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Eastern Europe proves to be a Nordic mirage

By Lars Kristensen

Review of Anna Estera Mrozewicz, *Beyond Eastern Noir: Reimagining Russia and Eastern Europe in Nordic Cinemas*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018

In her conclusion, Anna Mrozewicz sets a task for scholars of Eastern European cinema. She writes,

an analysis of representation of *Norden* in the neighbouring Russian and Eastern European film cultures, showing us how *Norden* is being reimagined in their rich cinematographies, could yield further insights into how common Nordic/Eastern boundaries can be imagined in, and for, the future (200).

In *Beyond Eastern Noir*, Mrozewicz does exactly that with Nordic film culture – looking at the representation of Russians and Eastern Europeans in order to say something about the Nordic view on borders and boundaries. As Mrozewicz is quick to outline, these visualisations of Eastern Europeans and Russians are formations of ‘selves’, rather than of the neighbouring other – the representations pertain to Nordic discourses and not Eastern European discourses (198). As such, the representations are part of a Nordic mirage that is generated by the fall of Communism. The question is whether this can be done the other way around – Eastern Europeans making illusions about themselves through Nordic characters?

Academia has a tendency to compartmentalise and to group people, objects and phenomena together, but *Beyond Eastern Noir* is an attempt to get ‘beyond’ that tendency. In this view, Mrozewicz account of ‘a Baltic Sea cinema’ is important, because it seeks to establish a new investigative territory that crosses boundaries. The book is divided into 6 chapters, each focusing on different aspects of a border/boundary dichotomy developed in the introduction. Mrozewicz takes that theme of Nordic noir and crime fiction to argue that the representation of Eastern Europeans and Russians is constructed along the line of a master narrative that has the same *leitmotif*; the crime scenes. As a master narrative, the Eastern noir ‘freezes history, like a stereotype, into one solid block and disseminates ahistorical images irrespective of historical change’ (15). Mrozewicz’s aim is to problematize this frozen situation and she does so by elaborating with two overlapping concepts of division: borders, which are hard and splitting the region into us and them; and boundaries, which are weaker notions of division and thus more porous and penetrable. Within this frame of analysis, Mrozewicz can examine a whole host of moving images that are produced and viewed in the Nordic countries. And, indeed, the material for the analysis varies, as she includes short films, documentaries, student films and television dramas and series. Accordingly, it might as well be a TV series that is most telling for the development of the Eastern noir, although the main focus is

on feature filmmaking, This has methodological consequences, as this screen analysis approach overlooks production contexts and specificities that are inherent to the form of the chosen media. In other words, the analysis is focused on screen representations without going into audience numbers or practices in order to argue that these Eastern European and Russian representations reveal an understanding of the Nordic self.

Is there such a thing as a Nordic 'self'? Mrozewicz assumes that there is, but as she is well aware, it is a 'self' that deteriorates under scrutiny, similar to the construction of an Eastern European identity. The Nordic countries are referred to as *Norden* (the North), which mean primarily the Baltic Sea and the borders created around this specific geographical space. Between the Nordic countries there are different reactions to the fall of Communism, which also translate into different treatments of its Eastern other. This difference, Mrozewicz argues, can also be detected on the level of representation; namely in a grading of Eastern Europeanness. Russians are here the great Other with capital 'O', the Baltic countries and Poland are just 'others' with lower case 'o' and lastly the former East Germany, which is seen as close, or closer, to a Nordic identity. In this perspective the old borders and boundaries remain as they were.

This grading scale of the Nordic others can be detected in the topic of the chapters. The first chapter deals with images of the border spanning 30 years, comprising feature films and documentaries to the recent Norwegian television series *Occupied* (2015-). Not surprisingly, when looking at hard borders, Mrozewicz finds that Russians function as the ultimate Other. It is when the notion of borders as boundary is introduced that the analysis gets interesting. This is developed in chapter 2, which revolves around spy narratives. Here Mrozewicz makes use of the soft border perspective and the ways in which the infiltrator is in fact a symbol of subverted nationalism, a symbol of the constructive feature of swearing allegiance to just one nation. I liked this chapter the most as it manages to move beyond the typical stereotypes of the Nordic other.

The chapters on the connection across the Baltic Sea (chapter 3) and the guilt and shame in transnational space (chapter 4) are less surprising, but important for the establishment of boundary framework where identities on the periphery are negotiated. There are solid readings of important films in the genre of trafficking, brides-to-order and prostitution, which can prove interesting for scholars not familiar with Nordic cinemas. In chapter 5, men in military uniform are examined, but these representations are found mostly in films about Russia, which connects the analysis to the recent perception of contemporary Russia rather than Russia of the 1990s. Again, various materials are presented for analysis, but the main point is to paint the militarised (Russian) body as standing against, or contrary, to the self-perception of the pacifistic Nordic identity. It is a clever construction that hits its target of a Nordic mirage of what once was, but is no more. In short, it is an illusion of self that Mrozewicz is exposing here.

The Nordic identity created during the Cold War under progressive social democracies that were peaceful has ceased to exist and Mrozewicz's argues that

this is a consequence of the fall of Communism. Postcommunism and neoliberal market reforms have eroded the welfare states to a degree that aggressive nationalism is just as ripe in the Nordic countries as it is in Eastern Europe. History is no longer at an end, as proclaimed by Fukuyama, and *Beyond Eastern Noir* makes this clear by talking about a 'beyond' the divides that separated countries. Postcommunism has evolved into anti-liberal and anti-immigration nationalism, which is just as ludicrous as the utopian victory of liberal democracies. This signals the end of the postcommunist condition, which should make us rethink how we compartmentalise the study of national, regional and transnational cinemas. Is it not more plausible to divide Eastern European as well as Nordic films into ideological categories? For example, being for or against social liberalism?

The last chapter is based around the idea of the home and, in particular, the notion of *folkhem* (people's home), on which the Nordic identity largely rests. Mrozewicz here takes the ghostly presence of the Polish labour migrant travelling to repair or maintain the Nordic house/home. It is a strong metaphor that she is working with, arguing that Postcommunism has eroded this structure so strongly that it threatens the foundation on which it is built. In the films, the Poles have the upper hand on their hosts, as they see through the constructedness of the Nordic mirage. They are 'catalyst heroes' who spark a change in the Nordic protagonists (182). In this perspective, *Norden* is in crisis and the East is where the key to change is located, as in *Four Week of June* (2005) where the protagonists leave for Poland at the end of the film. I am not entirely convinced by the argument, as I am missing a larger discussion of the supposed nostalgia for this *folkhem*. For example, Gabriela Pichler's *Eat Sleep Die* (2012) uses Eastern European characters to critique the neoliberal economy, but without a nostalgia for a *folkhem*.

Pointing to other omissions could open up the analysis for criticism, since the object of study, the Nordic self-perception, slips through our fingers as the sand on a Baltic Sea beach. For example, the Nordic crisis of identity, which Mrozewicz points out as key to the understanding of the changes Postcommunism inflicts on the Nordic countries, might be an inherent crisis always already buried in the construction of *Norden*. This is the thesis that Iver B Neumann proposed in *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), where he points out an internal/external duality in the formation of the Nordic identity. There has never been a Nordic identity formation that was pure and stable. It has always been built on an inclination to find similarities that united, and differences that separated the countries. Mrozewicz's analysis could have been more sensitive toward the changing historical contexts in this identity formation. This does not make Mrozewicz's method of analysis wrong, but it does expose the problem of scrutinising collective regional identities. This is why I think Mrozewicz's challenge to Eastern European cinema scholars is interesting. Would it be possible to construct an analysis of Eastern European identity formation and the crisis thereof by examining Eastern European moving images of Nordic characters?