



Rethinking the Cinematic Cold War: The Struggle for Hearts and Minds Goes Global

Edited by Stefano Pisu, Francesco Pitassio, and
Maurizio Zinni

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A series of light, breezy, and translucent curtains is the first image that comes to mind when reading the collection of essays edited by Stefano Pisu, Francesco Pitassio, and Maurizio Zinni, which describes a cinematic Cold War characterized by so many exchanges, connections, and crossings that the idea of a single, rigid, and impenetrable Iron Curtain, erected between two opposing blocs, and that of a Hitchcockian *Torn Curtain* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1966) through which the circulation of information seems possible only through defection or, as in the film's finale, daring escapes across the Baltic Sea in wicker baskets, seem ill-fitting. More fitting is György Péteri's vivid metaphor of a "Nylon Curtain," which suggests that Cold War culture should be viewed not simply as the product of "hostile incommunicability" or mutual suspicion between two opposing camps, but as the result of "economic, cultural, and political inter-penetration between East and West" and "strong osmotic tendencies that were globalizing knowledge" (Péteri 2004: 114–5). Pisu, Pitassio and Zinni use Péteri's metaphor to propose a reappraisal of the history of film culture during the Cold War, moving beyond bipolarism to emphasise the intricate network of relationships, interests and individuals involved. "Multilevel" and "multipolar" are the two key concepts that recur throughout the edited collection and guide

its investigations; the wide range of cases covered in the book—fifteen chapters which, taken together, cover a period ranging from the late 1930s to the mid-1980s, and a geographical area extending from Italy to China, and Chile—helps to think about Cold War film culture both as a network of professional and personal relationships extending at the State level and at the level of non-governmental organizations and individuals, and as the result of a series of encounters and exchanges that took place not only between superpowers, but also outside, across and on the margins of their boundaries (5–6). The international scope of Cold War Film Studies (Shaw and Youngblood 2010) is very much present in this work, which does not overlook the effects of "socialist internationalism" (Babiracki and Jersild 2016; Salazkina 2023) promoted by Soviet political and cultural institutions and later spread within the Non-Aligned Movement, nor the role played by festivals and other international gatherings in producing culture and fostering exchanges "in a protected arena" under the banner of a (fragile) "egalitarian pan-nationalism" (Andrew 2009: 71–2). One of the collection's main strengths is the seamless integration of an international perspective with an equally fruitful transnational one, further developing a trend already discernible in earlier works devoted to Cold War cinema (Djagalov 2020; Lee 2020; Salazkina



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2023). The movement of people, objects and ideas along trade routes that are not always official and international—not only sanctioned by the state or parastatal bodies, but also by commercial enterprises and cultural associations or organised on private initiative (Hannerz 1996)—is in fact a theme present in all chapters and a central issue in many of them. In many cases, this is what Mette Hjort has defined as “affinitive transnationalism”, developed on the basis of cultural or ideological affinities or “in connection with shared problems or commitments” (Hjort 2009: 17); in others, transnational exchanges and encounters occur out of opportunism or chance. Due to the complexity of the processes of transnational circulation and production of film culture, the study of the actors and interests that are involved can lead to valuable findings, especially if the investigation employs a multidisciplinary, multilingual and, if necessary, collaborative approach (even just for the source-gathering phase). The ability to work with widely heterogeneous sources, produced in different cultural and linguistic contexts, distinguishes the work of all the authors who contributed to the edited collection.

The contributions are divided into three sections, dealing respectively with the artefacts and initial phase of the cinematic Cold War (“At the Onset: Super-Powers, the Struggle for Europe, the Extension of the Conflict”), with Soviet international film policy during a period of decolonisation and fragmentation within the socialist countries (“Film Diplomacy: Non-Aligned Countries, Decolonization and New Opportunities”), and with the new geopolitical shifts resulting from the weakening influence of the Soviet bloc and increasing processes of globalization (“From Rising Suns to a Slow Sunset: Cooperation, Disillusionment, and Transfers”). Each of these three sections offers insights into the multipolar and multilevel nature of the relationships that shaped film culture during the different phases of the Cold War. Some contributors to the collection discuss in their chapters the links that emerged at the dawn of the Cold War between foreign policy, cultural diplo-

macy and cinema, focusing on examples of the film policies of the two superpowers, as Zinni and Pisu do in their chapters, or examining particular figures, institutions or political entities, as do Gianluca della Maggiore, Marsha Siefert, Rosemary Feurer, and Charles Musser. Several authors explore cases of film diplomacy, film circulation, and cultural competition in the larger international and transnational scenario, describing exchanges, contacts, and tensions between different interests and ideologies in France (Perrine Val), Yugoslavia (Pitassio), India (Severyan Dyakonov), China (Elena Razlogova), Mexico (Israel Rodríguez), Chile (Margherita Moro), Mali and Guinea (Gabrielle Chomentowski). Finally, in their chapters, Dina Iordanova, Catriona Kelly and Sergei Zhuk shed light on some cultural trends and tipping points at the industrial level, as well as in film exchange and exhibition, which signal the unstoppable crisis of Soviet film institutions and policies in the final phase of the (cinematic) Cold War. In line with various studies conducted over the last decade on the different links between culture, ideology, institutions and diplomacy during the Cold War—studies that have addressed topics such as music (Fosler-Lussier 2015), art (Mikkonen, Scott-Smith and Parkkinen 2019), and books (Haddadian-Moghaddam and Scott-Smith 2025)—, the three editors of the volume have sought to broaden the scope of the discussion by considering film culture as both an important part of the “Cultural Cold War” (see Pisu et al. 2020), which they define as “cultural products and endeavours intended to achieve political goals during the Cold War”, and as part of Cold War culture, “that is, the production, circulation, and consumption of symbolic goods during this period” (3). Siefert’s discussion of filmmaker Sergei Gerasimov’s role as a cultural intermediary for the Soviet Union in the US and China, Iordanova’s study of the impact on Cold War cultural balances of the changes in curatorial policies at major European festivals after 1968, and Zhuk’s study on the reactions of KGB officials and Communist ideologists to the spread of genre cinema and alternative music among Soviet youth are

three good examples of how this dual perspective can develop from a single individual (Gerasimov), a cultural institution (film festivals) or groups with different interests (KGB officials and young Soviet viewers), and can be applied at the level of production, mediation and reception of film culture.

"Transnational creation and international exchange deal with mutual representations and reception practices. Too narrow an understanding of cinema during the Cold War [...] jeopardises the chances to fully grasp the much richer experience of circulation, consumption, appropriation, and cultural resistance" (260) maintain Pisu, Pitassio and Zinni, who, with this book, have demonstrated the breadth and variety of possible perspectives, still to be fully explored, in the study of both *cinematic* cultural Cold War and Cold War *film* culture. The sheer size of the subject that the editors have begun to explore leads to a consideration of the main "limitations" of this volume, which do not concern the essays themselves but are linked to more practical issues; in order to "rethink" a subject as vast as Cold War culture—even when limited to cinema—a large-scale, multidisciplinary project is needed to compare and connect history and micro-histories, and thoroughly explore multiple socio-cultural contexts. As with many edited collections whose titles are as ambitious as their objectives, such a project finds therefore its greatest "limitations" in the source accessibility and in the space (or, in other words, in the amount of paper) that time and available funds can grant to authors and editors. The fifteen chapters of the collection present fifteen partial perspectives on a multifaceted phenomenon that could, and should, be further investigated in subsequent volumes, for which the text edited by Pisu, Pitassio and Zinni will hopefully serve as a forerunner and example.

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