

Virginás, Andrea, 2021. *Film Genres in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema: History, Theory and Reception*. Lanham, MA: Lexington Books. 339 pp.

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East-Central European audiences have enjoyed international and domestic genre-films since the early 1930s, a time when white-telephone melodramas dominated the screens. Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns produced in the 1960s in Italy also became instant cult classics in the Soviet Bloc. Historical dramas, detective thrillers, and romantic melodramas were likewise imported as well as domestically produced even during those sparsest years of Eastern European filmmaking. More recently, Hollywood and domestic genre-films draw audiences in numbers that dwarf the much-revered local independent art-film movements. Within this context, Andrea Virginás's monograph, *Film Genres in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema: History, Theory and Reception* promises a comprehensive and fresh look at genre cinema within the East-Central European context. Focusing on Hungary and Romania, the author proposes an examination of the concept of "genre" as a creative space where global and local, national and transnational works can come together and interact with each other forming new and unique, hybrid cinematic texts.

In Chapter One, Virginás lays out the "Conceptual Foundations, Corpus, and Methodology" of her investigation. This chapter also presents the author's main hypothesis that "the characteristics of twenty-first century Hungarian and Romanian cinema that define their small cinematic status on the global scale can be related to the aesthetic and poetic practice of adopting film genre elements – usually classical Hollywood in origin – within their own domestic (small) national contexts" (11). Chapter Two is an overview of the history of genre films in Hungary and Romania, divided into three distinct periods: the pre-communist, the communist and the post-communist. This chapter attempts to reconstruct a highly condensed history of Hungarian and Romanian national cinemas, including production and distribution mechanisms, as well as an overview of main periods from the silent-film era all the way to the present.

The third chapter presents a detailed explanation of the concept of "small nation cinemas" based on the 2007 *The Cinema of Small Nations*, co-edited by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie. Virginás then applies this theoretical framework specifically to Hungarian and Romanian genre cinemas to make a case about the existence of unique "artistic-generic hybrid" films – a blend of genre elements with auteur cinema – as characteristic of Hungarian and Romanian film traditions. The author dedicates Chapter Four to expanding her main argument by contextualizing regional cinema within a larger framework of European genre-films. Here she

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outlines three main characteristics that hybrid auteur-genre cinema adopted from mainstream European and Hollywood genre film. First, they are often serialized; second, they frequently benefit from high production value; and, last but not least, they rely on predominantly male domestic stars. All these characteristics are intended to attract large audiences and thus ensure the producers' commercial success.

Wishing to further explore and exemplify some of the general contentions about Hungarian and Romanian film of the previous chapters, Chapters Five through Ten provide six case studies of various genres of the two countries including melodrama, crime films, film noir, western, thriller, horror and science fiction. In Chapter Five, Virginás argues that unlike Hollywood renderings, Hungarian and Romanian melodramas are characterized by "the hybridization of spatial confinement with audiovisual excess and explicit emotional loss" (144). Illustrating this blend, she groups together Westerns, gangster films and thrillers. The author's discussion in Chapter Six is focused mainly on Westerns, and she argues that the Hungarian and Romanian hybrid versions of this genre displace collective trauma, while transforming its concerns from national or ethnic or cultural into social and geographical ones. Yet, as happens in the American prototype, the East-Central European adaptation of this genre feature mainly male protagonists and issues, with women figures serving as auxiliaries, ornaments or coefficients of romantic subplots. In Chapter Seven, addressing the genres of horror and science fiction, Virginás stresses the differences rather than the similarities between source and variant. It turns out that Hungarian and Romanian horror and sci-fi films do not blend human and alien elements. Rather, they focus on physical and moral diseases, and sometimes the former are shown to be but the external expression of the latter. Chapter Eight explores the Hungarian and Romanian hybridized versions of crime and detective movies arguing that "crime deception films have been developing a stream where the ideal of the analog and the methodology of the immediacy are prevalent, and another strand, digitization, pervades everything and hypermediacy is a default" (234).

Chapter Nine is dedicated to postclassical adaptations of film noir, while in Chapter Ten Virginás looks at the concept of stardom and more specifically at female stars. She makes the case that Hungarian and Romanian female stars differ from their Hollywood counterparts in that they are "non-narcissistic, self-effacing and unglamorous" (74). Finally, Chapter Eleven is a conclusion and a summary of the main tendencies and characteristics of Hungarian and Romanian film genres. Here, referring to Hollywood-style generic building-blocks in auteur-style cinema, Virginás calls for a "dynamic and non-static canonicity" that is actually the "arthouse generic model" as a way to better understand Romanian and Hungarian genre films (295).

Throughout her study, Virginás provides extensive evidence to support her claims about a unique and pronounced "medium-concept film" tradition (as termed by Andrew Nestingen in several of his 2010s works about Scandinavian cinema) that is widespread in small-nation cinemas such as those of Hungary and Romania. Her account of the various generic building-blocks to be found in the auteur film traditions of the two nations is accurate and thorough. However, the title of the monograph is misleading in that it promises an overview of the history, theory and reception of *film genres*, while the films analyzed in the book are not genre movies. The examples that the author provides, as well as her theoretical argument, focus on independent artistic movies that - in a more or less pronounced way - include certain narrative or visual elements of genre cinema rather than on the actual robust genre-film convention that both countries clearly have. In addition, although the author devotes a couple of pages at the end of

each chapter to close analyses of films, often, these portions feel more like afterthoughts to the lengthy theoretical discussions.

It is beyond any doubt that Virginás is aware of the well-defined and long-standing history of genre cinema in Hungary and Romania from the 1930s all the way to the present, including many films that confine themselves much more clearly to Hollywood standards and have been historically popular with audiences. A few Hungarian examples of this tradition include: the action-thrillers *Európa Expressz* [Europe Express] (Csaba Horváth, 1998) and *Halálkeringő* [Death Waltz] (Krisztián Köves, 2010); the war movie *Drága Elza!* [Dear Elza!] (Zoltán Füle, 2014); and crime films such as *Délibáb* [Mirage] (Szabolcs Hajdu, 2014) and *Viszkis* [The Whiskey Robber] (Antal Nimród, 2017). Given the number and variety of these more typical genre-films in the countries under study, the title of the book becomes misleading as the study turns out to focus on a significantly different kind of cinematic tradition than it promises. It is true that the films included in the discussion do carry generic traces to a greater or lesser degree (e.g. there is murder, there is investigation, there is love), but overall they mostly belong in the independent art-house and auteur-cinema traditions; very few critics would think of them as "genre films" or even hybrids. Based on the actual body of films that Virginás looks at, a more accurate argument would point to the unique ways in which Hollywood-style generic elements show up in Hungarian and Romanian *auteur* movies (sometimes satirically, sometimes reflectively).

Another issue that obscures the clarity of the argument is the lengthy theorization that dominates not only the introduction but every chapter. The summaries and explanations of various theories related to genre, communication, and media are so extensive that they hardly leave any space for Virginás to describe actual examples and cite filmic evidence for her theoretical claims. Initially, the author promises to explain a hybrid genre-art cinema in Hungary and Romania within the framework of Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie's concept of "small-nation cinemas," as well as in light of Itamar Even-Zohar's cultural-linguistic "polysystems" theory. However, as the monograph unfolds, every chapter introduces several new theories, including extensive summaries and contextualizations. Just to give one example, in Chapter Eight, which is supposed to describe crime films, Virginás spends several pages explaining the concept of "immediation" and "hypermediation" related to David Jay Bolter and Robert Grusin's work on digital media. Such disproportionately long theoretical explanations come at the expense of analyzing the actual films themselves, the much-needed evidence for Virginás's theoretical assertions.

Even if one takes Virginás's argument about the existence of a hybrid-genre film tradition at face value, one still wonders about the principle behind her decisions to include in her study certain genres and leave out others. While she devotes chapters to western, horror and sci-fi films, which are not very common in the East-Central European region, she leaves out genres that have a clearer and more robust presence, such as historical drama, war film and romantic comedy. Finally, it also needs to be said that as is, the prose of this study is often too convoluted and thus burdensome; had the monograph gone through a more rigorous editing, its complex ideas and discussions could have come through more lucidly, especially in the eyes of non-academic lovers of film. On the whole, despite certain flaws, *Film Genres in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema: History, Theory and Reception* manages to rethink art house and auteur style cinema in East-Central European film by pointing at the presence of a whole range of foreign, mainly American generic elements in the film traditions, or industries, of the two nations at the center of this study.