

Identity, Distinction and Social Spaces; film culture and the challenging of modernity

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Schober, Anna: *The Cinema Makers. Public life and the exhibition of difference in south-eastern and central Europe since the 1960s.* Bristol/Chicago: Intellect, 2013.

Abstract:

In this book, Anna Schober analyses alternative film cultural circles that emerged in Germany, Austria, and Yugoslavia during the 1960s. Through an examination of discourses, films, institutions, and networks as well as interviews with some of the protagonists, she focuses on these movements which (often acting on a transnational level) challenged the homogeneity of modernity in their works and discourses, but also in the way they redefined cinema as a social institution up until now. The volume offers not only a reevaluation of an often ignored aspect of film culture, but also its reinterpretation within a broader social context under different cultural and political circumstances.

The process of growing politicisation and theorisation that characterised the 'new cinemas' from the second part of the 1960s onwards has usually been interpreted within the scope of a national film history, focusing on the developments taking place in Western Europe or the USA. Anna Schober, visiting professor at Justus Liebig University Giessen concentrates in her new book on a different European region that includes Western Germany, Austria, and Yugoslavia. Through an examination of discourses, films, institutions, and networks as well as interviews with some of the protagonists, she analyses these movements which (often acting on a transnational level) challenged the 'homogeneity of modern order' (47f.) in their works and discourses, but also in the way they redefined cinema within a social context.

Her approach is similar to those of the 'New Film History', especially with its interest in cinema as a place of social interaction. This book, though, is not mainly about 'classical cinema' itself but about certain productions and essential forms of distribution, consumption, and discussion that often challenge the more traditional assumptions in each of these fields. Schober proposes a reevaluation of the cinematic 'apparatus' from a film-sociological perspective within the set of influences of artistic and cultural life in diverse south-eastern and central European cities from 1968 onwards. She argues that most of these movements in different geographical contexts and temporal frames can be seen as part of a tendency to challenge a 'modernist' universalism (often in a political or national form) trying to eliminate ambivalence. Following this path, she takes her reader on a trip from the 1960s to the years following the beginning of the new millennium, from Cologne or Munich to Belgrade, Hamburg or Vienna.

The author explicitly refuses to develop a systematic theoretical framework (7). In the first chapter she chooses to outline the main concepts that will guide her analysis instead, especially 'social space' (H. Lefèbvre), which she believes to be central to understanding the role of cinema as a social institution against modernity's attempt to eliminate ambivalence (48f.). In the longer and, thematically, particularly inspiring second chapter, Schober focuses on those grassroots initiatives (mostly groups of films activists) that arose around 1968 in different central European cities in opposition to the 'old', traditional cinema. She shows for instance that in metropolitan areas such as Belgrade or Vienna cinemas played a central role in generating places of social involvement – 'social spaces' – that for Schober are also places of political, social, and aesthetic struggle. Those social spaces question traditional assumptions about the differentiation between producers and consumers through the invention of new cinema rituals "affirming the 'innovativeness' and 'individuality' of the acting subject" (37). Within a broader frame Schober argues that cinema's function in the creation of a public sphere persists in spite of the challenges posed by the new media; mainly as a reaction to the 'privatisation' and 'fragmentation' that goes along with them.

The third chapter presents two longer essays focusing on filmmakers and new forms of challenging homogeneity. Schober deals initially with the early films of Rainer W. Fassbinder and focuses on the way these works represent 'otherness' in a way that usually connects sexuality and politics. Dušan Makavejev's work during the late sixties and early seventies and Srđan Karanovčić's *Virginia* (1991) are analysed in the second part of the chapter, this time focusing on questions of sexual and aesthetic difference or rather on the way these were often interpreted in political terms (176f.).

The fourth chapter takes a leap to the 1990s in Germany, Austria, Serbia, and Croatia, and shows how 'ambivalence' takes form this time through humor/irony (Low-Fi-Video conventions) and the redefini-

tion of social spaces – such as in the German urban initiative *A Wall is a Screen* or in the activities of the Schikaneder and Topkino cinemas in Vienna.

Regarding these diverse fields of interest, the scope of Schober's work is overwhelming: institutions, film movements, film-enthusiasts and filmmakers are well represented in its 220 pages; 45 interviews were conducted during the preparation of this project. The various forms of 'difference' (cultural, sexual, political,...) challenging the 'homogeneity' of modernity also help to show the way aesthetic, politic, or ethnic questions were often intertwined; they furthermore modified not only the way films were made, distributed or interpreted but also the role of cinema itself as a central institution in these countries. At the same time this huge analytical scope, comprising the way politics, aesthetics, sociology, and film relate to each other in different times and places makes it difficult for the reader, at some points, to connect particular examples with broader theoretical debates.

All in all, this volume proposes a convincing, refreshing, and inspiring interpretation of almost forty years of film activism in central and south-eastern Europe: it not only directs our focus to regions and alternative film cultural milieus often ignored, but it also points out similar developments in diverse political systems and connects them to a broader social development. This book deserves to be widely read and discussed.

German Abstract:

Identität, Distinktion und soziale Räume; Filmkultur und die Herausforderungen der Moderne

Im vorliegenden Band analysiert Anna Schober alternative filmkulturelle Kreise in Deutschland, Österreich und Jugoslawien von den 1960er Jahren bis in die Gegenwart. Mittels der Film- und Diskursanalyse, der Erforschung von einzelnen Institutionen und Netzwerken sowie Interviews richtet die Autorin ihren analytischen Blick auf diese vielfältigen Bewegungen. Oft auf internationaler Ebene agierend, hinterfragten sie in ihren Filmen, den begleitenden Diskursen sowie durch die Besetzung des öffentlichen Raums die kulturelle und soziale Homogenität der Moderne auf unterschiedlichste Art.

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