

Gender, Faith, and Film:  
Viewing Post-Socialist Societies

Proposal for Democracy, Culture, and Catholicism  
International Research Project

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### Overview and rationale

Under Soviet rule in Eastern Europe, film, along with other art forms, was one of the few realms where vital political and social questions could be addressed. The pressure of the political censor forced filmmakers to use allegory and “Aesopian language” in confronting questions of spirituality and faith in officially atheistic states. These conditions resulted in films of great emotional and spiritual power, such as “Ashes and Diamonds” (Poland, 1958), “Daisies” (Czechoslovakia, 1966), “Andrei Rublev” (USSR, 1966), “Repentance” (Georgia, 1984/1987), and “The Decalogue” (Poland, 1989), among others. At the same time, a number of filmmakers also addressed issues concerning women’s status, the family, and sexuality. The situation changed dramatically between 1989 and 1991, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the USSR, and the transition to democracy. The end of censorship and the growth of the market, rather than the party, as the arbitrator of filmmaking led, in the judgment of many critics, to a dissipation of intensity, the decline of art house cinema, and the growth of new genres intended primarily for entertainment rather than philosophical musing or contemplation. Nevertheless, a core of filmmakers has also seized the opportunity to take their work in new directions. East European film in the post-1989 era, thus, is concerned with several issues, including: the narrative of a pre-Soviet (or pre-1945) national history and identity; the reconstruction of life in the collapsed state, especially the gender order of the family, work, and home; and the creation (or absence) of a civil society and community in the new order.

This project proposes to use film as a medium through which to view these fundamental social and political changes and to examine how the recent history of Eastern European nations has been told.<sup>1</sup> As an historian and gender studies scholar, I am interested in multiple dimensions of the recent history of the region: the transitions to democratic regimes and market economies, the impact on everyday life (including spiritual life), and the ways in which these shifts have been represented in cinema. The project will also explore the depiction in film of the sacred in everyday life, the manifestation of the divine in human action, and the need for community as a means to salvation. In taking a comparative approach to the study of spiritual themes, I seek to understand more deeply

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, I am including in this category Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the former Yugoslavia, as well as the former Soviet republics located in Europe: the Russian Federation, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

national and religious differences, as well as the ways in which attention to questions of faith and organized religion may contribute to the building of new national communities.

### Organizing concepts and questions

The project is structured by three intersecting central concepts that are tied to fundamental Catholic concepts of sacramentality, mediation, and community:

*The crisis of identity in post-communist nations.* The last twenty years has witnessed a preoccupation with questions of national identity in the wake of a turbulent experience of the twentieth century marked by authoritarian rule, war, and political upheaval. Historical drama has served as one way to begin to create a new national identity – or to revive an old one. Scholars such as Frederick Corney and Dina Iordanova, for instance, suggest that the recent proliferation of television miniseries and films that evoke nostalgia for a pre-revolutionary Russian or pre-war European past constitute one result of this impulse. Such films (often literary adaptations) attempt to construct a new narrative of the national community and a non-socialist public memory of the past. What is the nature of this new or revived community? Is it connected to a concept of faith, religion, or morality? I will use the metaphor of the family and intimate relationships to explore these questions.

*The reorganization of everyday life.* Certainly, regime change has had an impact on virtually every aspect of life in the region. “Shock therapy” of the 1990s and other policies resulted in widespread poverty, job losses, substantial rises in crime, declines in health and life expectancy, as well as specifically gendered forms of violence and control, such as sex trafficking. In addition, these shifts have led to a fundamental reordering of the family and a “crisis of masculinity” (Ashwin and Lytkina, 2004). What happens when the institutional structures supporting family, work, and home collapse? Some answers can be seen in the so-called *chernukha* films, such as “Little Vera” (Pichul, 1988), “Intergirl” (Todorovskii, 1989), and “Iska’s Journey” (Bollók, 2007). This project asks whether some filmmakers in the region have begun to find a kind of sacramentality/divinity in everyday life despite the overwhelming challenges and, if so, how it is expressed through film.

*The construction of an ethic of democracy.* Given the fact that, through most of their history, the countries of the region have been under some sort of authoritarian regime, they have had to create a new democratic tradition in the midst of reform. While it is relatively simple to build new political institutions, it is much more difficult to create a culture that honors Western ideals of participatory democracy. How have different nations faced this challenge? Moreover, how might a shared ethic of democracy include an understanding of not only social justice but of connection with a divine power? Finally, how have these processes been tackled in cinema?

### Methodology

I plan to investigate these concepts and questions in a comparative manner by studying films produced in four or five countries of the region between 1980 and 2009 (tentatively identified as Russia, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and the former Yugoslavia). I will select several small clusters of films on related themes that address the concepts and questions described above. For

the most part, I expect these films to deal with problems of everyday life, but in ways that present complex moral, ethical, and ultimately political dilemmas. I have already identified one cluster that concerns motherhood and the loss of children and/or parents: “Stolen Meeting,” “Diary for My Children,” “Diary for My Father and Mother,” “Melody for a Street Organ”.

In consultation with specialists in East European film, such as Lynne Attwood and Birgit Beumers (Russia), Herbert Eagle (Czech Republic), Catherine Portuges (Hungary), Izabela Kalinowska and Elzbieta Ostrowska (Poland), and Marko Dumancic (former Yugoslavia), I will identify three or four clusters of films to focus on. In addition to this thematic focus, I will also attend to the films of specific directors, such as Krzysztof Kieslowski (Poland), Kira Muratova (Russia/Ukraine), and Márta Mészáros (Hungary). This approach will provide the possibility for a broad and deep analysis.

### **Timetable**

2010: During the first year, I will cast a wide net for primary and secondary sources, including films, commentaries, and scholarly works; consult with country specialists; select specific films and identify clusters; and attend the workshop at Loyola. I will also explore appropriate publishing outlets.

2011: Research will continue. I will write a paper with my preliminary findings for the summer meeting in Vilnius, followed by travel to Russia and possibly other countries in the region to conduct further research.

2012: I will complete research and revise the paper for submission to the Rome conference. I also expect to submit one or two article manuscripts to KinoKultura, Gender and History, Slavic Review, or other appropriate journals.

### **Contributions to scholarship**

With a Ph.D. in Russian and Soviet history and a specialization in women’s history, I have a strong familiarity with the region and the questions related to gender and women. My manuscript in preparation, “Imagining the Nation as Family: Narratives of Revolution in Russia, 1905-1925,” investigates the ways in which Russian revolutionary narratives of the early twentieth century used the metaphor of family and concepts of gender to talk about the process of revolution and building a new state. I seek to translate my skills and insights garnered during this project to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Since arriving at Loyola in fall 2007, I have deepened my theoretical grounding in women’s and gender studies and have developed two new courses on history and film. As a result, I have a substantial base of familiarity with the current literature in both of these fields, which enables me to take on this new topic.

As a project concerned with narrative and representation, “Gender, Faith, and Film” will identify some of the cultural factors and dynamics that have facilitated or impeded the impulse toward more open and egalitarian societies in Eastern Europe. I expect that my findings will not only lead us to a more profound understanding of the role of Catholic or religious faith in the region, but enable us to devise ways to use that knowledge to continue efforts for social justice.

## Preliminary sources

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### Filmography

- "Grbavica: Land of My Dreams," dir. Jasmila Zbanic, 2006.
- "The Decalogue," dir. Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1989.
- "Diary for My Children," dir. Márta Mészáros, 1982.
- "Diary for My Loved Ones," dir. Márta Mészáros, 1987.
- "Diary for My Father and Mother," dir. Márta Mészáros, 1990.
- "Iska's Journey," dir. Csaba Bollók, 2007.
- "Little Vera," dir. Vasilii Pichul, 1988.
- "Melody for a Street Organ," dir. Kira Muratova, 2009.
- "Repentance," dir. Tengiz Abuladze, 1984 (rel. 1987).
- "Stolen Meeting," dir. Leyda Lajus, 1981 (rel. 1988).
- "When Father Was Away on Business," dir. Emir Kusturica, 1985.
- "The Wounds," dir. Srdjan Dragojevic, 1998.

“A Wonderful Night in Split,” dir. Arsen Ostojic, 2004.