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The Image of East in North-American Cinema
(1980-2010)

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The immersion in the American cinema universe, with the intention to identify, unlock and clear images and visions about world and society (both contemporary or under the incidence of past and memory) is not a recent or occasional practice in the scientific world. Cultural anthropology, imagology, mass media, art history or history are just a few of the fields which answered the challenge posed by the movies. The movie, although it still generates further intense debates regarding its statute as scientific source, has its own place, no doubt in the composition of hypotheses of various studies and works dedicated to the role and effect of image in society, but also the values of artistic movies as builder of identities and discourses aimed to reconfigure the surrounding reality. What really places the movie in the attention of the specialists is its capacity, maybe unique among contemporary sources, to capture and operate with sensitivities, collective mentalities and social imaginary, through both image and text. Besides these, it also holds a serious political, cultural and social component, able to build a valid frame of the historical periods. Thus, while benefitting from various and generous interventions and developments in this field, and also from a series of studies close to our subject, we wish to claim through the proposed research issue, the central point where historical imagology and cultural anthropology meet the mass media.

The main aim of the present work is to make a diachronic, thematic and phenomenological analysis of the image of the East in the North-American cinema of Hollywood, during 1980 and 2010, analysis which could allow the establishing of the stages of the process of construct edification, of the evolution and specificity of every segment, while largely sketching the characteristics of the relations between the East and the West, of concepts and stereotypes. The innovation of the research (comparing to the other studies) is given by the thematic coding of the structure of the thesis, the six concepts engaged by the analysis (contact, grabbing, imagining, cartography, advising and populating) becoming the ordering and composing criteria of the material.

Illustrating the East in the American movie is not a process with only one end or a one-way track. Indirectly, and in a collateral way, defining the image of the East implies the re-

defining of the image of the USA. Although, officially, our thesis is dedicated to the concept of the East, in the end, by drawing this image, a reassessing of the American identity is being created at a second level. Actually, the key concepts around which our demonstration is revolving are found in the pair identity/alterity, and subsequently gravitates around the alterity and its role in the discourse of power, closely linked to domination and social inequality (political, racial, gender, religious). In order for the American identity to come forward there is a need for a favourable context to launch and intercept the power discourse. Such a context implies a counterpart defined from the alterity position, an alterity presented according to principles of a shaded Manichaeism. The bi-polarity of eastern alterity allows a splitting of the relations towards a symbiotic development, of a reflexive, mimetic and flexible character. The disposition of the East (as alterity) to meet the western necessities and expectancies (as negotiated identity) is translated through the advance of a mutually suitable collaboration, of a mirroring of the West, strategies aimed to favour finding back the American belief.

In other words, our paper is not dedicated to profiling a single nation, but proposes, indirectly, the drawing of two entities, the American, in the backstage, and the eastern, without working with ethnic categories (Russians, Chinese, Arabs). The eastern dimension appears as a synthesis of particular discourses regarding the above mentioned nationalities.

The decision to work only on a strict 1980-2010 timetable had political and cultural reasons. Our intention is to witness the ever changing avatars of the imaginary of the North-American cinema across the three decades of transition. On the chronological side of the discourse, we notice a thematic preoccupation for political events of the 1980s, 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. The movies analyzed are rather contemporary or commemorative, after events portrayed. The movies of the 1980s prefer the Vietnam War, still undigested in the collective memory, and the old confrontation with the communist bloc, which, after being dismantled, leaves a Russia with an aggressive reputation and inheriting all the nuclear fears, threats and frustrations, a furious Cold War, exhausted in the countless periphery conflicts and movies. The 1990s bring into discussion terrorism and the war against it, and a demonized Middle East, movies which screen the race for oil, camouflaged in rescue and liberating interventions.

Starting with 2000 and continuing until the end of the decade, the focus lies on cultural aspects and internal politics, migration, assimilation and integration of minorities, especially Asian, having as background the same identity conflict, maybe now more pronounced than before. A few themes are being used over and over again – the national hero, now in exile, dramatic episodes of the past whose effects come into the present, and the solutions which bring the re-discovery of the self.

The geo-politic and cultural area comprised in the concept of “East” is situated in space between the Soviet Union/Russia, the Middle East and the far East – Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, China, Japan, and is situated in time during the period of the Cold War and the nationalist and cultural problems arising at the beginning of the 21st century. These time limits also imply the geographic dimension, and a whole grid of indices of the East – the final stage of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the wars of the periphery – Vietnam, Cuba, Korea, the American interventionism in the Middle East, the assertion of Japan as world economic power, the affirmation of American tourism in the Far East (Thailand).

The selection of filmography, the sampling, was one of the most soliciting and difficult activities for the present analysis; IMDB (Internet Movie Data Base) was used in order to identify and localize the necessary movies for research. IMDB is the most popular and serious data base on the Internet regarding movies, TV programs and actors, producers from entertainment media – over 100 million individual users are registered online every month, and the data base holds more than two million movies. To select the movies for the research, key words were used in order to search the site - keywords, plot keywords, characters or titles, slowly advancing towards an impressive word list belonging to the desired terms regarding the East, as it was defined in the opening of this thesis.

The volume of resulted productions was further selected after title type (type of production), and after genre, eliminating from the start the comedies, sci-fi, cartoons and musicals. Finally, the filmography was further separated, in a very important way: opening date (between January 1980 and December 2010), and world gross revenue – tickets and promo material sold, above a 30 million dollar level (such a gross revenue speaks from itself as to the audiences recorded by a certain production, and the popularity of the movie, the topic and the message). All these were done in order to reduce as much as possible the chances to leave out a

movie, and, from the initial few thousands of possible candidates, 75 were chosen in the end, titles who fulfil the necessary requirements.

Once built, the filmography was subject to a critical analysis of the discourse, through a series of case studies, suitable for every required thematic category. Thus, every single chapter is built by a practical putting together of the qualitative analysis with the quantitative one, the case studies being completed with observations and preliminary conclusions of a volumetric evaluation of the filmography. The add-ons and explanations/descriptions of repetitive or new aspects identified in the movies are meant to offer substance to the presented hypothesis or raise question marks regarding the discussed concept.

The selected methods for fulfilling the tasks were dictated by the character of the main source, the artistic movie, and also by focusing on the site of image itself. The critical analysis of the discourse is one of the most recent and fruitful methods used in the mass media research, whose specificity consists of the preoccupation for the role of the discourse (visual or text), in the (re)production of social domination, that is the enforcing of power by the elites, institutions or groups, and which result in social, political, class, social, gender or race inequality. Although, normally, the domination connection is done from up towards down, we make a procedure scheme and include resistance relations bottom up, not only top-down. Another aspect invoked by the CDA is the power effect, and power abuse in the counterpart's consent, through persuasion and legitimacy. The link between discourse and society, respectively discourse and domination and inequality reproduction, lies in the role of social representations in the minds of social actors. One of the functions of the dominant discourse is to create agreement, power legitimacy.

From art history we borrow content analysis, discourse analysis (combined with the CDA), and compositional interpretation, focused on visual effects and visual meanings. CDA, through its preoccupations, requires with force the site of production, but we have made a translation and adaptation of methods in order to maintain the research within simple lines and strictly focused on the image itself. The site of production requirement would have opened another line of research, dedicated to the production register and institutional dimension, aspects which can easily constitute the subject of another thesis. With such size and complexity of the

material, an elaborate methodology would have affected the aspect and organization of the analysis, so we have opted for a simplification of the work method.

The coding, the second quantitative analysis method, besides the sampling, is thematic: the six moments/stages and concepts through which the relation is made are *the contact*, *the appropriation*, *imagining*, *mapping*, *advising/adressing* and *populating*. Although the method is not perfectly validated because of the interference and effusion of variables used, the coding helps us in the classification and organization of the relationship in a new method regarding subject analysis. The discussed themes will constitute the basis of the paper structure, being closely followed by a secondary coding, which separates an external and an internal East, within the USA. In other words, relation with and imagining the East implies two other mental levels and two geo-politic realities.

The quantitative analysis consists mainly in the number of the movies in the filmography, being useful especially in establishing stereotypes and a repetitive character, of the main formula and the standard package of relating/visualizing the East, of clichés. This aspect will allow us to initially identify the metamorphosis and tendencies of vision; also, a fine, not massive, comparative perspective is aimed to sketch the volume of gained information towards the discovery of procedure and vision details, and of parallels between the inner and outer East. Although apparently different, as the space requires, within the USA or outside it, in their original location, the two Easts are very similar as internal mechanism and structure.

The qualitative analysis comes to complete the profile through the decoding of the symbolic and metaphorical load, through highlighting the relation between the used concepts, of power exertion and American domination, and through the imaginary Hollywood discourse regarding the East. As mentioned before, the preoccupation for these items was perfectly capitalized by opting for the critical discourse analysis. In fact, our methodology is tributary only to mass media and visual arts, the two domains offering us specific methods for working with visual image and message.

The Contact is the first stage in the East-West relation, stage which brings together in discussion, in logic and narrative, the two cultural horizons. The meeting and creation of a connection are made on various motivations and through different means. The analysis of the

filmography made clear, besides the physical, direct and external contacts, also media contacts, internal or ideatic, which bring the East in accessible format to all viewers. The initiative belongs to the Occident. Contact belongs to a need of initiation and discovery of a new world. Curiosity, fear, the need to solve the mystery are among the most common effects of the East. Contact also brings in front of the public the portrait of the American, the movie hero, as an outsider, a persona non-grata, or, on the contrary, of a man endowed with extraordinary physical, moral and mental qualities. Contacting and subsequently deepening the relation, being either grabbing or advising, lead to a contamination of the West, once the experience of the East is shared.

Appropriating is materialized through analyzing the filmography by exposing and analyzing the means of ruling the East by the West; illustrated through historical, political and cultural events, imposing the American domination takes various shapes: physical, military, material, ideological or mental. Once contact is made, the next necessary step is logic - grabbing this new horizon, this new world. Imposing the American way of life is mainly physical and material, on the personal/individual level, but also on the collective, national level. Either it is about acts of armed, physical, sexual aggression, or imposing products of the American civilization, occupation through advantages and technological or ideological superiority democracy, liberties, or is about counselling and educating the easterners in Western style, all these are expressions of possessing. They occur either in force, or by good will, according to the double nature of the East, where opposite reactions and attitudes alternate, through collaboration/asking Western assistance, or totally rejecting, doubled by resistance to implementing American values.

Imagining is another form of creating the East, comprising a series of tendencies and motivations at the base of the Hollywood concept of the East. Projections towards alterity, are rationally and instinctively meant to strengthen the opposite positions of the counterparts, and the imaginary advance of the USA compared to the East. Suppositions, expectations, judging rules of this world, inheritance and experience of past episodes, memory of important events or fake truths, tourism, personal or collective investitures, motivations for imagination, all take active part in projecting an Americanized East. Imagining is a procedure linked with mentality and operates with abstract objects. The investiture is not only in radical negative terms, but holds nuances; exoticism, projecting a paradise, or, on the contrary, an inferno, a space that needs to be

conquered, tamed, full of promises, unstable, always rebellious. Adapting to this world is difficult or impossible to accomplish, and when it occurs without complications and resistance is classified as a ...

Mapping is introduced as illustration method, description of the geographical and natural dimension of the East. Strongly visual, almost exclusively built on the image of the environment, urban or rural, of western civilization versus the untamed nature of the East, which instigate to exploration, mapping consists in a succession of frames and emblem main motives for the two cultural horizons. The landscapes are individualized, obviously, according to the geographic region, but the filmography is a single entity in the images built for each single item (Vietnam – luxuriant vegetation, rice fields, peasants with hats and oxen; Russia, Moscow – massiveness, snow, cold, army, poverty or heavy luxury; Irak, or any other Middle Eastern country – desert, sand, rocks, peasants, goats and massive poverty; Japan – western urban life, a bit sci-fi, pictograms; China – mix of western architecture with local shapes – market stalls, etc). Entering eastern space and time is always unveiled by the idea of travel, long time journey, sometimes difficult, like in a labyrinth, and very uncomfortable for the westerner – differences in time schedule, turbulences, landing in hard conditions, abrupt crossing from urban life to wild nature, etc.

Advising/Adressing is on one hand a version, a part of possessing, and on the other hand, a major form of creating the East. It has a material, physical component, less discussed, (military assistance), and also an ideatic/ideological side. Advising – good or bad – is made with the aim, more or less obvious, to enslave the East. What always comes through is the American ardour to create an East as an exact copy of the West, without any care or respect for local particularities. In fact, we witness an attempt to eradicate the imperfections of the East and the salvation of Western potential within the Orient, which has to be helped to emerge. The fight and surviving expressions of the East, when do not require or look specifically for American intervention, are among the advice of the West. The cinematic construct forwards both eastern attitudes in an attempt to balance and legitimize the established cultural and visual colonization.

Populating brings into discussion the last stage of building the East. The human resources given to the imaginary by Hollywood, aimed to populate a celluloid universe, are in fact a complete round up of ethnic and racial stereotypes, and of the reputations of all nations involved.

In qualitative and quantitative terms, populating the east will be done on professional and moral criteria, and according to the level of collaboration with the west, which, in chronological terms, evolves from positions inferior to the western ones, to a vague equality status. The only superlatives allowed here are the ones in relation with the own nationals or other eastern nations, or from narrative perspectives – the American hero full of positive qualities must be opposed to a worthy adversary, an evil genius. Another observation must be made here – the existence of more eastern degrees; there are categories of superior easterners, with high chances of collaborating and updating, and unrecoverable easterners. The Russians and Japanese are valued in a positive way, partially, by granting them intellectual, military and cultural merits, while the Middle East is kept in a state of physical, moral and intellectual impotence.

The American movie proves to be a valuable source for scientific research, although it doesn't benefit from an official methodology; in fact, this aspect can be considered an advantage for interdisciplinary approach, thus favouring the adoption of methods and procedures offered by other fields.

Imagining the East will eventually be a process in close connection, if not even dependent to the fluctuations of American self conscience, public opinion, internal and external state politics; also, the emotional dimension and the memory of national past strongly forge the visual discourse. Although the classical tendencies in the field of representation certify an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent USA, in strong contrast to a demonized East, invested with all the negative qualities which American stereotypes and national discourse can provide, there is also a permissive voice about East, which is obviously not meant for a career in motion pictures.