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## **Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe: Sarmatia Europea to Post-Communist Bloc**

ROUTLEDGE, NEW YORK – LONDON 2021, 230 PP., 80 B&W ILLUS., INDEX.  
(ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN ART AND VISUAL STUDIES VOL. 7)

Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius studied art history at the University of Warsaw. In the 1980s, she was curator of Italian painting and from 1990 onwards chief curator at the National Museum in Warsaw. After a stint in Great Britain, in 2009–2010 she returned to Warsaw and the National Museum as Deputy Director and close collaborator of Piotr Piotrowski during the latter's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to transform an important state institution into a critical museum. This book brings together more than two decades of her research into the specific nature of the visual communication of cartoons and maps. The name of the series the book is part of suggests a direct relationship between art history and visual studies. I believe that because of the grounding of the author in an art-history milieu similar to our own, a reading of the book could contribute to the debate taking place in the Czech Republic around the relationship between visual studies and art history. This debate has been going on for the past two decades and has not been without its misunderstandings. In the introduction to the book, the author informs us that her working method is directly derived from her training in iconology, as she learned it while studying at the University of Warsaw in the early 1980s under Jan Białostocki (1921–1988). The book is also important for its thematic focus on the region of Central and Eastern Europe, which includes the Czech Republic. Art-historical geography is another lively topic of debate and has already allowed art history to make its own distinctive contribution to local social debates. Most recently, it was touched upon in the thematic issue of *Umění* devoted to a discussion of Matthew Rampley's article *Networks, Horizons, Centres and Hierarchies: On the Challenges of Writing on Modernism in Central Europe* in volume LXIX, number 2 (2021), which so piqued the interest of the international scene that Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius wrote a separate review of it.<sup>1</sup>

*Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe* consists of four chapters devoted to an analysis of maps, illustrations in English-language travelogues and travel magazines, cartoons and humorous drawings, especially those that appeared in the British magazine *Punch*, and the dust jackets of a range of specialist books on Eastern Europe. With the exception of the last theme, which covers only the previous thirty years, the book examines the long-term development of the imaginary in question,

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<sup>1</sup>Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius (rec.), The Place Of Modernism in Central European Art, *Journal of Art Historiography* Nr 26, June 2022, <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/murawska-muthesius-rev.pdf> (accessed on 7 July 2022).

from the early modern period, or at least the last century. The introduction and conclusion refer to the country of Slaka, a fictitious location that features in Malcolm Bradbury's 1983 satirical novel and 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'". (p. 1)

The author's choice of time frame is derived from both perspectives inherent in her work, namely, the Polish and British. These converge in their neglect of the more westerly countries of "East-Central" Europe (namely Bohemia and Moravia, Austria, Saxony, Silesia and Mecklenburg) in favour of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and the Balkans. Eastern Europe as the subject of the book is always "the other", and, unlike the "former West", it has persisted in the political imaginary even after the disappearance of the Iron Curtain. The achievement of the book resides firstly in its presentation of the continuity of this otherness from humanist figural allegory to post-communist identification, and secondly in its exploration of the strategies of its construction. For Czech readers, the most disturbing aspect of the book will probably be its inclusion of Central Europe, and thus the Czech lands, into Eastern Europe. It has been customary over the last thirty-three years of political life in this country to regard the slogan "we belong to the West" as challenge, goal and starting point, a fact that has become increasingly salient in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. However, the tradition of Czech national emancipation featured a far more welcoming relationship with Eastern Europe, and at one of the milestones in the interpretation of the construction of Eastern Europe through its mapping the book reproduces Pavel Josef Šafařík's engraving *Slowanský zeměvid* from 1842. The extensive discussion of Central Europe, which from the Czech perspective is felt to be a pivotal motif, is here confined to the observation that Šafařík's "zeměvid" was a Slavic "counter-map" aimed at subverting the emerging Germanic construct of *Mitteleuropa*.<sup>2</sup>

What is important, however, as the author explains throughout the book and most comprehensively in the first chapter, is that Eastern Europe as a cultural and political region was defined after the Great War as the space lying west of Soviet Russia and occupied by the smaller successor states of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. This idea was revived after the collapse of the Soviet Union and explains, inter alia, why we do not usually find Ukraine in this prevailing imaginary of Eastern Europe. Cartoons depict the new states as a bunch of naughty, untidy, ill-mannered street urchins who had to be raised under the strict supervision of Auntie Europe. The author illustrates vividly how visual imagery is deeply and multifacetedly intertwined with the emergence of the political imaginary. This term refers to non-verbal, non-discursive and often unconscious ideas of political objects, which nevertheless have the capacity to endow political thinking with emotion and thus efficacy. This is despite the fact that such an imaginative delineation, i.e., primarily symbolic and visual, may be at odds with physical, economic and historical geography, and yet may be the driving force behind

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<sup>2</sup> *Ostmittleuropa* has been the preferred term in German (though not Austrian) discourse since the 1950s. On the subject of Central Europe, cf. my contribution to the above discussion, which includes several maps and references to recent literature: Milena Bartlová, *From Which Vantage Points does an Art Historian Look? The History of Central European Art and the Post-colonial Impulse*, *Umění* LXIX, 2021, pp. 175–183.

specific political actions.<sup>3</sup> The selection of visual motifs from travel books and later on magazines was one of the most powerful visual moments that defined “the other” Europe in the eyes of the Western public. Murawska-Muthesius shows how, particularly in the pictorial reports of interwar and post-war British and American reportage magazines, there was a confrontation between the modernised and “ethnic” form, above all of the primarily female subjects of photographs and illustrations: woman as the embodiment of “nature” versus “culture and civilisation” understandably dominated these reports. Probably the most original choice of theme is that of chapter four, namely the dust jackets of books. This mainly involves specialist publications that themselves contain only a minimum of illustrations, but which the publishers have furnished with covers that include photographs. Since it is only rarely that the “content expert”, i.e. the author or editor, has been involved in such a choice, which tends instead to be the work of “marketing specialists”, the outcome is another automatic, stereotypical set of visual codes.

The book is thus an exploration of the ways in which the “iconosphere of Eastern Europe” (p. 180) was created in the 20th century in the countries of Western Europe and North America. The chapter on the visual illustration of travel texts, as well as the shortest chapter on dust jackets, are both original choices of subject matter in the sphere of visual culture and reveal the possibilities that such research opens up. A key characteristic of the methodology of visual studies is a concept of the image in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. artistic and non-artistic, as a social medium of communication. The image is not a passive reflection of reality, but an active instrument in the formation thereof. This is just as true of artistic representation (though this is not the subject of the book): the communicative role adds to its traditionally understood aesthetic or artistic character; it does not replace it but allows us to ask new questions and acquire knowledge that is relevant to the present moment. Without this connecting link, however, it might be hard to understand in what sense the starting point of the interpretive methodology of visual studies is Erwin Panofsky’s iconology, as well as one of the last books by Ernst H. Gombrich entitled *Uses of Images* and published in 1999.<sup>4</sup> The latter work, together with W. J. T. Mitchell’s texts from the early 1990s, is considered a foundational work of a new approach, nay discipline. The part played by visual imagery in the construction of knowledge is now an indisputable fact. Its exploration then proceeds by means of deconstructive procedures, by asking what intentional and unintentional meanings such imagery contains, how specifically it operated in the social practice of the time of its creation and subsequent periods, and what practical consequences this had. Key concepts include terms such as the gaze and its site, otherness and stereotype, exclusion and inclusion, concealment and disclosure, corporeality, dehumanisation, control and emancipation. Murawska-Muthesius illustrates in detail the real historical and political implications the linguistic definition of Slavism had for Šafařík’s map, and the representation of Eastern Europe through costumed young girls, for example: these are stereotypical

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding the term political imaginal cf. Chiara Bottici, *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary*, New York 2019. – Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge – Malden 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *Uses of Images*, London 1999.

objects of masculine interest, perceived as attractive but threatening, naturally uncultivated but potentially enlivening.

The chapters on maps and humorous drawings engage with an extensive scholarly debate on both modes of visualisation and are applied to the theme of Eastern Europe. Cartography has up till now received little attention on the part of visual arts specialists in the Czech Republic. I myself used maps from school atlases in order to illustrate my book on the construction of Central European national identities in medieval art history, though without analytical commentary.<sup>5</sup> Yet this is one of the most eloquent ways of visually constructing the political imaginary, as Murawska-Muthesius carefully shows. "The cartographic gaze, the mapmaker's commanding view from above, so clearly implied here [in Šafařík's *Slowanský zeměvid*], is a particular instance of the disembodied gaze, controlling access to knowledge and power... The use of Slavic names restored and confirmed the Slavic rights to the land in much the same way in which German names on the maps of *Mitteleuropa* were giving authority to Teutonic expansion. Jews and Roma, customarily ignored by nineteenth-century ethnographic maps, had not been entered on Šafařík's map either. Inclusion is always, and inevitably, related to exclusion. The counter-map is always already a map of domination." (p. 35) Not only do maps not represent unbiased codes, not only is there no such thing as a neutral spatial projection, but such specifically visual techniques as choice of colour scheme also play an important role. The critical interpretative methods of visual studies acquire a new value as decolonial impulses strengthen. For countries in Central and Eastern Europe, it is maps that demonstrate that colonial thinking was a feature of their own European habitus, notwithstanding the fact that they did not have overseas colonies themselves. At the same time, the author can speak, for example, of a grey area on a map as "the [Berlin]Wall and its attributed chromatism, evoking the monotonous greyishness, routinely associated with the lands imprisoned behind the Iron Curtain, which had acted before 1989 as the displacement of Eastern Europe's 'coloured skin'." (p. 49)

From the perspective of art history, cartoons are one of the best researched topics in visual studies. In the Czech Republic, too, we have original studies that have examined cartoons in the light of the inspiring chapter in Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. However, interest has mainly been focused on the function of formal stylisation in relation to Cubism and abstraction on the one hand, and on the relationship with the psychology of humour and satire on the other.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to its interdisciplinary approach, the recent publication of a research project on visual manifestations of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism has made a huge contribution to the critical analysis of the dehumanising potential of caricature. However, the methodological background of research in the theory of visual studies and art history has remained insufficiently evident in these projects.<sup>7</sup> Murawska-Muthesius's book may therefore be of value to those interested in further research into cartoons, both for its survey of the

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<sup>5</sup> Milena Bartlová, *Naše, národní umění*. Brno 2009, [unpag.] (illustrations are lacking from the German edition of 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Ondřej Chrobák – Tomáš Winter (edd.), *V okovech smíchu. Karikatura a české umění 1900–1950* (exh. cat.), Galerie hl.m.Prahy 2006. Cf. Ernst H. Gombrich, *Umění a iluze*, Praha 1987, pp. 373–409. For more detail see Louis Rose, *Psychology, Art and Antifascism: Ernst Kris, E. H. Gombrich and the Politics of Caricature*, Yale 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Jakub Hauser – Eva Janáčková (edd.), *Obrazy nenávisti. Vizuální projevy antisemitismu ve střední Evropě*. Praha 2021. – Eva Janáčková (ed.), *Obrazy zášti. Vizuální projevy antijudaismu a antisemitismu v českých zemích*, (exh. cat.), Oblastní galerie Liberec, Praha 2022. – Cf. Milena Bartlová (rec.), Vizuální stereotypy jinakosti, *Art & Antiques* 2022, no. 4, pp. 84–85.

relevant literature and its concise description of "cartoon-work", as well as its own methods. The 150-year-old tradition of the British satirical magazine *Punch* is confronted in this chapter with the self-representation of Eastern European countries. The author is less interested in caricature than satirical drawing, where the focus is not on radical formal stylisation, but on "iconologically" legible manipulation by means of the content and meaning of drawings, such as the one in which the familiar group of street urchins is transformed into the seven dwarfs, dominated by Snow White featuring Hitler's face. After analysing cartoons of Central and Eastern Europe published in *Punch*, she describes the political imaginary of the British public at the time of the Munich Agreement in relation to that region as "*a country 'of which we know nothing', a country of absurd nightmares, where Snow White is bound to turn into a dictator*". (p. 143) In the cartoons that appeared in Great Britain in the 1990s commenting on the accession of parts of Eastern Europe to NATO and the European Union, a bunch of misbehaving little boys are transformed into an equally unpleasant crowd of uncouth, uncultured, unwashed and undoubtedly smelly vodka drinkers, who force their way through the open door behind which sits polite European society.

We may feel a certain resentment over the outcomes of the visual manipulation that forms part of the legitimate media repertoire of democratic countries when it is we ourselves that are the objects of their production of otherness. This is a result we do not expect from reading a scholarly work. Yet it is as valid as the specialist knowledge the book imparts. It is a pity that, given the vast production of books today and the high prices charged by respectable publishers, *Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe* is unlikely to find its way into the hands of Czech specialists in the humanities, not to mention people active in the media. While art historians and historians in general would benefit from its methodology, Czech political science, historiography, geography and many other disciplines could benefit from its useful suggestions regarding the way they handle visual materials, which unfortunately often remains embarrassingly uninformed. That the author intended the book to possess a liberating potential is shown by the illustrations she has included on its dust jacket, notwithstanding the uninventive and sterile graphic design of the series as a whole. The still from a video by Polish artist Katarzyna Perlak entitled *Niolam ja se kochaneczke* (2016) expropriates the stereotypical folkloric imaginary of costumed young women that embodied Eastern Europe not only in the eyes of the "former West", but also in its own nationalist self-presentation: "*Instead of the usual celebration of heteronormativity, the song tells the story of love between two women, playing on and subverting the sisterhood rhetoric, as well as radically opening up the range of identities communicated by the ethnic dress.*" (p. 118)

TRANSLATED BY PHIL JONES