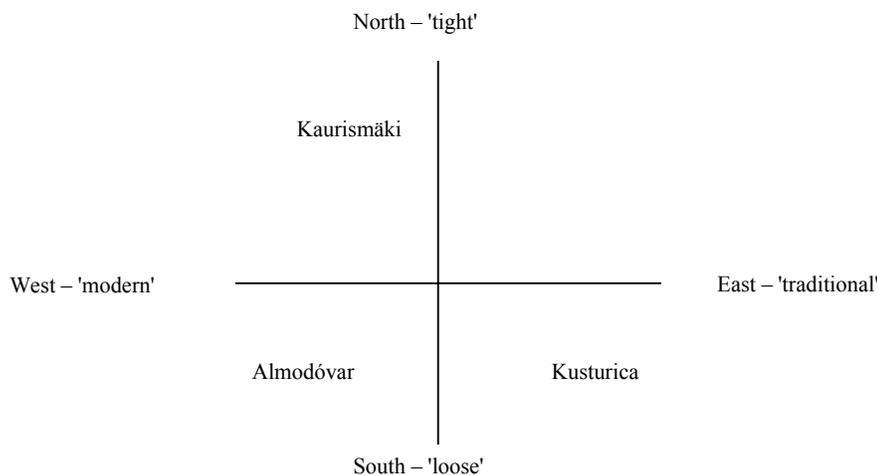
In general, we can say that the nouvelle vagues of the period appeared when the given country or nation faced the problems of autonomy (the disintegration of the colonial world, the search for new ways in the Soviet bloc). Thus this concept links up the politically-socially critical concepts of national self-consciousness with the renewal of the cinema history.

The question is: what is the new situation in the postmodern age in the beginning of the millennium in the global audiovisual world? Where is the place for national and what is the role of national stereotypes in this system? It appears that it is highly successful to build on national stereotypes in contemporary European cinema. Remarkably and efficiently. In an exaggerating and sometimes in a parodist fashion. In a way that the end result can be instantly recognized by a foreign audience and also acceptable and entertaining for the local audience. Kaurismäki's heroes, always wordless, morose and gulping down enormous quantities of vodka, those Finns so nostalgic about the rock'n roll era, Almodóvar's hysterical, unbearable, temperamental Spaniards, his women, always at the edge of nervous breakdowns and his uproarious matador-men, Kusturica's glass breaking, unruly Romas of untamable vitality – are only a few examples from the latest offer.

The national stereotype seems like the perfect intermediate notion, because it gives both the chance for identification and identifying: outwards it makes everything recognizable, inwards it strengthens. It identifies and separates at the same time. One of the basic statements of social-psychology regarding stereotypes is that people accentuate those of their features that distinguishes them from their surroundings – and national stereotypes work the same.

When describing national characteristics social-psychological studies brought up the question of a specific pair of contrasts. We can talk about poles from the view of self-discipline, dimension of tight and loose (discipline and correctness vs. passion and easiness and liberation). Furthermore, this duality can be almost projected to the map: empirical researches found significant divergences among different nations on the Northern-Southern line. (Too disciplined Northerners, passionate Southerners).

This Northern-Southern divide is supplemented by the new bipolar world order after World War II on a Western-Eastern line, regarding political and social settings. Comparing the two dimensions the mentality (disciplined-liberated) and the social-cultural status (modernity vs. traditions) we get four different fields. We can represent the four possible poles in this way:



Almodóvar's and Kusturica's heroes and movies are similar in their uproariness or vulgarity, but while in the first case the milieu is the world of postmodern media and mass culture, Kusturica's stories take place in a rough, untamed pre-modern world.

Kaurismäki's and Tarr's works stand close to each other in their slowness, spleen and strong frustration, and although the divide between East and West is less obvious (it's not by accident that Kaurismäki's half-stoned heroes regularly raid the Russian countryside), the ironic-playful form of reflection and the thick Eastern melancholy distinguishes them.

The differences between the 'Northern' and 'Southern' mentality cannot be dealt with in such rigidity. Precisely because they are built on the notions of distinction and sameness and in almost every region these reflexes can be set into motion between neighboring nations: the Danes are the Bohemians of the North, while the Swedes are considered insipid creatures by the neighboring Danes. So in this cross section the Danes represent the 'Southern' and the Swedes the 'Northern' stereotypes. (Lars von Trier's satirical-mystical hospital thriller-series *Riget* is a shining example for this: the Swedish surgeon trying to cover up his malpractice is in constant battle with his infantile Danish colleagues and refuses to take part in the jovial rituals of the morning meetings but takes pride in staring at the neighboring Swedish steel mills through his binoculars.)

With or without the help of national stereotypes, the post-Communist East-European cinema will have to find its own identity in a radically altered new world. How can we make ourselves interesting again? What kind of subjects, stories and heroes are needed today? Is there a bridge between East and West? How can we make movies that are equally relevant and popular in East-Europe and in the art cinemas of the West? Should we compete with American movies or do quite the opposite and go for movies meant for a smaller, select audience and swim against the current? If the political peculiarities are gone, how can we make ourselves interesting again? If a little bit simplified, these are still the basic questions of the post-Communist years. And these are tricky questions, because there is evidently no single straight answer for them.

Mixing solutions in global and local, universal or peculiar spirit, there can be several options. One of the possible ways for today's Eastern-European directors is to head towards the ever successful genre movies, following international patterns (Hungarian crime story, Polish action movie, Czech road movie, and Russian sci-fi). The universal patterns are filled up with life through local colors and in this manner they can become attractive for the local audience. The catch is that these movies can perform well only on a local market, so by adding local colors the filmmakers win (a local audience) and lose (a chance for international distribution) at the same time.

In the case of movies mobilizing national stereotypes we can say exactly the opposite. These films are not built on universal genre codes but on strongly personal, auteur styles and open from this starting point with the help of stereotypes and the patterns of alienated similarity – used in a parodist, ironic fashion.

This is a dual game, between reflexes of the different poles, the alienation and identification, and the essence of this perpetual motion is postmodern culture integrating and coordinating local elements into global culture.

If that's so simple then we can ask the question: why are there no art-directors of Aldomóvar's cult level in Eastern-Europe? On the one hand, naturally because this logic is only one dimension, one twist in the sophisticated machinery of star-making, canon formulating and international festival industry; on the other hand, because you need a certain state of self-image or self-consciousness for playing with national stereotypes. However, Eastern-Europe is politically irrelevant and the activist-minded filmmaking of the sixties got into a vacuum anyway, so it seems that there is nothing we can show in this present stand-off. We don't need the distorting mirror of national stereotypes. Either because there is nothing we have to come up with or because we don't want to be different, to be distinguished from others. But then who will get to know us?

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