**Book review:**

***Euro-Visions: Europe in Contemporary Cinema* by Mariana Liz, New York/London, Bloomsbury, 2016, 184pp., £23.99 (pbk), ISBN: 9781628923025**

*Euro-Visions: Europe in Contemporary Cinema* is a timely investigation of the portrayal of ‘Europe’ in contemporary European film. For as Liz notes in her introduction:

The idea of Europe is intensely challenged by contemporary events. The refugee crisis resulting from the war that broke out in Syria in 2011, the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015 and the subsequent reinstating of border controls in France and a number of other European nations part of the Schengen Agreement testify to a profoundly divided European society, not to mention EU.

We might add to that list of intense challenges to the ‘European project’ the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and the rise of anti-EU populist parties across the whole of Europe.

The particular focus of Liz’s study are films supported by the EU’s MEDIA programme (now known as Creative Europe), which primarily supports the cross-border distribution on European films. As such, her book – which is based on her PhD thesis – may also be seen as an exploration of the EU’s role in constructing and promoting particular ideas about European cinema and identity.

Beginning with an analysis of the meaning of ‘Europe’ from both an historical and institutional perspective (chapter 1) and overview of current trends within the European film industry (chapter 2), Liz provides an in-depth textual analysis of the portrayal of Europe in historical drama (chapter 3) and contemporary drama (chapter 4). Amongst her case-studies are: *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (Peter Webber, 2003), *La Vie en Rose* (Olivier Dahan, 2007), *Black Book* (Paul Verhoeven, 2006), *Good Bye Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003), *Match Point* (Woody Allen, 2005) and *The Silence of Lorna* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne, 2008).

Liz concludes that the idea of ‘Europe’ which emerges from contemporary European cinema is a space of contradiction between the national and the transnational, art and commerce, and thought and emotion. Within this space of contradiction, certain values (e.g. universality, cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism) seem to prevail:

The EU wishes to be associated with, and promotes in its cultural policies and in the films it supports, general and undisputable values, such as tolerance, democracy and respect for human rights. Films such as *Merry Christmas*, *Sophie Scholl* and *Only Human*, for instance, foreground these kinds of incontestable ideals.

In terms of style or genre, Liz argues that EU policies essentially favour ‘middlebrow’ cinema that, ‘while always associated with quality, is simultaneously characterised by being popular (for instance, having many internationally successful stars) and highbrow (filmed by a long list of auteurs)’. This echoes arguments made elsewhere (e.g. Mazdon 2016) about current trends in European film and television drama.

Liz notes that European films also often try to teach us about important historical events (e.g. the Second World War) and contemporary social issues (e.g. immigration). Yet, in order to get their message across, they tend to appeal more to our hearts (feelings and emotion) than our heads (facts and knowledge):

Films such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Merry Christmas* and *Sophie Scholl*, for example, are characterised by spectacular images and overwhelmingly positive feelings that compel viewers to identify with the stories and characters represented on screen.

Using the European Commission’s marketing campaign for the MEDIA programme as an example, Liz argues this appeal to emotion is something EU policymakers have tried to exploit in order to encourage more people to watch European films and thus feel part of a wider European community.

*Euro-Visions* is an accessible book that makes an important contribution to theoretical debates about the relationship between film, policy and European identity. Liz is particularly good at identifying some of the key themes within European historical drama (e.g. European artists, wars and the recent political past) and contemporary drama (e.g. cities and social problems), though she has less to say about other key genres of European film, such as action-adventure, family films or animations.

The book combines a range of methodological approaches and sources. However, I felt the textual analysis of recent historical and contemporary dramas in chapters 3 and 4 was stronger than the quantitative analysis of key industry trends in chapter 2. For example, in order assess the impact of the MEDIA programme, Liz examines how many MEDIA-funded films have been released in the UK and Portugal: it would perhaps have been more revealing to know how many admissions these films received or their overall market share.

I also have some reservations about one of the book’s core arguments: that through the MEDIA programme, the EU helps construct and promote a particular idea of European cinema and identity. In the terms of the ‘automatic’ distribution scheme, it is film distributors not Brussels bureaucrats who choose which films receive distribution support, and I suspect their decisions have more to do with the film’s commerce potential than its ideological values. Even for ‘selective’ funding, decisions are made by an independent panel. In any case, the values which Liz associates with MEDIA-supported films (e.g. universality, didacticism and middlebrow-ness) are certainly not fixed (a film seen as ‘middlebrow’ in one context could be seen as ‘highbrow’ in context) nor the only ones on display. This is something which my own research for the MeCETES project involving cross-national audience surveys and focus groups has revealed.

Nevertheless, *Eurovisions* is undoubtedly a timely addition to the literature on European cinema that addresses many of the key issues on contemporary European film, identity and policy.

**References:**

Mazdon, Lucy. 2016. “‘Kings of the Middle Way’: Continental Cinema on British Screens.” In *Middlebrow Cinema*, ed. Faulkner S., 181-195. Abingdon: Routledge.

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