

University of Theatre and Film Arts  
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# **Women's Perspectives in Eastern European Experimental Film**

Theses of the doctoral dissertation

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This dissertation explores the thematic and formal features of non-narrative experimental films made by women artists in Poland, Hungary and Romania during state socialism. The analysis focuses on the critical aspects of the selected films highlighting potential feminist and political interpretations. I argue that these moving image works express criticism through individual strategies utilizing various “camouflage techniques”. Besides addressing the oppressive politics of the regime and the patriarchal setting of the state socialist society, they investigate the restrictive nature of dominant artistic discourses and shed light on the discriminative mechanisms of dissident art. The dissertation aims to illustrate the ways these films reflect on the local conditions, and articulate the professional and personal realities of the artists.

The analytical approach utilizes Piotr Piotrowski’s concept of horizontal art history and therefore aims to consequently distance itself from all master narratives that impose predetermined meanings on the subject. In terms of Eastern European art, the vertical narrative considers Western art as universal, and refers to its position as the center, while placing Eastern European art on the margins. Within this narrative the center determines the dominant paradigms, while the art of the margins is seen as peripheral. Detaching the concept of critical geography from the horizontal approach, the dissertation reflects on the central position of the male artist in Eastern European art history and on the discriminatory practice of art historians that often dismisses and marginalizes the achievements of women. In terms of Eastern European experimental film, the central position is usually occupied by either the Western avant-garde or the different genres of narrative cinema. Non-narrative experimental films are discussed and evaluated mainly in relation to these categories. Moving image works made by women are strikingly underrepresented even in those publications that focus on experimental films produced in the region. During my investigation into the works of Polish, Hungarian and Romanian women artists, I aim to dissociate the subject from all these reference points, and demonstrate a critical approach when referring to them.

To implement the concept of horizontal art history and expose the discriminatory hierarchy of the vertical narrative, it is crucial to explore and secure new alliances, and base the analysis on a dialogue between different discourses. Therefore my dissertation relies heavily on interdisciplinarity, it exempts the films from the constraints of a purely artistic discourse, and follows an analytical method that integrates aspects of other disciplines to investigate the topic. It examines various social, political and cultural conditions and even incorporates some findings from a field that is considered radical in relation to experimental film history, namely sexology.

Even though the dissertation introduces different critical interpretations reflecting on the political, social and cultural realities of the artists, all argumentations are guided by a feminist approach. In terms of feminist theories, the dissertation applies a synthesizing theoretical framework, that is linked to the tradition of critical cultural research. The analysis abandons the theory of the textually positioned spectator, and asserts the viewpoint of the critical, socially aware spectator, who plays an active role in the production of meanings. The text reflects on achievements related to various schools of feminist theories, but refrains from relying on purely psychoanalytic theories. When approaching the moving image works discussed in the dissertation, critics usually apply the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Freud to decode meanings, they refer to them without critically acknowledging their phallogocentrism. I argue that the main purpose of these, often forced analytical approaches, is to legitimize Eastern European art by creating a bridge between the East and the West. To implement the horizontal approach promoted by Piotrowski, the dissertation prioritizes interpretations which imply a closer connection to the social realities of the artists. By revealing the locally embedded, feminist interpretations, the text aims to question a dominant view, according to which the films included in the dissertation (and feminist art produced during state socialism in general) follow Western models, and convey universal, naïve and simplistic messages.

The investigation extends to three countries, Poland, Hungary and Romania, as in these countries the state allowed, or at least overlooked the formation of moving image workshops where filmic experimentation was supported: the Balázs Béla Studio (BBS) in Budapest, the Workshop of the Film Form (WFF) in Warsaw and kinema ikon in Arad. Even though these three workshops serve as relevant reference points, the analysis is not restricted to these groups, as besides six women, all other artists operated outside these circles. Considering the Polish context, the exploration, or the creation of alternative spaces was essential for women artists interested in filmic experimentation, as throughout its seven years of operation WFF did not invite a female member to join the group. The dissertation only considers the workshops in relation to women artists, and provides critical assessment on both the organisational structures and the artistic approaches of the Romanian and the Polish workshops.

The analysis distances itself from the so-called traditional filmic discourse, and instead focuses on the fine (and performance) art context. This decision is justified by the dissertation's aim to reveal the everyday professional realities of women, and therefore prioritize the discourses which had the biggest impact on their artistic lives, most defined their relationship towards moving image art, and influenced the structure and referentiality of their work.

The structure of the dissertation follows a narrowing perspective. After introducing the theoretical framework, the text examines selected aspects of the politics of women's emancipation in state socialist Poland, Hungary and Romania, and critically investigates the relationship between feminism and communism. The argument does not dispute the impact of policy measures adopted by the communist regime to promote legal and economic equality. Also, it strictly refrains from the comparative analysis between Western and Eastern feminism, which usually means to expect the initiatives of women living in totalitarian, state socialist countries to follow the narratives of feminist movements based in democratic capitalist societies. However, since the dissertation represents a critical approach towards the system, this chapter aims to highlight the barriers to women's empowerment. Through the investigation of concepts, like the construction of the female communist subject, it analyses the conflicting role expectations for women, and by pointing out shifts in reproductive politics and events that show the intensification of the anti-feminist rhetoric, it demonstrates the phenomenon of backlash against women's rights. This chapter aims to provide an overview of the gradual transformations that took place in in the last two decades of state socialism. In the countries subjected to the analysis, these changes resulted in the re-traditionalization of gender roles and came with the development of a certain kind of alliance between the state and its men. The patriarchal structure of the state socialist society got more and more exposed.

The next section of the dissertation investigates the various factors that may have hindered the development of critical feminist art in Poland, Romania and Hungary. It focuses on circumstances that go beyond the political and social constraints discussed earlier. After a brief overview of some of the key feminist art initiatives, the text disputes another widespread assumption, which suggests that the evolution of feminist discourse in the region depended on the availability of feminist concepts that supposedly came from the West. It challenges the one-sided narrative of Western feminism as "the norm". The chapter then examines factors that contributed to the limitation of women's artistic representation, and to the denial of the artistic legitimacy of women's experiences. The argument covers various topics, including the anti-communist opposition's attitude towards women's equality, the politically motivated erosion of feminism, and the resulting difficulties of feminist identification, the protracted dominance of modernist art, the (self-)positioning of the male artist as a genius, and – in the case of Poland – the influence of the Catholic Church. This chapter aims to prove that the development of feminist art in the region is by no means only hindered by the directives of the communist regime, and that the political opposition and certain dissident art practices also contributed to the suppression of women's artistic freedom.

The fourth chapter investigates the possibilities of women's agency and artistic participation, and the representation of feminist and socially critical topics within the three main experimental film workshops. In terms of the Polish scene this section gives an overview of other art spaces, which serve as alternatives for women who were excluded from the WFF to experiment with moving image art. This brief inquiry suggests that of the three main workshops, the experimental film section of the BBS is only the one, that openly supports a socially conscious approach to cinematic art, and encourages the representation of political dissent. Nevertheless, non-narrative films produced here refrain from openly exploring feminist topics. The chapter sheds light on the (social) dynamics of art groups, that, in some cases, developed male-centered hierarchies, which resulted in women being assigned supporting or lower status roles. The section also reflects on the often vulnerable position of women artists, their professional dependence on men in power positions. It argues that women who wished to explore experimental film practices had to overcome great difficulties, and even use the support of influential men to gain access to film. This resulted in a peculiar status, which resonates in the formal and thematic features of several Romanian and Polish films.

The next three chapters divide the films in three thematic units, and explore how the social, political and artistic factors influenced women's experimental films, how they shaped their particular formal features and how they correspond with the represented topics. The analysis puts a great emphasis on the artistic representation of the sexualized and naked female body, as due to its exposure to exploitative political and economic power, it served as the front line of resistance. The investigation into the moving image works created by Natalia LL and Teresa Tyszkiewicz aims to illustrate that, contrary to prevailing interpretations, the films reflect on various local features of the Polish state socialist context. In addition to the totalitarian functioning of the regime, the anti-feminist indoctrination of the Catholic Church, the discriminatory (and apolitical) tendencies in unofficial art, and the domination of conceptual art discourse are also the subject of criticism. The analysis then focuses on films made by Ewa Partum, Jolanta Marcolla, Jadwiga Singer, Ágnes Háy and Dóra Maurer and investigates their subversive strategies to question the hegemony of conceptual art and to incorporate disguised political messages utilizing the structural film form. In the films of Irena Nawrot, Izabella Gustowska, Marcela Muntean, Anna Kutera, Roxana Chereches, Liliana Trandabur, Jadwiga Singer, Geta Brătescu and Lenke Szilágyi the dissertation identifies a diversity of approaches towards artistic resistance and various critical themes associated with women's agency. They emphasize the limitation of possibilities, the urge to break out of the suffocating confinements and the inevitability or even necessity of confrontation.

The aim of the second part of the dissertation is to provide evidence through the analysis of selected moving image works, that illustrate the different strategies women artists explored to engage in critical dialogue with their environment. The overall objective is to demonstrate that experimental films made by women in Poland, Hungary and Romania during state socialism, exhibit clear intensions to critically reflect on the social, political and cultural realities of their time. They uncover the locally embedded struggles of women, expose various oppressive and discriminatory practices and challenge hegemonies of power and the status quo.