



Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe. Visual Culture and the Reconstruction of Public Space

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Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe is a massive account of a wide variety of productions that fall under the large umbrella of “non-fiction”: short films, sponsored reels, ephemerals, documentaries, newsreels, industrial films, and home movies. The period covered in the book starts in 1946 and ends in 1956, even though, as stated in the introduction, neither dates should be taken as rigid endpoints. Rather, these dates represent key transitional moments in European history: the end of War World II on the one hand and, on the other, the year of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, of the repression of anti-communist and anti-Soviet demonstrations in Poland and Hungary, and the rise of television. In the book, “Europe” is also a space with soft boundaries rather than national borders, and in which the divide of the “Iron Curtain” is contested to understand connections and continuities in how film contributed to the construction of individual and collective identities by showing, telling, and recollecting the reconstruction of cities and economies. The book covers a wide territory from a transnational perspective, challenging national categories of film historiography and contesting traditional divisions, particularly,

between “East” and “West.” The open territory is framed, in the book, through the lens of public and private spaces (respectively, threatened by the rise of depoliticized consumer culture and lost during the time of Fascist and Nazi rule, and of war). Analyses of case studies are coherently advanced with the common understanding that film, as a technology able to represent and recollect realities, had a crucial function during the postwar period in suturing the fractures caused by personal and collective traumatic experiences, political divides, and ideological conflicts.

There are seventeen articles included in the book divided in four sections, plus a preface and an introduction, making for an impressive volume of almost five hundred pages. While the size of the book may seem daunting, the standalone articles are loosely organized into sections that do not necessarily need to be read in order. In addition, a brief overview at the beginning of each section and abstracts at the beginning of each essay allow for a selective read, which can also be conducive to create new connections between case studies. Section 1 “Locating Non-Fiction Film” opens the volume with five essays that approach non-fiction cinema from the point of view of



where it can be located, considering this question both in the relationship between filmic and profilmic (where is the reality represented?) and from the point of view of circulation (where was the film screened?). This is perhaps the most unfocused of the five sections, for the essays are not really connected thematically but by virtue of their broader scope on the book's field of inquiry. Section 2 "Reconstructing realities" is rather more cohesive in terms of its focus, centred around the devastation of the continent during War World II and the efforts by national and international agencies to rebuild not only cities, infrastructures, and industrial sites, but also political institutions and economic systems. All the films discussed in this section promote such agencies as effective in implementing projects to the benefit of society, with the goal of supporting the system that put them in place (either capitalist or communist). Section 3 is also interested in the reconstruction of European cities and economies but with a specific focus on the relationship between spaces (especially, cities in ruins) and the trauma of war. Titled "Spaces of Cultural Trauma," this section features articles on how in different countries, whether they went through the war as occupied territory or as invader, films similarly functioned as tool to heal the visible and invisible scars left by War World II. Comparative analyses are key in this section, with articles focusing on Italian, Polish, German, French cinemas as well as on the relations between European countries (United Kingdom, France and Italy) and their ex-colonies (respectively, Togoland, Cameroun, and Somalia). The last section "Creating New Paths" presents three unique contributions on the accessibility and uses of non-fiction films: on the employment of footage of the liberated concentration and extermination camps by the Allies in compilation films of the postwar period; on the structure and goals of the online exhibition "Frames of Reconstruction"; and on the pedagogical


toolkit prepared by some of the authors in the book. The last two articles are relevant to educators who are interested in using digitized filmic representations of the reconstruction period in their classrooms.

Among the many articles included in the book a few stand out either for their unique topic or because they neatly summarize the main questions at stake in the book. "From Rubble to Ruins," written by Francesco Pitassio, Johannes Praetorius-Their, and Perrine Val is a splendid introduction to the political functions played by non-fiction films in the joint reconstruction of physical spaces and social fabric. In "Finding the Best Time for Shorts," Lucie Česálková focuses on film consumption in "non-stop cinemas" in Czechoslovakia, using both distribution data and oral interviews to ask how this form of screening was able to more effectively permeate people's daily routines and thus perceptions of reality. Finally, "Screening Dortmund in Ruins" make visible the work of Elisabeth Wilms, an amateur filmmaker who shot the city centre of Dortmund in the immediate postwar period unexpectedly providing cultural, educational, and political institutions with visual elements to recollect the past.

Non-Fiction Cinema in Postwar Europe is the endpoint of a research project undertaken by a team of researchers from France, Italy, the Czech Republic, and Germany: ViCTOR-E (Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration and Reconstruction in Post-WWII Europe), which ran from 2019-2022. It reflects, in its wide scope and array of essays, the project's effort to build a transnational scholarly community, "a European research area, a shared sphere for the exchange of ideas and knowledge" (18). Overall, the book fulfils this mission, offering readers a varied picture of a complex historical period in which national realities enter in a productive dialogue with each other. Evidently, the volume cannot be exhaustive, leaving out some national contexts and placing great-

er emphasis on a few countries (France, Italy, East and West Germany, and Czechoslovakia). At the same time, the overall cohesiveness of the book's research questions across its sections makes up for the somewhat selected view that is typical of edited volumes. The "spatial turn" on film and cultural analyses shared by authors shed light on differences and continuities in the films that represented reconstruction of European nations and the making of new imag(inari)es for their inhabitants.

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