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A transnational regioscape in the making

The Baltic Sea in Christian Petzold's *Barbara* and Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen's *My Favorite War*

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Abstract

The Baltic Sea has effectively separated the Scandinavian and Eastern European countries, especially in the period when this body of water constituted a part of the Iron Curtain and functioned for Scandinavians as an imaginary protective moat. From the East-Central European perspective, the Baltic Sea offered a hope of escape to freedom, encapsulated in the cinematic trope of the sea as a 'blue boundary', or a 'horizon of hope'. But the Baltic Sea was also feared as a life-threatening border, as expressed in the trope of 'Baltic noir', a variation of the 'Eastern noir' trope (Mrozewicz 2018) – imagining the sea in nocturnal scenery as wild and under state control. The article discusses screen representations of the Baltic Sea understood as performative regioscaping practices (Chow 2021), offering insights into the memories and histories of human mobilities across the Baltic Sea beyond official narratives, as well as into the human relationship with the sea as both a cultural boundary and material body of water. As demonstrated by the analyzed film examples, Christian Petzold's *Barbara* (2012, Germany) and Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen's *My Favorite War* (2020, Norway, Latvia), the Baltic Sea continues to be an important spatiotemporal node in the transnational re-telling of the region's history and identity.

Keywords: transnational cinema, the Baltic Sea on screen, the Baltic Sea region, regioscape, blue humanities, Christian Petzold, Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the Scandinavian and Eastern European cultural discourses of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Baltic Sea has predominantly aroused ambivalence (Mrozewicz 2018:93). Despite physically connecting the shores of the nine countries that surround it today (during the Cold War spanning the three Nordic countries: Finland, Sweden and Denmark; the Soviet Union; 'communist' Poland; and the GDR), as a cultural imaginary it has represented an ocean of cultural distance rather than a passage. Enthusiasts proposing to rearticulate *Norden* as a Baltic project, an idea that emerged in the early 1990s on the wave of the geopolitical changes in Europe (Wæver 1992:100), turned out to be over-exuberant optimists. Perhaps today, when, following Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, the Baltic Sea has become NATO's new inland sea (with Finland having joined NATO in 2023, and Sweden having applied for membership), these ideas will attain new relevance. Indeed, the current historical moment calls for a re-examination of the cultural representations of the region.

In what follows, I make a brief introduction to how the Baltic Sea has functioned in the Scandinavian versus Eastern European audiovisual imagination, after which I present some ideas for how audiovisual narratives could help us positively rethink the ambivalence attached culturally to the Baltic Sea. I am suggesting the concept of the Baltic Sea as a transnational regioscape, denoting, most broadly, films (feature, documentary, animated) and TV series with scenes featuring the Baltic – either as audiovisual representations of the sea as such, or depicting activities embroiled with it.[1] The regioscape of the Baltic Sea is understood as a dynamic audiovisual archive mediating and bringing together different kinds of human experiences and memories connected to the sea. This archive can be thought of as a shimmering collection of cultural texts enabling understanding across cultures, nationalities, generations, genders, and social divisions, filling gaps in the transnational history of the Baltic Sea, and reimagining the sea as a material and cultural shared space at the heart of a transnational region. The idea of the transnational regioscape of the Baltic Sea is not so much aimed at setting "the historical record straight, as […] to listen to its other, repressed, side" (Chambers 2004:427).

I am thereby arguing that screen representations of the Baltic Sea contributing to this archive propose – explicitly or implicitly – a vision of the sea as a transnational space beyond the dominant national, landlocked borders and narratives, and that this dynamically growing archive comprises a transnational spatiotemporal node that participates in a negotiation of the history and identity of the Baltic Sea region.

2. PROTECTIVE MOAT, BLUE BOUNDARY, BALTIC NOIR

From the Scandinavian perspective embedded in the Cold War reality, the Baltic Sea embodied a border that separated the Scandinavian countries from the previous Eastern bloc countries as a natural protective moat – a discourse prevalent especially in Sweden during the Cold War (see Malmborg 2001). At the same time, as a fluid body of water, the sea has unsurprisingly signified connection and exchange. For instance, the sea made unwelcome intrusion – by Soviet spies (as an incident with a Soviet submarine intruding Swedish coastal waters near Karlskrona in 1981 proved), or other undesirable elements from the east

[1] For more about the distinction, see Dobrin (2021:16).

(cheap labor, migrants, human traffickers, criminals) – more likely and less controllable than a land border, as the explosions of the gas pipelines running in the Baltic Sea in September 2022 have reminded us.

From the Eastern European perspective, the Baltic Sea has connoted a different kind of ambivalence: on the one hand, it offered the hope of escape to freedom and the beginning of a new, presumably safer life in the North. This hope is expressed in the metaphor of the 'blue boundary', or the horizon of hope, as the Baltic Sea was sometimes referred to. On the other hand, it was feared as an extremely dangerous and life-threatening border, adhering to the well-established literary and cultural trope of the ocean as 'antagonist' and obstacle (see Dobrin 2021:22), as well as the broader archetype of 'man versus nature' (see Dobrin 2021:16). This fear is expressed in the strongly present audiovisual trope of 'Baltic noir' – imagining the Baltic Sea as wild, dangerous to cross, usually depicted in nocturnal scenery – but at the same time, a body of water facilitating an escape to a better life (see Mrozewicz 2018:107).[2]

The audiovisual trope of Baltic noir can be seen as related to the broader trope of Eastern noir, a well-established Western, including Scandinavian, narrative concerning the former Eastern bloc countries that imagines them as dark, dangerous, unintelligible, and often as a crime scene (see Mrozewicz 2018). In the Cold War cultural imagination, the Baltic Sea was connected to the East, as opposed, for example, to the North Sea, easily accessible for Westerners and thus associated with the West (cf. Ludewig 2004). The trope of Eastern noir, including Baltic noir, has endured especially in today's crime narratives (though not solely) and travels in both directions, so to speak; in Scandinavian films and television series, the Baltic Sea is imagined as arousing anxiety and fear, dangerous to cross and as a gate to an utterly different world. The Danish TV series *DNA* (TV2, Denmark, 2019) provides a recent example of this trope, where a night crossing of the stormy sea by the protagonist traveling to Poland commences a series of tragic events that irreversibly change his life. A tragedy that occurs during a nocturnal crossing of the Baltic Sea – the Danish protagonist loses his child – sets in motion a chain of events that lead to a questioning of the idea of family understood as a biological entity determined by DNA (as the title of the series suggests), and in the end to the establishment of a new transnational family, with a strong and independent Polish woman as the mother figure at its top. Thus, the negatively loaded trope of Baltic noir is reimagined here by the Baltic Sea functioning as a space that, like a storm, shakes our earth-bound, nationally oriented beliefs (which the idea of the biological family is related to), and leads to new relationships that might have been hard to imagine in the divided Cold War Europe.

Another example of how the audiovisual trope of Baltic noir is reimagined today is provided by Danish director Jonas Poher Rasmussen's animated documentary *Flee* (Denmark, 2021). In the film's central scene depicting a night crossing of the sea from Estonia to Sweden by a group of Afghan refugees fleeing from their home country in the beginning of the 1990s, the Baltic noir trope is clearly evoked. However, it is not only reiterated, but also employed to stage the Baltic Sea as a scene of an encounter between the Afghan refugees and the more privileged travellers, a group of tourists on a Norwegian cruise ship (stand-ins for those in the theatre audience who can identify with them). The encounter at the sea serves both to make viewers better understand the refugee experience and confront us with our own involvement in the so-called 'refugee crisis' (see Mrozewicz 2023). Again, the Baltic Sea, by being staged

[2] This ambivalence, or the duality of the Baltic Sea as a blue boundary and Baltic noir, is both visually and discursively present in the Danish documentary *The Escape* (*Flugten fra DDR*, dir. Jesper Clemmensen, DR 2014). For a discussion of this film, see Mrozewicz 2018:107ff.

as an inherently transnational body of water – as Stacy Alaimo has put it, "the deep seas epitomize how most ocean waters exist beyond state borders, legal protection, and cultural imaginaries" (2013:233) – serves in *Flee* to question human-made borders as arbitrary, as well as the assumptions about who is 'legal' and who is 'illegal'.

3. A REGIOSCAPE IN THE MAKING

As an audiovisual archive, these representations of the Baltic Sea can be seen as producing – or co-producing together with other cultural texts and objects – the Baltic *regioscape*, and thus thought of as a possible region-building category. This conceptualization is partly inspired by Pei-She Chow's research on the entanglements between regions and cinema/television (her case study being the Øresund region). Chow considers films as possessing "a particular agency in shaping attitudes about a place and a geopolitical project", both on the level of representation and "as elements within a larger ecosystem of practices and relations on political, economic and cultural levels" (2021:12). Chow uses the terms *regioscape* / *regioscaping* to define the processes of "manifesting and shaping a sense of the regional imaginary" (ibid.:13). Films and TV series, according to Chow, "critically participate in the processes of regioscaping" and "in the negotiation of a regioscape as a constructed and performative space within which notions of identity, power, and territory are signalled" (ibid.:14). Films and TV series are active regioscaping agents on three levels. They: "(1) reflect or refract a particular perspective of a region, (2) are a product of complex relationships between entities in a transnational industrial network, and (3) reveal, through the (visible and invisible) traces of these relationships, the contours of a regional space" (Chow 2021:14).

Within the scope of this article, my analysis is more modest and limited primarily to points 1 and 3 listed above, with the film-industrail aspects remaining outside the limits of this analysis. However, I will include comments on relevant paratextual and production-related aspects of the discussed films. The question of reflection and/or refraction of a particular perspective on the region will be considered first and foremost in relation to the two previously mentioned cultural tropes of the Baltic Sea: the blue boundary and Baltic noir. The 'contours of a regional space' revealed by traces of interactions at and with the Baltic Sea will be understood as expressed primarily on the level of representation.

An important question raised by Chow is how a community is imagined when the region is comprised of several states, each of them with their own national consciousness and history (Chow 2021:15). In the case of the Baltic Sea region, it should be emphasized that it is marked not only by national differences, but also by substantial social and economic inequalities, and power structures resulting from the different political histories of the countries surrounding it.[3]

Here, I argue that screen representations of the Baltic Sea can help us cross these differences and inequalities on an imaginary, cognitive and affective level. I also argue that understanding the sea not only as a geopolitical border, but also as a material and nonhuman agent can help cross the distance dividing those countries.

Another theoretical inspiration comes from Iain Chambers, who proposes a method of what he calls the ocean's 'liquid materiality' to approach the history of the Mediterranean in

[3] These inequalities have been addressed in Nordic cinemas, e.g., in pre-2004 EU enlargement films such as *Lilya 4-ever* (dir. Lukas Moodysson, Sweden, Denmark, 2002) or *Buy Bye Beauty* (dir. Pål Hollender, Sweden, 2001). On trans-Baltic inequalities and the Nordic guilt towards the Baltic countries as imagined in cinema, see Mrozewicz 2018, Chapter 4, 'Guilt and Shame in (Trans)national Spaces'.

a postcolonial context. For Chambers, the Mediterranean becomes "an experiment in a different form of history writing" (Chambers 2004:425). I am imagining the screen representations of the Baltic Sea as a different form of the region's transnational *regioscaping* in the context of a series of spatiotemporal nodes in recent European history. These include the post-1989/1991 as well as post-2004 (enlargement of the EU), post-2015 (the so-called 'refugee crisis'), and post-2022 (Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine) contexts, not following each other in a linear fashion, but constantly, like waves, folding past, present, and future into each other. As Chambers put it, "beneath the official harmony of the past lie the vaster regions of sedimented traces and a fluid topography of discarded memories and forgotten lives that reside in time; a time that is always now" (2004:424f.). This is why, he continues,

> the metaphor of the sea with its waves, winds, currents, tides, and storms, where the earth touches the sky in the infinity of a horizon that promotes a journey, navigation, dispersal, provides an altogether more suitable frame for recognising the unstable location of historical knowledge than the restricted location of a landlocked world and its dubious dependence on the fixity of immediate kinship, blood, and soil. (Chambers 2004:425)

Chambers' publications on the Mediterranean coincide with the emergence of the so-called blue (post)humanities, a water-oriented current of thought within ecocriticism (Dobrin 2021; Neimanis 2017). What is striking in his approach is the fact that he foregrounds the fluid materiality of the sea, as opposed to a landlocked perspective, and uses it as a metaphor for our historical knowledge. The blue humanities, emphasizing the crucial role of water as a life-giving force as well as a metaphor for thinking that extends beyond both human-centered and landbound approaches, have challenged the 'dry', individualist, coherent and fundamentally autonomous human – as well as national – subject, perceived as separated from other human and nonhuman beings (Marzec 2019). Such an understanding of the subject originates in the philosophy of the Enlightenment and lies behind anthropocentric individualism. Water, the precondition for all human and nonhuman relationships, has the power to blur the borders of solid clear-cut subjects, to connect rather than separate – both in a material, metaphorical, and political sense. Can the screen representations of the Baltic Sea increase mutual understanding and solidarity across various types of borders, beyond soil-bound categories – and if yes, then in what ways?

4. THE BALTIC SEA A SPATIOTEMPORAL NODE OF FREEDOM

Recent film examples show that the Baltic Sea continues to be an important element in regional-history-(re)telling, and that cinema can offer narratives countering official or stereotypical discourses. This is demonstrated by two films analyzed in the following pages: Christian Petzold's feature film *Barbara* (2012, Germany) and Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen's animated documentary *My Favorite War* (2020, Norway, Latvia). Both films can be described as embedded in the post-1989/91 as well as post-2004 (enlargement of the European Union, which included the Baltic states) reality, while at the same time they both evoke and reimagine the Cold War narratives and iconographies of their respective countries (Germany and Latvia) through staging the Baltic Sea as a symbolic and material space offering alternative future perspectives.

As Chow observes in a discussion of the cinematic regioscaping practices in Øresund, "Choice of genre, format, and the use of alternative modes of vision all influence the ways the texts work as conduits of cultural memory or counter-narrative" (2021:23). In Petzold's *Barbara* (see Figure 1 for the poster of the film) nature functions as a means of escape from the totalitarian

regime of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and as a space of – even if only restricted – freedom (including sexual freedom). The film is set in East Germany in 1980, that is, a time well before the groundbreaking political changes embodied by the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Eastern communist bloc. *Barbara* tells the story of a female physician who, punished for having filed an official request to leave East Germany, is transferred from the prestigious Charité hospital in East Berlin to a small rural hospital on the Baltic Sea. With the help of her West German boyfriend, Barbara is planning to flee by sea to Denmark. In the end, however, she decides to stay in the East and instead assist in the escape efforts of Stella, an orphaned teenage girl held in a forced labor camp, with whom Barbara develops a nurturing mother-like relationship, and who has become pregnant and wants to keep the child (which the totalitarian authorities refuse to allow). Stella, a traumatized victim of the totalitarian regime, gets an opportunity to continue her life in Denmark, which as an imaginary place serves as an alternative to both East and West Germany (the last depicted in a less-than-positive light). By deciding not to flee, Barbara actively chooses to devote her life to her work at the hospital, in this way fulfilling socialist ideals in spite of the failures embodied by the GDR regime, while also not playing into the schema of being 'rescued' by a Western male savior.

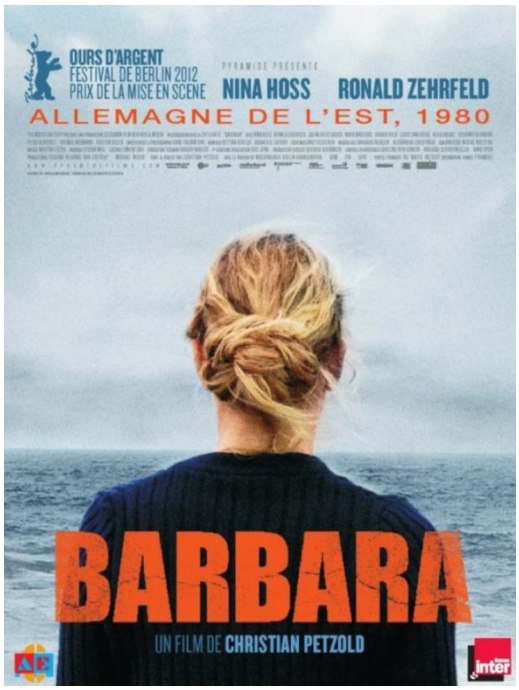

Figure 1. *In Christian Petzold's* Barbara *(2012, Germany), the Baltic Sea functions as a material and symbolic space of freedom beyond the human-made regimes and a nurturing body of water coded as female*.[4]

Surveillance is an important theme in the film. Petzold shows the efforts of Barbara – who knows that she is being observed night and day – to live as if she were not living under constant scrutiny. In accordance with the Berlin School approach, to which Petzold is usually ascribed as a filmmaker, the politics of *Barbara* are evident not only in the topic of the film but also in the mise-en-scène. The ubiquitous surveilling gaze of the system is present not only

[4] Source: Institut français du Burundi, retrieved from https://ifburundi.org/2023/spectacles-evenements/cinema-16/ (accessed 23 January 2024).

on the level of the plot, but also through the aesthetic and stylistic strategies adopted, including camera positioning and movement, framing, color scheme, lighting, and actor choreography.

The next-to-last scene of the film takes place on a beach where Barbara brings Stella to pass her to a person responsible for her transfer to a boat that will take her to Denmark. The ocular sharpness of the mise-en-scène is dissolved by the dark-bluish filter of the night, melting the sea and the sky into one, while the aural presence of the sea is intense and all-embracing. The darkness creates a blurred image, which rather than being ominous, as in the 'Baltic noir' trope, functions here as an all-embracing soft, dark blue veil protecting the two women from the controlling gaze, and interconnecting all the bodies and things within the frame. Just as it is difficult to tell the difference between sea and sky, it is also difficult to discern the two female bodies from each other, both clothed in dark blue dresses.

In the scene on the beach, Stella rests her head on Barbara's lap, their bodies configured like a female pietá – an archetype of motherhood in European cultures. While Barbara functions as a motherly figure for Stella, the pregnant girl is already a mother herself. At the same time, the sea serves here as an archetypal nonhuman mother, the beginning of all life on Earth (as the blue humanities emphasize) (Marzec 2019). When a tiny male figure with a rubber flatboat appears from the dark water, Barbara hands Stella over. The sea is not an antagonist here, as in the Baltic noir trope, but rather a receiving space in which Barbara and Stella fully trust rather than fear. The sea envelops Stella like a safe motherly womb. The sounds of the waves and wind enhance this all-embracing aquatic experience, dissolving borders between self and other, human and nonhuman. While viewers may wonder whether Stella made it to the other shore, we never learn what happens to her (however, we are prompted to assume she did). The connection with the sea – a protective space of freedom and escape from the human-made political regime, a life-giving body of water – is more important here than the final (human) destination. The sea is not just a zone of transfer to the other shore, but a material and symbolic space of freedom beyond the state regime.

Although the plot of the film is set in 1980s, we should not forget that the film was released in 2012. In an article on the Baltic Sea in German post-reunification films, Alexandra Ludewig (2004) advances the thesis that many of the films featuring the Baltic Sea revisit and reimagine the tradition of the German *Heimatfilm* – the homeland film. This cinematic genre that evolved from the late 1930s expressed traditionalist, nationalist and patriarchal values associated with Nazi 'blood and soil' ideology. The characteristic iconography of *Heimatfilm* were rural (non-urban, folkloric, anti-modern) landscapes, and often alpine mountain tops. With Germany's reunification and the continuing integration of Europe, the *Heimatfilm* genre experienced a revival, which pointed to the need for defining the 'home' anew. However, these films were revisionist rather than revivalist, as they attempted to

> bridge the east-west divide, with an eye toward rapprochement and a focus on the search for meaning and a place that can be called "home." In doing so the films no longer turn to West Germany's alpine or heathlike landscapes but to former German territories in the east and maritime landscapes in the northeast. […] In contrast to the traditional Heimat associations of natural, romantic idylls, the sea, as depicted in many films, stands for the rough elements of nature, the Other, the ultimate border. (Ludewig 2004:29)

Indeed, the hard and vertical border symbolized by both the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain is replaced in the films discussed by Ludewig – and this can similarly be applied to *Barbara* – by the porous and fluid boundary embodied by the Baltic Sea. At the same time, if related to the

tradition of *Heimatfilm*, it is striking that the horizontality of this aquatic boundary and its strategic coding as a female space (Ludewig 2004:41) as well as a space of motherhood, as in Petzold's film, creates a telling counter-image to the phallic mountains expressing in *Heimatfilm* a nationalist and patriarchal ideology – or, "masculinity, heroism, and conquest" (Ludewig 2004:41). The Baltic Sea in post-1989 German films thus indicates a reorientation from hard borders to porous boundaries (cf. Mrozewicz 2018:19–23) and to an understanding of the new – in the case of Petzold's film German – 'motherland' as connected to a transnational, or perhaps even supranational (Ludewig 2004:41) reality, symbolised by the Baltic Sea. In the scene discussed above, not only does Barbara walk confidently in the direction of the sea, the sea is also a space to which she entrusts her 'daughter', hoping to give her a different and better (than her own) future – beyond the political blood and soil ideologies of the changing regimes. Hence, through the two women's spatial orientation towards the North, the scene on the Baltic Sea can be read as the film's rejection of the East-West axis, even if this rejection seemed unimaginable in 1980.

Similarly to what Przemysław Czapliński argues in his essay published in this volume about the reorientation of Polish cultural imagination towards the North, a crucial role played by the Baltic Sea in the post-1989 European imagination is its potential to offer "a 90-degree turn of the vicarious map" (Czapliński 2023:16), enabling the inhabitants of the previous Eastern Bloc countries (including the GDR, as in *Barbara*) to break free from the East-West axis, all too limiting and associated with a world order belonging to the past.

5. THE BALTIC SEA AS A SPATIOTEMPORAL NODE OF CONNECTION: MAKING THE NORDIC-BALTIC REGIOSCAPE

My Favorite War is a personal, autobiographical animated documentary, creatively reviving through the medium of animation (combined with different types of live-action footage) its director Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen's memories of her childhood in Soviet Latvia. Human encounters with the Baltic Sea frame the film's narrative. The opening scene depicts a dangerous excursion to the coast on which Ilze's parents take her in 1974. The blue color of their car and outfits expresses the desire of connecting with the sea. The main purpose of this risky trip is "to see the sea". Simple as it may seem, it is also an act of courage (they can be caught by a patrol) and silent resistance – not least because Ilze's father, as we learn later in the film, is an active member of the communist party. In the Soviet Union of 1974, the Baltic Sea is a space highly controlled by the military. The opening scene shows Ilze and her parents as tiny human figures forced to stay disconnected from the sea. They dream not so much of escaping from Soviet Latvia as about dipping their toes in the sea. The body of water behind barbed wire visible on the poster of the film (see Figure 2), as well as on the map metaphorically envisioning the Iron Curtain as a barbed wire fence separating the Baltic countries from the sea, or the sand on the beach mechanically raked every day so that the footprints of potential fugitives would be visible, can be seen as a denial of the inherent qualities of water – its fluency, its ability to leak through some solids, to facilitate relations between subjects and objects. The Baltic Sea, established as a regime-defined "zone of surveillance, barrier and control" (Bayraktar 2019:362), is in Burkovska-Jacobsen's film undermined on both a material and metaphorical level, with water denoting here the possibility of connecting with other people and places.

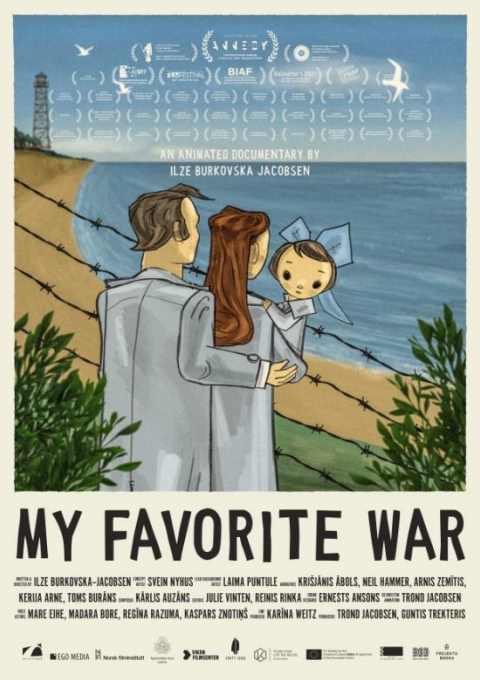

Figure 2. *In the opening scene of Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen's* My Favorite War *(2020, Norway, Latvia), we witness the protagonist and her parents chasing their dream to embrace the sea in the backdrop of Soviet Latvia.*[5]

In a humorous scene illustrating the collapse of the Soviet Union – a colossus standing on feet of clay – the solid bodies of the monumental statues of its ideologists, like that of Lenin, float in water, drawn in a way that suggests a blurring of their solid borders and dissolution of their 'dry bodies'. They are viewed as if from a boat, which implies that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, access to water is finally possible. In the voice over narration, water – or, more specifically a river, functions as a metaphor of the common people united against the regime ("We are the river").

My Favorite War ends with yet another scene at the Baltic Sea. This scene is live-action footage showing Ilze travelling with her children (all wearing a piece of blue clothing) on a similar route as Ilze did as a child some 40 years earlier. The film culminates in a celebration of free access to the coast of the Baltic, the reconnection with the sea experienced sensually, as if this was necessary for people to feel joy and a sense of togetherness, the family immersed in the oceanic experience. The human subjects are shown as continuous with their aqueous environment – as wet (rather than 'dry') subjects.

The way the sea is depicted throughout the film, both in the animated parts and in the final scene – calm and in bright blue, the line of horizon clearly visible – recalls the previously mentioned tradition of imagining the Baltic as a 'horizon of hope' (cf. Mrozewicz 2018:107f.). However, while within this trope the sea as such is not so important – rather, it is only an intermediary stage on the way to elsewhere (the Scandinavian countries and a better life), in *My Favorite War* it is a body of water that is a source of joy. The fact that the final scene is live-action footage and not animation symbolically implies that the 'archive' of the Baltic – both cultural and ecological – has been reopened and is now publicly accessible, and therefore does not need to be creatively replaced with drawings.

[5] Source: *My Favourite War* press kit, retrieved from https://myfavoritewar.com/press-kit/ (accessed 23 January 2024).

Burkovska-Jacobsen's animated film documents the transition from the totalitarian Soviet regime to a new transnational imaginary of the region from the perspective of the Baltic countries, and, above all, Latvia. This transition is imagined by the changing accessibility of the Baltic Sea to 'common people' and by the changing human relationship with it, reflecting people's – especially those who happened to live on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain – longing for transnational connections beyond state-controlled, militarized borders, a connection that also implies the freedom of choice. Thus, even though the film was released sixteen years after the enlargement of the EU and eight years after *Barbara*, it can similarly be read as a cinematic staging of the cultural reorientation from the East-West axis towards the North through the symbolically coded space of the Baltic Sea, and thus a rejection of the dominant narrative with roots in the Cold War order.

While in the film the pure connection with the Baltic Sea is foregrounded, and the sea functions as a space of physical, emotional, and political freedom, on the metatextual level, Burkovska-Jacobsen – who can be called a transnational filmmaker – embodies the connection between 'Eastern Europe' and 'Norden' across the Baltic. We know that she migrated to Norway shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Burkovska-Jacobsen-the-filmmaker, and the film as a product of cooperation among a team of people from both Latvia and Norway,[6] create a cinematic regioscape connecting the two regions (Baltic and Nordic) and countries (Latvia and Norway), offering a vision of a new regional entity oriented towards the Baltic Sea that could be called a Nordic-Baltic regioscape. On the level of creative cooperation, the film embodies the post-Cold War empowerment of people to travel and meet across borders. With her autobiographical animated documentary, Burkovska-Jacobsen proves her agency through self-representation, something that was not obvious in the regime where "all the choices had been made for me". Because Ilze and her mother are foregrounded in the film, and the system is primarily embodied by male subjects, it is equally important to notice that the emphasized agency is that of a female director.

In the context of the still-existing authoritative regimes in Europe, and especially in view of the Russian military aggressions against Ukraine (2014, 2022),[7] the film is acutely relevant, producing a Nordic-Baltic regioscape as a space of democracy and political freedom that, considering its recent past and the actual events in neighbouring Ukraine, should never be taken for granted. On the paratextual level, on the official website of the film, this regioscape of freedom and democracy explicitly includes Ukraine, while at the same time acknowledging the role of cultural texts ("stories we tell") as regioscaping agents having the power to impact the real world. As the manifest (written on April 5, 2022) declares:

> On February 24, Russia attacked its neighbor Ukraine and is now waging a brutal, sadistic war. Ukraine's desire to become a democratic country has irritated and frightened the leaders of Russia. They do not want to look ahead but to return to Russia's authoritarian past. It hurts to say that our film is relevant like never before. Russia, the heir to the Soviet Union, is once again brainwashing its citizens, including young children, and forcing the population to love war. […] But our world is created and changed through the stories we tell. Even a drop in the river is a small contribution.[8]

[6] Members of the team are included on the film's official website, retrieved from https://myfavoritewar.com (accessed 21 September 2022).

[7] In an alternative trailer for *My Favorite War*, available on the film's website, several references are made to contemporary regimes, including portraits of Vladimir Putin, Alexander Lukaszenka, Victor Orban, Donald Trump, Mohamed bin Salman, Bashar al-Assad, Xi Jinping.

[8] Retrieved from https://myfavoritewar.com/ (accessed 6 March 2023).

Despite the still existing social and economic inequalities in the Baltic Sea region (especially between the Nordic and the previous Eastern Bloc countries), the eight democratic EU and NATO countries (assuming Sweden will formally join NATO soon) seem today more united than ever against a common enemy, the authoritarian/fascist Russian regime. In view of this reality, Burkovska-Jacobsen's film is indeed an important contribution as a testimony of living under political oppression and a counter-narrative to the past, present and future antidemocratic and destructive political regimes, still lurking over the region.

6. CINEMATIC SOLIDARITY ACROSS THE SEA

In cinema, as Chow reminds us, material and imagined spaces melt, capable of challenging hegemonic discourses (2021:20). Whereas *My Favorite War* and *Barbara* tell stories that both on the level of aesthetics and plot undermine the hegemonic, landlocked narrative of the Soviet/Eastern bloc and GDR/Nazi regimes, they also negotiate the East-West axis through which the story of resistance has usually been told. The binarism of this axis is disrupted in both films by the orientation of the Eastern European protagonists towards the North – which is also visualized by frame compositions in the scenes discussed. Both scenes (the final scene of *My Favorite War* and the scene at the sea in *Barbara*) include shots of the female protagonists viewed from behind, literally turned towards the North, that is, towards the depth of the frame as opposed to its east/right or west/left edge. Moreover, both films reimagine the trope of the Baltic Sea as a blue boundary, while the fear-instigating Baltic noir trope – which would be convenient from the point of view of the regimes – is not present in them at all.

Both of these films focus on the Baltic Sea both as a material body of water and on its life-affirming quality despite the attempts of political regimes to curb it and impose strict state-controlled borders. In *My Favorite War* the sea functions as a metaphor of both human and nonhuman forces capable of dissolving the solidity of the dry subject (of the state regime), embodied by the monumental statues of the male leaders of the USSR, and as a space of both corporeal and political empowerment for 'common' people. The film includes documentary footage of the 'Chain of Freedom' (also known as 'The Baltic Way'), formed by 2 million people from Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania connected with each other by literally holding their hands across 600 kilometers, thus creating a 'human chain'. This archival footage can itself be seen as a bottom-up cinematic – and regioscaping – practice. *Barbara* emphasizes the equally life-affirming possibility offered by the sea to escape from the ocular regime of surveillance and masculinist state ideologies. The films imagine subversive bottom-up practices of regioscaping beyond the pre-1989/1991 political divisions as well as beyond the dominant post-Cold War narratives and "identities orchestrated by authorities" (Chow 2021:27). Through the power of water, they envision the human desire, both past and present, of dissolving solid borders and participating in transnational, as well as human-nonhuman, communities.

The transnational regioscape of the Baltic Sea is constituted by subjects with asymmetrical access to privilege – including access to the sea as such. Therefore, the regioscaping of the Baltic Sea, surrounded by countries with very different political and social histories, involves a negotiation between different perspectives. The two films discussed here align with the perspective of those with less privilege, or no privilege at all, those forcibly alienated from rather than belonging to the region. Nonetheless, the films are made by directors who at the same time also represent the more privileged – in view of the history of the 20th century – parts of the region: a Latvian migrant director living and working creatively in Norway and a German

director who was born and grew up on the Western side of the Berlin Wall. The fact that repressed (Chambers 2004) or marginalized narratives and experiences related to the Baltic Sea in recent history are a focus of those directors proves that the Baltic Sea-on-screen can cut across national, political, and social divisions. Even though the Baltic Sea is depicted as a human-controlled space of hierarchies and surveillance, the two films offer an aesthetic and affective experience that challenges the dominant mode of division and instead produces connection. Even if these films have no palpable political effect, they can produce in viewers a deeper understanding of the social and political dynamics across and around the Baltic Sea. The transnational 'blue' body of water, the maritime centre of the region appropriated and controlled by various agendas and political discourses throughout history, registers the human-produced borders and hierarchies, but also soaks through them, wetting and saturating the 'dry' subjects and their narratives.

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