

Anna Szykowska-Piotrowska

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5478-3336>

Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw

Fryderyk Chopin University of Music

Université Paris 1 Pantheon Sorbonne

anna.szykowska-piotrowska@cybis.asp.waw.pl

“FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE, IMAGE WITH IMAGE, AND SATIRE WITH SATIRE.”

ON THE BOOK BY KATARZYNA MURAWSKA-MUTHESIUS – IMAGING AND MAPPING EASTERN EUROPE

One of the most hilarious (often falling into parody) and yet disturbing elements of Western perception of Eastern Europe investigated by Murawska-Muthesius is Slaka. As Murawska-Muthesius states (p. 1): “Not to be found on any map, Slaka is a Cold War simulacrum of the other Europe behind the Iron Curtain. Its violent history and politics, unstable boundaries, and its hybrid heritage overridden by socialist realism have been constructed out of a plethora of primary features taken for the essence of the timeless ‘Eastern Europeanness’”. The satire has been written by Malcolm Bradbury to pinpoint some of the most absurd realities in Eastern-Western relations. Tropes of insufficiency, distortion as well as the use of nonsense in the face of overwhelming history, ever-changing geography and strange-sounding Eastern European languages are brought to our attention by Murawska-Muthesius.

In the second chapter of the book, the author focuses on the defining instability of the region as well as its exonyms (names given to it by non-natives). She quotes such examples as: Sarmatia Europea, Slavic Europe, New Europe, ‘shatter zone’, ‘the belt of political change’, *cordon sanitaire*, ‘Other Europe’, Communist Bloc and others. Proving that maps are not a neutral tool of representation but rather a manifesto for identity and existence, a way of

projecting a message of independence or submission, constitutes an important goal of this part of the book. Murawska-Muthesius asks a brilliant question (p. 18): "If the map precedes the territory, what precedes the map?"

In the chapter entitled "The Lure of Ethnic Dress", the author notices (p. 63): "If maps conjure up political entities, travel writing contributes to the formation of cultural identities, generated in an unequal encounter between the traveller and the 'travellee' (...)." The confronted problem seems to lie in the colonialist gaze of the incomer. And, indeed, this inequality of the traveller and the travellee becomes crucial for the inequalities of perception encountered throughout the book. Inequality of the gaze is an important issue because of its consequences in identity-making or identity-perceiving processes. It results in the production of images that make up the visuals of a certain identity and a certain collective unconscious mechanism of what to read into them. Today we could most likely call these tricks of perception in relation to the Eastern other, a type of Westplaining, even if a visual one. It is because what is at stake is the Western idea of Eastern Europe.

Such concepts as 'ethnic body' or 'ethnic dress' are analysed not only with the view to the past of the shifting semantics of those, but also in regards to the present of what national identity may mean in regions of Eastern Europe. In "The Battle of the Dust Jackets", the author gets to the present times while analysing the question of identity and performance, to finish with "Farewell to Slaka", giving account of changes that have taken place and anticipating the ones to come.

Already the title of the book prompts the reader to pose a question concerning the difference between imagining and imaging. From all the possible options, such as: inventing, imagining, perceiving or confronting (present, by the way, in the titles of some of the bibliographical resources used in the publication, the bibliography itself being very impressive), the author chooses imaging, which both seems to the point and constitutes a kind of a step back to go forward with visual analysis. It is a clear reminder of the role of images in creating a perceived identity. This purposeful pause to take a long look at the evidence – actual still pictures – before jumping into conclusions is a signature move of the publication. The author herself starts the *Preface* with the sentence (p. XV): "This is a book about images of Eastern Europe." And indeed, this very simple sentence gives us a just insight into the method – sticking with images and not with what has been said or imagined about Eastern Europe.

The point of departure of the author is that a lot has stayed unnoticed, tacit, or implied in visual data. What is more, a visual message may even be contrary to what a verbal message conveys. Murawska-Muthesius shows that, despite a great number of verbal narratives on Eastern European identity, an attempt to identify meaning through theoretical field work on images has

been scarce, if not inexistent. And thus she embarks on such an endeavour. The author does not take meanings derived from images (e.g. travel images, illustrations, pictures, comic strips, press cartoons or maps) portraying Eastern Europe for what they are. She gives them a critical look on a meta-level, showing how they demystify some fantasies on the part of the producer.

The underlying assumption that Eastern Europe would be the other of the West, defining itself by some kind of a shortage of the self, seems, as Muraw-ska-Muthesius remarks, rooted already in the Enlightenment. Murawska-Muthesius is critical in her observations, but she is definitely very just in analysing the situation on both sides with equal effort to transgress unnecessary emotivity. She also shows that emotivity is often present as a component of analysis or description in different resources portraying the so-called other, although it most obviously stands in the way of actual perception. Not letting oneself fall into already interpreted or overinterpreted imaginary nets of discourse, but rather rigidly focusing on the imagery is a way to reduce the bubble of reciprocal emotions that holds us back from perceiving the actual mechanism of constructing the other through words and images, the latter being the focus of the publication.

The method is based on very close observation of images that have accompanied narratives and discourses produced in relation to the region, with the aim to capture its “essence”. This noun should already get anyone knowing anything about world history on full alert. “The essence” seized in images is a strong signal of an evaluation procedure characteristic of totalitarianism, discrimination, or the will to categorize and segregate. This is why a critical analysis of such mechanisms is still needed.

A recent exhibition in Centre Pompidou, focusing on August Sander’s photographic portraits *Germany / 1920s / New Objectivity* (2022) reminds us about it. What strikes us is the combination of the social sensitivity of the photographer, raised by a father who was a miner, and his practice of categorizing through a socio-professional lens, which often leads to stereotypes and exclusion.

The author inscribes herself in the field of visual culture (WJT Mitchell), socio-critical study of images (J. Berger), postcolonial theory and ‘ideologically aware iconology’. The book sheds light on a problem that makes itself evident in imagery; Eastern Europe, being a construct made up of discourse and images, is usually approached *en bloc* as an entity without regional particularities. The aim of the book seems to be expressed in the sentence (p. XV): “(...) the book examines the ways of creating the region by mapping it and populating it with bodies. It is not a picture history of Eastern Europe though, but an inquiry into the discontinuous of picturing the region, stretching over a long time span, from the early modern era to the present.” This production of visual

knowledge becomes the object of study here, focusing on the so-called former satellites. Yet, on a more general level, the goal of the publication is a study of imaging mechanism.

Undoubtedly, a great advantage of the book is the writing of the author – her usage of language is full of wit and always accurate.

Keywords: perception, images, Eastern Europe

Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, *Imagining and Mapping Eastern Europe. Sarmatia Europea to Post-Communist Bloc*, USA, New York Routledge 2021. ISBN 978-1-138-49085-7