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Transnational Cinema and Ideology: Representing Religion, Identity and Cultural Myths

Abstract

This is a book review of *Transnational Cinema and Ideology: Representing Religion, Identity and Cultural Myths*, by Milja Radovic (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

Author Notes

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Transnational Cinema and Ideology: Representing Religion, Identity and Cultural Myths, by Milja Radovic (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

Films, as cultural products, transcend national borders. Films are co-produced by production companies from different countries, internationally distributed, and filmmakers are influenced by other filmmakers from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. In this sense, film is a *transnational* medium.

In her book, Milja Radovic is looking to expand the transnational perspective outlined above. She posits that the study of religion and film “need[s] a shift from production-based transnationalism towards the explorations of transnational cultural processes” (11), and aims to show how issues of religion, nationalism, identity, multiculturalism and otherness can be approached from the perspective of transnational cinema. She also wishes to demonstrate how these issues are interconnected with each other and with dominant ideologies.

Radovic’s book is logically and thematically structured, in a way comparable to the traditional three-act structure of film. In the first ‘act’, encompassing chapters 1 and 2, Radovic sets up the book by introducing the concept of transnationalism and explaining her aims, methodology, themes and choice of regions and films. The second act, chapters 3, 4 and 5, consists of analyses of films from the Balkans, Russia and United States. In the third act, chapters 6 and 7, she expands on the results of her analyses, comparing the results between the

three regions, and returns to the question of the possibilities of a transnational approach to cinema.

Radovic presents transnationalism as a complicated concept, encompassing a multitude of interpretations and approaches. Radovic's approach is perhaps best understood as exploring the relationship between local and global, not only in terms of how local and global cinema influence each other, but how our understanding of the local, or national, informs and is informed by our understanding of the global, or foreign. Her approach is not, however, post-national, as she recognizes that films have both national and transnational dimensions and considers transnational cinema "as an arena in which national and transnational intersect" (6). She argues that, while it is possible to talk of "national cinema", the concept is problematic. Besides the production-related transnationalism of cinema, the concept is undermined by its assumptions about the 'nation.' Nations are constructed and re-imagined as homogeneous communities, while in reality they are far more heterogeneous and allow for diversity in cinematic representations and interpretations. She also argues that the changeability of national borders further complicates the use of 'national cinema' as a category; is it possible to speak of a former Yugoslav national cinema after Yugoslavia's disintegration?

Radovic's approach to film analysis incorporates a wide range of categories, in her own words, "narrative, context, images and symbols, and critical reception" (3). With a focus on both mythological and ideological aspects of cinema, she is

able to fully exhaust the analytical possibilities of transnationalism and the result is lengthy and thorough discussions of Balkan, Russian and American cinema.

The primary reason for her selecting the cinemas of the Balkans and Russia for analysis is that the regions have experienced a post-communist religious revival and national reconstruction in which religion played a large part. Religion became a marker of national identity in the Balkans, with Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks, serving to separate a previously multiethnic Yugoslavia into several ethnically homogeneous nations. In Russia, on the other hand, Orthodoxy served to unite a multiethnic nation under a monocultural religious national identity. Radovic, coming from the former Yugoslavia, is also familiar with national and religious ideologies of the post-communist era, which is particularly visible in paragraphs providing historical and ideological context to her analyses of Balkan cinema.

The United States was chosen for different reasons. Hollywood films, due to their world-wide distribution, are essentially global films and are often taken to represent typically Western values and ideologies. Radovic uses American films, along with frequently cited philosopher Slavoj Žižek, to uncover American cultural myths and ideologies, primarily relating to otherness.

Her discussions on the cinema of the Balkans focus, on the one hand, on the relationship between the Balkans and the West and, on the other, on national and ethnic relations in the region. Radovic, drawing from the work of Frederick

Jameson, argues that Balkan filmmakers often use outsider stereotypes about people of the region, such as “the wild Balkan man” (38). Whether this is done for reasons of global marketing or subversiveness, or as a result of internalization, this *Western gaze* is, according to Radovic, best researched and approached from a transnational perspective.

The films analyzed in the chapter on the Balkans all carry themes of war, violence, and ethnic and religious conflict. One particularly interesting film in this category is Srdjan Dragojevic’s *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* (1995). Set during the civil war, it is the story of two childhood best friends, now enemies as one is Serb and the other Bosniak. Radovic argues that the controversial film may be read either as pro-Serbian propaganda or as a subversion of it. On the one hand, it asks audiences to sympathize with Serbs rather than Bosniaks and arguably frames the conflict as ‘no one’s fault.’ On the other hand, it can be read as exposing religious-nationalist Serbian ideological discourse as being partly responsible for the conflict.

The othering of different ethnic groups and particularly the antagonism between Serbs and Bosniaks is a common theme in Radovic’s analyses. Serbian films, for example Miroslav Lekic’s *The Knife* (1999), often portray the Muslim Bosniaks as the original aggressors and historical and mythical enemies, referring to them as ‘Turks,’ representatives of historical oppression at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. With Serbs portrayed as victims of the Bosniaks, this ideological discourse justifies Serbian war crimes as acts of vengeance or self-defense.

Radovic devotes most of her discussions on Balkan cinema to Serbia, and with good reason. The Serbian identity is strongly tied to Orthodoxy, for example in the *Svetosavlje* ideology. Defined by its proponents as a “unique form of Serbian Orthodoxy” (47), *Svetosavlje* emphasizes a strong monocultural, Orthodox Serbian nation and is explicitly anti-secularist and anti-Western. Serbian Orthodox nationalism views Serbs as a Chosen Nation, a recurring category of national myth that Radovic returns to in the cases of Russia and the United States, and as Christ-like martyrs in suffering and self-sacrifice. Both religious aspects of Serbian nationalist identity are the basis of *the Kosovo Myth*, which according to Radovic has had a significant impact on Serb society. A reinterpretation of a historical battle, the myth tells the story of how Duke Lazar was approached by God and offered to either win the battle, giving him the ‘kingdom of earth’ or die along with all his men and receive the ‘kingdom of heaven.’ Lazar chooses martyrdom for Christ and, in modern interpretations, defines the Serbian people as a Chosen Nation. A film adaptation by Zdravko Sotra, *The Battle of Kosovo*, was released in 1989, coinciding with the 600-year anniversary of the battle, at the rise of Serbian nationalism, and, according to Radovic, the film “strongly reflects the contemporary political ideology in Serbia and the nationalist perception of nationhood and Orthodoxy” (69).

Continuing the theme of a Chosen Nation, Radovic then moves her focus to Russia. In the cultural myths of Russia, the people are constructed as humble and

suffering, thereby preserving Christ and the sacredness of the nation. Radovic suggests that from this idea one can identify implicitly religious themes in Russian cinema, even in the dominant negative representations of religion of the Soviet era: representations of the people as a force for change; representations of collectivism; and representations of Christ-like suffering.

While implicit religious themes are found in Russian cinema irrespective of era, Radovic illustrates how representations of religion differ by comparing the soviet era *Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966) and the post-soviet *The Island* (Pavel Lungin, 2006). *Andrei Rublev* portrays faith as personal struggle and suffering, but emphasizes the role of the common people as the protagonist, a medieval painter and monk, has his faith restored “through the act of hope of a boy” (75). Artistic and rich in religious imagery, Radovic views the film as a transcendental experience. In contrast, *The Island* is a more explicitly Orthodox film, produced in the context of a Russian Orthodox revival. Radovic characterizes the film as “catechistic” (77), as it aims to present Orthodox concepts in a modern Russian context. She also notes that the film, through its main characters – an Orthodox priest and a communist general – presents Russian Orthodoxy as the only alternative to communism and the only path to salvation for the Russian people, reflecting contemporary religious-nationalist ideology.

Moving on to Hollywood cinema, Radovic distinguishes the American notion of a Chosen Nation from that of Serbia and Russia. Early Puritan settlers

viewed the newfound land as a place to establish a godly kingdom, with an important part to play in the events of Judgement Day. This millennial/post-millennial concept views the United States as “a God-chosen nation that has a ‘sacred’ role in the history of the world” (88). America represents prosperity, democracy and liberalism, and the ‘Other’ is anyone who represents different values or presents a threat to these values. In the post-9/11 era, the context of the films discussed in this section, the ‘Other’ is usually represented by Islam or, more generally, the ‘East’.

Radovic focuses most of her ideological analyses of Hollywood films on different portrayals of the ‘Other.’ In Zack Snyder’s *300* (2007), telling the story of the battle of Thermopylae, the brave outnumbered Spartans fight off a horde of invading Persians. Often read to symbolize the threat the ‘East’ poses to Western liberty and democracy, the film portrays the Persians as barbaric and their soldiers as more demonic than human. Radovic contrasts this interpretation with a more subversive reading. In line with Zizek’s interpretation of the film, she argues that the invading Persians may be taken to represent American foreign policy or Western capitalist ideology.

While ‘Others’ are not always portrayed as hostile, they are nevertheless always viewed through the lens of ‘Americanism.’ In James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) the alien species Na’vi represents various indigenous peoples and are the victims of Western military-capitalist ideology. The film, however, fails to subvert

that ideology through its white, American protagonist, who saves the day. Though Western democratic ideals and American Christianity champion universalism and inclusiveness, Radovic shows how Americanism excludes even sympathetic 'Others' by exorcising them and representing them as intrinsically different.

Radovic also discusses representations of Eastern Europe in Hollywood films. Eastern Europe is often portrayed as a “unique cultural entity” (98), caught somewhere between East and West, simultaneously rejecting and rejected by both. Imagined as a mystical region, characterized by violence and conflict, the Eastern Europe of Hollywood cinema is the home of villains and exotic characters. Radovic devotes special attention to representations of the Eastern European woman, often portrayed as a victim of cultural violence and an object of desire. Through ‘gendered racism’ she can be objectified by a Western male gaze, distanced from the violence she suffers at the hands of Eastern European men.

While her analyses mostly expose Hollywood as an ‘ideological factory,’ Radovic also discusses a film which she views as a subversion of the American othering of Eastern Europeans. Sasha Baron-Cohen’s controversial 2006 comedy *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* stars Cohen as the titular Borat, a journalist from Kazakhstan, embodying all Western stereotypes about Eastern Europe, who is sent to the United States to document the ‘American way of life.’ During his travels, Borat becomes disillusioned with the mythical greatness of America and returns home. According

to Radovic, the film exposes the popular image of America as a media construct and invites the audience to “reconsider its vision of America, which reveals itself as a confused and prejudiced country” (107).

In a cross-cultural comparative analysis, Radovic ties together various themes from the analyses of the different cinemas. Issues of religion, nationalism and identity in film are treated differently in the Balkans and Russia: in Balkan, and especially Serbian, films, religion as a marker of ethnic and national identity is portrayed implicitly, as part of nationalistic discourse and national mythology; in Russia, Orthodoxy is very much explicitly represented as the religion of the Russian people, with “no ambiguity ... and thus no space for subversiveness” (120). In Hollywood cinema, mythological narratives emphasize the importance of the American hero in defending freedom, democracy and capitalism, and in bringing salvation and enlightenment to 'Others.' Across the cinemas of the regions, Radovic identifies different types of exclusion or 'Othering,' with examples from each region. There is, for example, the threatening 'Other' as in *Pretty Village*, *Pretty Flame* and *300*, and the absent 'Other' as in *Avatar* and *The Island*, where the 'Other,' though sympathetic, remains intrinsically different from the viewer. Because films are strongly linked to national identities and cultural myths, which inform particular understandings of the 'Other,' they often fail to convey inclusiveness. This failure is typical of Hollywood cinema, but is comparable to the paradox of Serbian and

Russian Orthodoxy: on the one hand, Orthodoxy is understood to be a transnational faith, but on the other, it is a national religion of the people.

In her film analyses, Radovic demonstrates an awareness of her audience. Assuming her readers are more familiar with the American cultural context and Hollywood cinema than that of Russia and the Balkans, she provides more thorough historical and cultural backgrounds and film synopses for her analyses of non-Western cinema than for Hollywood fare. This inevitably results in different approaches to the cinemas. Her interests in Hollywood cinema are in exposing cultural myths and ideologies that are retold and shape films produced in the United States and her selection of films is limited to post-9/11 cinema. In contrast, her treatment of the cinemas of Russia and the Balkans includes films from different eras. While the fall of communism warranted explorations and reconstructions of national identity in the former Eastern bloc, it was unneeded in the United States, explaining the differences in treatments. Radovic leaves the question of how 9/11 affected depictions of otherness in Hollywood films unanswered, except for a comment on how Muslims replaced communists as the first choice for villains.

Apart from that, her film analyses are extremely thorough and make use of all aspects of the cultural and historical context provided. Radovic incorporates interpretations and opinions on films from not only film critics and academics but also from representatives of the Orthodox Churches in Serbia and Russia, which

manages to convey the diversity of possible meanings that can be constructed from a single film, depending on the viewer's cultural and ideological background.

In *Transnational Cinema and Ideology*, Milja Radovic set out to do two things: to demonstrate the usefulness of a transnational approach to religion and film, and to articulate the interconnectedness of religion, nationalism, identity and cultural myths. Through highly contextualized film analyses of the cinemas of the Balkans, Russia and the United States, and cross-cultural comparisons between them, Radovic explores how perceptions of the nation and the 'Others' are recreated through cinema and shows what can be accomplished using a transnational approach.

At only 154 pages, Radovic's book is surprisingly inclusive. Leaving very few stones unturned within the parameters of her research, her effective use of space makes for a no-nonsense introduction to a transnational approach to the study of religion and film. A beautiful example of mythological and ideological critical analysis, *Transnational Cinema and Ideology* should make for a great addition to the literature of any course on religion and film.