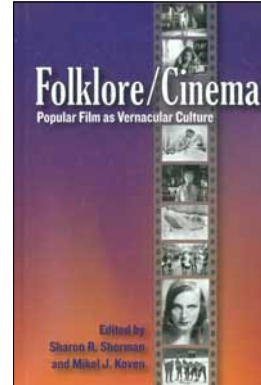


BOOK REVIEW

EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES OF FOLKLORE STUDIES

Sherman, Sharon R. & Koven, Mikel (eds.) 2007. *Folklore/Cinema. Popular Film as Vernacular Culture*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 232pp.



Will folkloristic perspective be encompassing enough for an in-depth analysis of the riches of content and form of contemporary visual culture, or more specifically, cinematography? What might be the links between cinema and folklore? The collection of articles entitled *Folklore/Cinema. Popular Film as Vernacular Culture*, compiled and edited by Sharon R. Sherman and Mikel Koven, offers several interesting answers to these questions. Evidently, these two areas can be closely related, as the editors of the article collection have set out to prove by aiming to combine academic folklore studies and film studies. By doing this they provide an interesting read and food for thought for the audiences of both.

The eleven articles mostly by American but also by Canadian anthropologists, researchers of film, folklorists and literary theorists focus on films which are perceived as directly or indirectly connected with tradition. In other words, films that in some way make use of or generate folkloristic material. The introduction by editors provides a more detailed definition of these two angles of approach to the overlapping of cinematography and folklore. A 'folkloric film' is focused on folklore; it has been produced by folklorists or producers interested in folklore. Such films are documentary by nature and record unstaged events for the purpose of sharing culture-specific information. These films can be defined as unique ethnological documents that centre on the presentation of expressive forms in the reciprocal influence of traditions. The trend of folkloric film has been fostered by Sharon R. Sherman, one of the compilers and editors of the collection, who is both folklorist and an independent filmmaker. Among other works, she has made documentaries and videos of the traditions of the Andes, the musical practices of young men, and narrating supernatural experiences.

'Filmic folklore' is another aspect that is revealed in the collection under discussion. The term is used to signify folklore which has emerged and which exists in the film of mostly fictional content. Outside its original context, this lore may function the same way than it does in a folkloric film. Filmic folklore employs and emphasises certain stereotypes (ideologies) and meanings which are perceived as truthful by a specific group of people. Folklorist and ethnologist Mikel Koven, co-editor of the collection, who is specialised on studying film, television, and urban legends, has developed this approach in his earlier works. In one of his articles ("Buzz Off!" The Killer Bee Movie as Modern Belief Narrative in *Contemporary Legend*, Vol. 4 (2001), pp. 1–19), Koven interprets a film about killer bees (*Deadly Invasion: The Killer Bee Nightmare* (1995)) as a religious tale reflecting the phobias and anxieties of the people of contemporary society.

Editors of the book have divided the eleven articles in four groups according to the contents, or rather according to methodological approach: (1) Filmic Folklore and Authenticity; (2) Transformation; (3) Through Folklore's Lenses; and (4) Disruption and Incorporation. The eleven articles of the collection, based on different film sources, are in fact in-depth studies, which are difficult to review even cursorily in this overview. Below, an attempt is made to briefly review one approach to my personal liking in each subcategory.

The first chapter of the book is dedicated to the post-modernist approach to the problem, the notion that Regina Bendix has defined as 'the authenticity of experience'. The first three articles elaborate on the topic of folkloric films and introduce ways of transmitting "authentic" ethnographical experience. Authors Gillian Helfied, Julie LeBlanc, and Rebecca Prime explore in the articles the search for authenticity in places where folklore used to exist but has lost its authenticity. They show how through a medium of popular culture (film) folkloric experience has turned into a post-modernist experience. In the 1960s, a number of short documentaries were made in Québec. These documentaries were inspired by the socio-political situation and the search for identity by the Québécois. Canadian film researcher Gillian Helfield has discussed in her article "'I' y ava't un' fois" (Once upon a time): Films as Folktales in Québécois Cinéma Direct' how agrarian culture was revived in the cinematography of the period and explores the use of French-Canadian folktales. The same narrative elements were recognisable also in the structure of the films (the motifs of a journey, arrival and departure, a 'story within a story' performance characteristic of folktales, etc.). The entire material associated with lore culture and the iconographic and narrative elements of folklore, as used in the cinema, brought to the forefront ties with the historical and cultural past of the Québécois.

Transformation is the central subject both in folktales and popular films. Holly Blackford has analysed the use of traditional narrative motifs in science-fiction films such as *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *WarGames* (1983), *Tron* (1982), *The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes* (1969), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Star Trek* (1966). Already the title of the article, 'PC Pinocchios. Parents, Children, and the Metamorphosis Tradition in Science Fiction,' exposes the nature of metamorphosis. The author finds a metamorphic motif in all the above films in which a child or adult transforms into a computerlike being or a computer (or any piece of technology) transforms into a child. While following this assumption, the author turns to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* and Stith Thompson's *The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. These two theoretical sources are used in several other articles of the collection. Like in the fairytale of Pinocchio the wooden doll, these films employ the metaphor human/nonhuman to express a strong humanist agenda. Many of these films in which technology is brought to life introduce the question of the responsibility of creators over their creation.

Of the studies presented in the third part of the book, the most captivating is the analysis by Margarete Johanna Landwehr on the use of folktale as a traumatic narrative in film *Germany, Pale Mother* (1980) by Helma Sanders-Brahms. This autobiographical film tells about the author's personal childhood experiences and the fate of her mother Lene in postwar Germany. The creator of the film has used the 'story within a story' technique, and in this, in the course of the film's plot, mother Lene is telling her

daughter a fairy tale of “The Robber Bridegroom” (ATU 955). A closer analysis of the film shows that the content and form of the folktale and storytelling as such are closely related to the idea of cinematographic narrative on multiple substantial and functional levels of meaning. By opposing a fictional fairy tale world to the harsh reality in Germany the author both criticises the atrocities of the war in a patriarchal postwar society and presents the power and importance of narration. Storytelling is an activity which makes the voice of women who survived the war audible and promises to create a distance with the traumatic past in order to cope with it in the present.

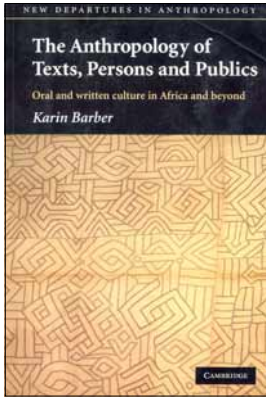
Self-perception, power relations and ‘the cultural other’ is the central topic of the last (fourth) article of the collection, entitled ‘Beyond Communitas. Cinematic Food Events and the Negotiation of Power, Belonging and Exclusion’. LuAnne Roth, lecturer of American film and folklore at the University of Missouri-Columbia discusses how food and eating culture may be markers of racial and cultural identity. Roth analyses in her article several films on food tradition, including the romantic comedy *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002). The author notes that by observing food culture it is possible to determine how traditions of food shared by a family help in socializing, and expand and present the dynamics of power and relationships. The films discussed in the article point to the distrust of other cultures and fear to intermingle with these cultures, but also the concurrent natural wish to experience ‘the other’.

Next to the ones mentioned above, *Folklore / Cinema* offers other interesting studies – for instance, about the relationship of contemporary horror films and fantasies with folk culture. The axis of these studies seems to be the fact that the films discussed in the book are seen as new cultural texts created by the art of filmmaking in which the aggressive visual world of the art of film employs, joins and mixes the different manifestations of folk culture, including folklore, by creating new meanings and opening and explaining the world around us.

Reading these articles has inspired me to contemplate on cultic films released in Estonia in the Soviet period. So far no academic treatment on the phenomenon of such films has been published in Estonia. In several studies Estonian folklorists have indeed mentioned how the films have enriched the slang of Estonians, but whether and to which degree is it possible to approach these cinematographic works also as reflections of ethnographic or Soviet-Estonian ideology and national identity? These questions remain to be answered.

Eda Kalmre

A BOOK ABOUT ORAL AND WRITTEN CULTURE



Barber, Karin 2007. *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics. Oral and written culture in Africa and beyond* (New Departures in Anthropology). New York: Cambridge University Press, 276pp.

This book is about texts – or more precisely – about texts as a possible focus of anthropological inquiry. Karin Barber is not interested in texts as sources for some kind of ethnographical or historical data, but she is interested in ‘textual anthropology’ as a separate field of inquiry. So she writes that as one of the things societies produce, and one of the things people do, the texts are “interesting in the same way that kinship, ritual and agriculture are interesting” – they are “forms of social behavior widely distributed and gener-

ally central to people’s communal experience”(p. 4). Case material presented in the book is mostly connected to Africa.

Barber positions this prospective branch of anthropology into an imagined meeting spot between American cultural anthropology and British social anthropology. Barber emphasizes that although the British social anthropologists (Bronislaw Malinowski, Raymond Firth, and others) considered the stories circulating in the communities under research to be extremely significant and even recorded them in quite a good detail in their field notes; the texts have at best a footnote status in their monographies but are mostly altogether omitted. Meanwhile, for American cultural anthropologists such as Franz Boas, the text was simultaneously subject matter, method (the work consisted achieving the most adequate recording of texts) and result (compilations of texts). Barber herself seeks an approach which would focus on texts alike cultural anthropology but at the same time would locate the texts into the field of research for social anthropology. Thus Barber notes, “I take the fundamental subject matter of anthropology to be social relationships, and ask in what ways verbal textuality arises from, and in turn helps to shape, social relationships” (p. 29).

What is at stake here is precisely the textuality of the text – that is how text is constituted as a text. Barber wishes to distinguish her approach from that of various historians-ethnographers who treat oral texts as possible sources for information, as well as from the approach of the earlier cultural anthropologists who did concentrate on texts but did not pay attention to whether the text written down was actually constituted as a distinct text or was it their own arbitrary excerpt from a discursive flow. She writes that “if a verbal text is to ‘tell us’ anything about society, social experience, or cultural values, this can be only *through* its specific textuality, its specific way of being a text – not by-passing it” (p. 13). Barber mentions the category of genre as a significant meeting spot of the social and the textual, and in the chapter ‘Genre, society and history’, she observes text from microsocial and macrosocial perspectives alike, treating conventions of genre as a possible link between those two vantage points.

A somewhat different angle is taken for the relationship between the social and the textual in the chapter 'Audiences and publics' where the author analyses the mutual relationship between text and audience, and different forms of that relationship depending on the degree and mode of the audience of "being imagined" as a community. In the chapter 'Text and personhood', Barber tackles the issue of constituting self in the light of text creation and social relationships; she focuses her research on genres by which individuals can assert themselves as social beings. Barber writes that for the research of the constitution of self, a text does not necessarily have to be descriptive or confessional (modalities of genre upon which studies of individuals are usually founded and which treat self as an already existent phenomenon) but what matters is the creation and presentation of text as a vehicle for constitution of self.

At the centre of Barber's treatment of text/textuality is the concept of 'entextualization'. Relying on the work of Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban, she defines entextualization as "the process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local contexts" (Silverstein & Urban 1996: 21, *op cit.* Barber 2007: 22). Therefore, the main essence of the textuality of text is clear distinction from the flow of speech, which enables the text to be re-presented, quoted and commented on. This matter of quoting and commenting is assessed in greater detail in the chapter 'The constitution of oral texts' where Barber surveys various ways of entextualization (entextualization as freezing and entextualization as creative quoting) and analyses the issues of preserving/renewing tradition in the light of those.

One of the reasons why Barber prefers the entextualization perspective is the possibility to treat written and oral texts on the same grounds. Thus she writes that although writing is often highlighted as the means to turn a verbal text into an autonomous object, the oral entextualization is in fact a similar creation of an object:

A study of the entextualization of oral genres, however, suggests that writing is only an extension of processes already well established and flourishing without it. Fixing words, [...] making them object-like in themselves, [...] creating forms that others can recognise, appropriate and inhabit, are what "oral cultures" do. (Barber 2007: 101)

Barber concentrates on continuities between oral and written modes (p. 29) and above all, she is concerned with instances of intermediate domain that participates simultaneously in both oral and written modes. In the chapter 'Audiences and publics', she analyses the way how the author of the first Zulu book, Magma M. Fuze turns to his reader: sometimes by using expressions that refer to togetherness of reader and author, sometimes implying the reader who is a member of a much broader and more abstract community; such kind of shifting between local-oral and print-constituted public reflects the uncertainty of author about his position as a writer.

As the concept of entextualization emphasizes the re-presentability and quotability of text, it also supports the notion of the process of reception as a creative activity. Thus Barber indicates that people exert the same creative capacities when they "compose, improvise or write new texts, but also when they read, listen, repeat or remember them" (p. 210). Subsequently, Barber points out the necessity to complement our customary (canon-based) understanding of literature and literariness with the bottom-up phenomena. The same is also stated in respect of postcolonial literary studies:

Postcolonial criticism that looks only at published, cosmopolitan, English-language writing – and only in relation to other published, cosmopolitan, English-language writing from elsewhere in the world – is not well grounded (p. 223).

So – to contextualize ‘literary’ it is necessary to focus on “the field of local, popular and domestic textual productivity” (p. 223).

To characterize such literary practices, she employs the term ‘tin trunk literacy’, referring to tin trunks which were used for the storage of written texts all across the sub-Saharan Africa – for documents which the colonial power obliged people to keep (e.g., tax receipts, passports) as well as written texts of more personal value (e.g., diaries, letters). Barber writes that those tin-trunks can be considered a kind of do-it-yourself archives and they “seemed to be associated with the core of an individual’s private values and aspirations” (p. 176). This kind of tin trunk literacy is dealt with in the chapter ‘The private’, where author presents some examples of diary keepers and letterwriters (the exemplary material is derived from the compilation *Africa’s Hidden Histories. Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*, edited by Karin Barber (2006, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press). In the introduction to the chapter, Barber gives an outline of different theories on the links between self and writing that are based on Western materials but she states there is no point in searching such “writing of an individual” in African texts – though the genres (diary, letter) may seem similar, the real practices are quite different. So she writes that those people wrote “not so much to inscribe their innermost private thoughts as to invent original ways of making things stick, in a fluid and precarious world” (p. 199). With this remark Barber stresses the similarity of these (literacy) practices to the oral textual practices analysed in the chapter ‘Text and personhood’: the main point is not the confessionality but text as a way to constitute a person and to play through his/her connections with the surrounding world.

Finally, it deserves to mention the author’s note in the preface that the book does not attempt to be exhaustive or systematic, the aim has rather been to raise as many questions regarding text/textuality as possible. The author has raised those questions in a fairly broad theoretical framework – each chapter begins with a thorough and expansive theoretical introduction where the author poses various ways of tackling the given concepts (genre, personhood, audience, publics, private), and moves on to lay her exemplary material rather neatly on the theoretical field, adapting and restructuring it according to her needs. Even though the chapters of the book are also readable as separate entities, the main merit of the book is precisely the kaleidoscopic impression created by reading the whole of it.

Katre Kikas