Starkman on Galt, 'The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map'

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Reviewed by Ruth Starkman (Department of Philosophy, University of San Francisco) Published on H-German (November, 2006)

New European Cinema(s)

Rosalind Galt's monograph is an ambitious book. It endeavors to answer a highly contested question ("What is Europe and how can we understand it?") through theoretically informed readings of European films made shortly before and after 1989. Galt has given herself the unenviable task of navigating debates both on Europe as a historical and conceptual category and on film as a transnational phenomenon. In both cases Galt's method is historically informed, as she examines the idea of Europe from different perspectives and considers European cinemas not merely in their own national contexts, but in relation to larger debates on European identity and self-understanding. Galt's operative metaphor is that of the map, a greatly suggestive figure employed widely in larger theoretical debates on the dialectics of place, space, memory, history and spectacle since the end of the 1980s.

Elaborating on discussions of maps and mapping in Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Slavoj Zizek, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Irit Rogoff, Rosalyn Deutsche and a host of others, Galt shows how European cinema is also engaged in a process of mapping. For Galt, maps are the stuff of the political and cultural imaginary; they can be used to liberate one from positivist notions of geographical space or to condone retrograde nationalist spectacle. Films, she argues convincingly, show that maps and mapping both manifest themselves in narrative form, especially in films that mediate on national identity, and act as a dominant cultural figure that shapes the public imagination both nationally and transnationally.

In her methodological chapter on mapping European cinema in the 1990s, Galt eschews both liberal discourses about European unity, which are belied by recent history, as well as the particularist identity politics of the nations and cultures she discusses. The book then follows with revised versions of two previously published essays on heritage film and Lars von Trier's Zentropa (1991). Two chapters--one on mapping and one on Yugoslavia--follow. Galt ends with considerations on a theory of European space.

Avoiding simplistic binaries at every turn, Galt neither simply praises films that question nationalist sentiment nor rejects those nostalgic for some kind of authentic national experience, though she repeatedly describes the latter as problematic. Rather, Galt purposely chooses films maligned by critics for numerous reasons including their potential nationalist or otherwise backward-looking
politics. Overall, Galt seems to be seeking a more nuanced notion of Europe and European cinema. No moment could better serve this search than the immediate post-Wall era. For her analysis, Galt chooses films made around the time of the revolutions of 1989, each of which attempts to address the larger historical breaks of that moment: the reunification of Germany, the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent disintegration of the Balkans and sense of loss and disorientation. Remarkable about all these films is their fixation on 1945, the postwar "Year Zero," and all of its myths about starting anew. Among the films Galt examines are Giuseppe Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* (1989), Michael Radford’s *Il Postino* (1994), Gabriele Salvatores’s *Mediterraneo* (1991), Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995) and Zentropa. Galt compares these works with films of the immediate postwar era, including the neorealist films of Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, socialist realist cinema in Yugoslavia, Billy Wilder’s *A Foreign Affair* (1948) and Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949), and reflects on how like the "zero hour," the fate of Europe during this era caused similar anxieties, which were reflected through increasingly cold-war politics and represented in classical Hollywood style. Had Galt simply written on one or two "zero hour" films and compared them to post-Wall cinema, she would have had a book in itself, but her study is purposefully transnational and for that reason has advantages as well as disadvantages.

The advantages of Galt’s comparative approach are many. First, she is an excellent reader of both theoretical texts and film form, offering numerous close readings of her subjects that raise questions for both fields. Equally important, she is willing to bring sophisticated philosophical discourse to European national cinemas that have been considered marginal, perhaps even the underdogs of European "art cinema." In her discussion of Yugoslavian film in the post-1989 era, for example, Galt offers not only a provocative historical account of how Yugoslavia came to reside at the margins of "western Europe," but also articulates the very difficulty of accessing Yugoslavian films. Secondly, she makes no high/low media distinctions between the "art" films she discusses and more experimental ones like the TV reality-style *avant la lettre* documentary *killer.berlin.doc* (1999) by Tina Ellerkamp and Jörg Heitman.

Unfortunately, however, Galt’s attempt to connect her case studies of films to political and philosophical debates on the future of Europe, as well as to contemporary critical and cultural theories, is frustrating. Herein lie some of the disadvantages of her approach as well as her project. The difficulties occur in part because the project is too big and unwieldy to develop fully any of the particular ideas or national moments she examines. Such a lack of overview or mastery is an inherent difficulty of comparative projects, but Galt seems to rush through so many ideas, methodologies, cinemas, genres, historical moments and problems that she cannot sufficiently answer many of the very good questions she raises. Her opening, for example, beguiles the reader with a dazzling list of ideas, promising to theorize the connections between the idea of mapping, the genre of the heritage film, art film, narrative form, spectatorship, postmodernity and transnationalism. Despite her introduction, Galt breezes so quickly through problems that she fails to make theoretical connections effectively. For example, in her discussion of the German heritage film and problems of mourning and melancholia she leaves little opportunity to understand the connection she makes to the English or Italian heritage film or even the Indian or Taiwanese films she briefly mentions. Indeed, it is unclear whether mourning and melancholia are in fact the same categories as nostalgia; Galt seems to suggest that they are not, but does not elaborate.

Indeed, the theoretical diversity of the book tends to undercut the depth of the analyses it offers.
Thus, for all her effort to "redraw" the map of European cinema, Galt does not always succeed in drawing a map of where she is going or what the outcome might be. For example, in a discussion of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, Galt asserts that her query about the definition of Europe is both "epistemological" and "ontological" (p. 92); but the passage includes no real development of the epistemology or ontology to which she refers, but instead provides an equally brief and underdeveloped discussion of Jameson's "cognitive mapping." She then returns to the film in question: "What connects ontology with epistemology for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is, in the inexorable logic of literary history, death. As we shall see, in post-Wall art cinema, too, the redrawing of space and time often juxtaposes textual play with historical finality" (pp. 92-93). The question of how to define Europe is abandoned by resort to theoretical concerns. Like many theoretical passages in the book, this section is rich and suggestive, full of connections between ideas, especially the intersection between film history and the modernist morbidity that grew up after the Second World War. But, since just about every section of every chapter ends with a similarly ultra-condensed theoretical moment, the reader is tempted after a while simply to dismiss each moment as yet another loose thread.

The strength of Galt's book lies not necessarily its conclusions, but rather the directions to which it points and the important questions about Europe, cinema and European identity it raises. With its solid grasp on theoretical debates, the volume succeeds in integrating larger methodological debates, even though it might attempt to cover too much material and compromise thoroughness. Galt thus offers a provocative look at Europe's post-1989 historical context and writes a suggestive study of the problem of post-Wall European cinema.

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