

# Screening Trafficking\_ Yana Ha...epictions of Human Trafficking

Tue, Nov 14, 2023 12:14PM 23:21

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

trafficking, eastern europe, cultural, russian, societies, east, ohio state university, western, products, examining, european, balkans, human trafficking, culture, films, cultural studies, study, work, images, sciences

## SPEAKERS

Yana Hashamova, Eva Dale, Janet Box-Steffensmeier, David Staley

---

- E** Eva Dale 00:00  
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences, with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:32  
Yana Hashamova is Professor and Chair of the Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. She is Core Faculty of the Film Studies program, and Affiliate Faculty of the Global Arts and Humanities Discovery Theme, Comparative Studies, Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, and the Mershon Center for International Security Studies. She has authored and edited several books, as well as published over 30 articles and book chapters in the areas of Russian and Balkan film, media, and literature, all examining national, ethnic, and gender representations. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Hashamova.
- Y** Yana Hashamova 01:15  
Thank you very much. I'm pleased and honored to be here.
- D** David Staley 01:19  
Happy to be with you this morning. So, one of the things that you study is what you call cross-

cultural transactions, which really caught my attention. What does this mean, what are cross-cultural transactions?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 01:32

I have studied quite extensively here in this country, I came to gain a graduate degree, but ended up earning two PhDs, and the second one was actually comparative literature, comparative studies, with film and gender. And this really framed my understanding of humanities and cultural studies, and I always look at the way different cultures interact with each other, and how one culture or cultural community looks at another. All my work, regardless of the various topics and titles of books, always centers around the way a certain national community or ethnic community sees and perceives itself, as it is reflected in cultural products, and how that cultural community sees other cultures, and other nations, and other ethnic communities. So in that exchange, and then vice versa, how that other perceives the local culture. And through all my work, I have always looked at the global flows of cultural images, cultural ideas, in the way they're perceived locally. And often I have discovered tension between the global flow of images, ideas and their local understanding.

**D** David Staley 03:08

So when you say cultural products, what sorts of... you say images, what's a cultural product?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 03:15

My material is usually literature, film, media examples; could be documentary, could be TV, series, national cinema. So, these are my cultural products, products created by artists... I shouldn't say around the world, because I'm not covering that much. But, I work a lot with Eastern Europe and Russia, Russian cultural and East European products, and some comparative view, the way they function and are perceived in Western Europe and the United States, but also how Western - and this is, again, a bit of a general term, by Western I mean mostly Western Europe and the United States - how those Western, in this case, cinematic examples create and construct East European characters or East European realities.

**D** David Staley 04:19

So when you describe cultural products, they almost sound like economic goods, like commodities, or refrigerators, or something like this. Is it an overstatement to say that you're examining the consumption of these cultural products?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 04:31

Actually, it is not. I am... in my most recent book, which is "Screening Trafficking: Prudent and Perilous", I'm examining exactly the consumption of these products. In my argument there unfolds in the way that western films, U.S., Western Europe, their BBC production films, or United States and Canada production films, have constructed and created the story of

trafficking for the big screen and have constructed the image of East Europeans either as victims or criminals, and there is no middle way. And I study how these images are received here, understood here in the United States, and also in Eastern Europe. When you say trafficking, what is being trafficked? What are we referring to here? Yes, I should have clarified that; it's human trafficking.

**D** David Staley 05:35

Human trafficking, and in Western films about Eastern Europe.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 05:39

Correct. About human trafficking, but in most cases, the stories revolve around East European victims and criminals.

**D** David Staley 05:47

Give us an example of where we see this.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 05:50

We see this in, it is a Lifetime drama, the TV network Lifetime drama, "Human Trafficking" with Mira Sorvino and Donald Sutherland. We see this in "Whistleblower", we see this in BBC Channel 4 production of "Sex Traffic", and others.

**D** David Staley 06:12

So what are the depictions in these films, what are we seeing of an Eastern European, let's say, in these films?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 06:17

Usually the depictions are of very naive, vulnerable, young women who fall prey to brutal traffickers and pimps, and mostly because either they are in economic disparity, which is actually real, but also they're portrayed as very naive and vulnerable. And also, the traffickers are Eastern Europeans with no moral values, with no regard for humanity. And although they are cases like that, real life trafficking cases, this is not totally invented. But when this image is perpetuated all over and over again and exaggerated without any sensitivity or accurate presentation of local realities, then it becomes superfluous and it actually perpetuates those stereotypes rather than creates an informative picture of trafficking, which can energize viewers and create socially engaged viewers.

**D** David Staley 07:00

**D** David Staley 07:29

What explains this perpetual sort of stereotype, what are the sources for these images?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 07:34

Some of the sources are the ideological structure of production. I mean, I have to state here purely that the team makers are all socially alert individuals who have engaged with this topic because they are disturbed by its existence, and they would like to contribute to the fight against trafficking. However, when you look at the whole ideological foundation of these productions, at the end, the representations boil down to the long standing dynamic between the West and Eastern Europe as the center and periphery, between the West as a morally superior cultural, civic entity, and Eastern Europe as the morally inferior. And this is the dynamic which actually underlies all this Western production, with some variations, of course; some are more successful in criticizing the Western involvement in this, because the demand is on the side of the West, a lot of profiteering is on the side of the West. So, the West has its own responsibility and serious responsibility for this phenomenon. But nonetheless, usually, the West is presented as morally superior, the American or Western characters are usually the saviors of the East European victims, they are combating the traffickers. So presumably, human trafficking is depicted in East European cinema, and I would suppose that the representations are different? They are slightly different, actually.

**D** David Staley 09:20

Only slightly though? Okay.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 09:21

They are, and this was one of my discoveries, because the usual understanding of identity and identity structures has been to find the other, who usually receive certain amount of disparaging characteristics or blame, so the self feels superior, feels better about itself. So, I assumed that the East European productions would similarly cast blame on the West, as the demand side of the trafficking problem, but actually, this is not what I saw there. Although the presentation of the conditions of trafficking was very similar in East European films compared to the Western, there was no blame cast to the West, the look was actually inward. Those filmmakers were trying to expose economic, social, and moral decay of those societies, they were concerned with their own societies rather than trying to find another to blame.

**D** David Staley 10:34

And to be clear, when you say the other, you mean capital "O", "Other". So when we say the "Other", what do we mean when we say that?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 10:41

Well, the capital "O", "Other" has a long tradition, but I will not go into details. Actually, the identity stems from the Latin "alter", which is the same as, as the same as always needs

identity stems from the Latin *idem*, which is the same as, so the same as always needs somebody else, right? But it was in psychoanalysis and the French theorist Jacques Lacan who established the idea of the capital "Other", the one who structures our understanding of the world, but also toward whom certain projections are extended.

**D** David Staley 11:16

So the person different from whoever we are, and probably with both our fears and our hopes attached to them. You call the book "Screening Trafficking"; tell us the derivation of that title.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 11:29

I opted for this title because I don't study only films, feature films, I also examined some media documentaries and media coverage of the trafficking. I examined, CNN had a long standing Freedom Project, well developed website, interactive website, also documentaries, featuring stories about trafficking, so, that was part of my analysis. And also some East European media products, usually either short video clips, some mobile, actually, games, to educate young people with the problem of and about the problem of trafficking and the situation, the realities of trafficking, some comics also on the subject. So, that's why I opted for screening, to hopefully covering the visual aspect of trafficking, and the subtitle "Prudent and Perilous" because, of course, there is a benefit of creating all these products and they are all created with good intentions, to raise awareness and create the socially engaged viewer and citizen. At the same time, there are a lot of flaws in these products, and my conclusions there have been and I'm urging social workers and NGOs to more critically select their cultural products again materials with which they try to disseminate information and create their awareness campaigns. So cultural products, cross-cultural transactions, how does one study these transactions? What's your method, what's your approach to studying these phenomena? My overall framework is that of the interpretive cultural studies. And I -

**D** David Staley 13:22

Give us a sense of that.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 13:23

I use the analysis of signs and their representations, and it can be visual analysis, it can be content analysis, and beyond that analysis of signs and representations and content, I always reach to the core of power relations, because the interpretive framework of cultural studies at the end centers on power relations. Again, as I have been explaining or mentioning here, the whole dynamic between West European and East European productions of trafficking boil down to the center periphery dialogue, the power relations between the West and East, or in that case Eastern Europe.

**J** Janet Box-Steffensmeier 14:11

I'm Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for the Ohio State

University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as top 25 programs, with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of the Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at [artsandsciences.osu.edu](http://artsandsciences.osu.edu).

**D** David Staley 14:36

What are you seeing today in the relationship between Western and Eastern Europe? Things have become much more volatile, especially after the Russian incursion into Crimea.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 14:46

These imaginings of Eastern Europe as an inferior cultural space is not recent, it has been centuries. Scholars have argued that there are similarities, but also differences from the orientalism, which was established and argued about the Far East and the perception of Western Europe, about the East. So, when it comes to the Balkans or Eastern Europe, that structure and that imagination is slightly different, and especially now with putting, desire to challenge international understanding and international laws, and with annexation of Crimea, for instance, the established power dynamics are being challenged. They still persist, that view is still there, and maybe it will take centuries again to reverse or to put those two cultural spaces in the same footing in the imagination and the minds of citizens and the public.

**D** David Staley 15:52

I probably already know the answer to this, but I'll ask anyway. So, what initially got you interested in the study of cross-cultural transactions?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 16:01

Well, I arrived in this country in 1990, December.

**D** David Staley 16:07

I wondered if it had something to do with it, but.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 16:09

Almost, now 29 years, and I am a native of Bulgaria. I came here to pursue a graduate education after finishing their Slavic Philology in my university, at Sofia University. And then history and theory of culture, so I proceeded here to enroll into an M.A. and a PhD program at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign. And this movement, this crossing cultures, this existence of in-between and beyond, because now, I have lived in the United States longer than I had lived in Bulgaria. But, I am critical of both spaces. I feel native of nowhere at this point, in

a way I'm comfortable here, I'm comfortable there. And yet, there are matters which disturb me in both societies, and I believe more than if I had lived in one place. And this interaction of cultures, this position, this unique position of in-between and beyond, which gives me the opportunity to distance myself from both, and to probably have a slightly different view on cross-cultural exchanges and interactions is something which has triggered my interest in all my work.

D

David Staley 17:42

Tell us about some of the classes that you teach. Interesting.

Y

Yana Hashamova 17:45

I teach similarly themed classes, not all of them, however. I teach the introduction to Russian culture, for instance, which covers about three centuries of Russian culture. The course is entitled "Magnificence, Mayhem, and Mafia", and I do try to cover the great achievements of Russian culture, which is a world class culture, and at the same time, the turbulent moments of its history and the destructive impulses in the Russian society over the centuries. I teach the Russian film, which is the "Modern Russian Experience Through Film: Dreams and Nightmares", so, similar approach. I have created, haven't had a chance to teach it, I worked with my colleague Jennifer Suchland to create a trafficking course. I also will be teaching next spring, "Sports, Socialists, and Society". A new undergraduate course on the sports culture during socialism and in post-socialist times in Russia and Eastern Europe, all over. And I'm just finishing teaching a course this semester, it is a 6000 level course, "East European Film and Media Ideology and Viewers".

D

David Staley 19:10

Do you find that given the current geopolitical situation, there's more interest in the study of Russian history and culture?

Y

Yana Hashamova 19:16

I think so, I think so. When Russia is in the news...

D

David Staley 19:22

Which seems like every day,

Y

Yana Hashamova 19:23

Which is every day, there is more pronounced understanding of the need to know the culture and the language of Russian people.

**D** David Staley 19:36  
Tell us what's next for your research.

**Y** Yana Hashamova 19:39  
Actually, I have worked with two collaborators, two colleagues, one from University of Cincinnati, Sunnie Rucker-Chang, and she's actually my advisee, former now Assistant Professor there, and another colleague, Oana Popescu-Sandu, and we have co-edited a volume, "Migrants and Refugees To, Through, and From the Balkans". And again, through the interpretive cultural studies framework, we are analyzing the perception of migrants and refugees by local Balkan societies, as well as the Western perception of Balkans and the way they handle the recent refugee crisis. And we also will end with a part on Balkan diaspora writers and how they perceive their position. Again, similar to what I mentioned, in between and beyond in their interaction with other societies and other cultures and the way they are positioned.

**D** David Staley 20:48  
Any tentative or emerging conclusions that you've reached?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 20:52  
We have noticed - these are preliminary conclusions - we have noticed the mirroring processes, the way the Western societies are critical of the Balkan states handling of the refugee crisis. Balkan societies are critical and disparaging of the refugees coming from the Middle East and Africa and traveling through the Balkans. So, there is a mirroring effect there, and again, it does have to do with again looking for another. But, we are trying to go beyond that, and again, trying to establish power relations, and what is the core? And happily, we just received a contract with Liverpool University Press.

**D** David Staley 21:39  
Splendid. And you'll be looking, presumably, at media images or other kinds of cultural products?

**Y** Yana Hashamova 21:46  
Correct. Film, media, mostly media and some literature.

**D** David Staley 21:51  
What about online sources, now that we're in an age of Twitter and Instagram?



Y Yana Hashamova 21:57

We are not touching that aspect. Social media is not part of this project, but I'm increasingly interested in this, and actually one of my current advisees is looking into Russian digital news space, and part of it social media, and the restrictive nature, the increasingly restrictive nature of Russian laws on social media and news media in general and their reception.

D David Staley 22:25

It must require a different sort of analytic lens, I would think, is different from studying film and studying literature.

Y Yana Hashamova 22:31

Correct, it does. At the end, one can approach it again as a study the content, I mean, there are various approaches and methods, how to examine these messages. But, also we're interested in their reception and again there a various ways of not only surveys, but their online discussions, and one can examine the blogging, one can survey participants and users of this news.

D David Staley 23:00

Yana Hashamova. Thank you.

Y Yana Hashamova 23:03

Thank you so much for having me.

E Eva Dale 23:05

Voices from the Arts and Sciences is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug dangler. I'm Eva Dale.