

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY  
“HISTORY. CIVILIZATION. CULTURE” DOCTORAL SCHOOL**

**Cultural Policies Manifested in the Cinematographic Art of the  
Soviet Union and of Central and Eastern Europe  
1927-1953  
ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESES**

**Dissertation chair:  
prof. emeritus dr. CSUCSUJA  
István**

**Doctoral student:  
BREZOVSKY Otilia**

**2020**



## **TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Brief Historical Introduction.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>CHAPTER I</b>	
<b>ART AND PROPAGANDA UNDER TOTALITARIAN REGIMES</b>	
<b>Cinematography as a Tool for Manipulating Reality .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Power and Art Between Modernity and Totalitarianism .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>CHAPTER II</b>	
<b>SOCIAL REALISM</b>	
<b>General Conditions Around the Birth of Social Realism .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Brief History of Social Realism .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Accomplished Social Realism .....</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>CHAPTER III</b>	
<b>CINEMA AND REVOLUTION - THE 1920s</b>	
<b>Cultural Policies and the Formation of Institutional Frameworks .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>The Evolution of Soviet Avantgarde Cinematography .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>CHAPTER IV</b>	
<b>CINEMATOGRAPHY UNDER STALINIST TOTALITARIANISM – THE 1930s</b>	
<b>Cinematographic Industry and the Institutional Framework .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>The Manifestation of Stalinist Cultural Policies in Cinematography .....</b>	<b>88</b>

<b>CHAPTER V</b>	
<b>THE EVOLUTRION OF CINEMATOGRAPHY AMIDST THE GREAT WAR FOR DEFENDING THE HOMELAND .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>CHAPTER VI</b>	
<b>RESTAURATION AND MILITARIZATION – ZHDANOVCHINA .....</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>CHAPTER VII</b>	
<b>THE SOCIAL REALIST FILM IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (1948-1953) .....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS .....</b>	<b>145</b>
<b>ANNEXES</b>	
<b>Filmography .....</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>Index of Directors .....</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>167</b>

**Key words:** cinematography, totalitarianism, Stalinism, social realism, propaganda, censorship, Soviet avantgarde, Soviet school of editing, cultural revolution, thematic plan, Central and Eastern Europe, modernism, nationalism, Cominform, Soviet occupation, Stalinization, Soviet cultural policies

This research is mainly focused on the evolution of cinematography under the circumstances of total political control. The main research period covers the monopolization and concentration of political power by and in the hands of Stalin and it has been chosen as such mainly as it allows for a study of the (relatively linear) evolution of a form of art. This is significant within the research of various forms of representation, provided that the contents are not significantly modified. The research is aimed at a reconstruction of the evolution of a type of art as related to changes in ideological drives. Concerning the Central and Eastern European film production and cinematography, the implementation of Soviet cultural policies was studied. Consequently, aspects such as resistance or dissidence were not researched, our focus having been centred upon official Soviet policies and the way it was adapted to local cultural circumstances.

The research is primarily focused on film. The works have been examined in their authentic and original form, for the chief aim was to identify formal innovation and modifications, while matters of content were not a priority. In what pertains to genre, fiction films were chosen in order to shed light upon various methods of concealing political messages behind forms of art viewed by propaganda-people of the age as fit to accomplish that mission. The doctoral thesis is split into chapters addressing the chronological evolution of various policies (from the Bolshevik Revolution to the death of Stalin), discussing institutional structures and frameworks and also the most important ideological drives.

Cinematography enjoyed a special position both among the arts and propaganda tools chiefly because the encoded message could be read with no particular intellectual effort. Consequently cinematography became one of the most powerful propaganda tools and also the best means of expression for the Soviet avantgarde. During the nineteen twenties, this blend led to the gradual formation of the iconography of the social realist film. Directors belonging to the Soviet school of editing meant to educate and transform society and the masses. In consequence they never tried to live up to consumer expectations, while the faking of reality was just another element in the process of building a brave new world. Rewriting history or

“editing” reality were considered legitimate and acceptable under these circumstances. The motion pictures produced in the twenties are not presenting but constructing reality, while the contemporaries considered this revolutionary cinematography to be reality and not fiction. With or without intention, these artists contributed to the birth of the founding myth behind the revolution and the Bolshevik party and to the formation of the image of its leaders. The original concepts and artistic innovations have gradually lost their significance, becoming mere sketches and endlessly repeated magical formulae of lost origins. As the totalitarian power got consolidated, cinematography, as the entire society on the other hand, were subjected to a rigid system of planning, systematization and control. Repeated processes of reorganization, purification and simplification of language and a rigid conservative stance lead to an actual disaster in film industry. Also, through the implementation of the new cultural policy, the party and its supreme leader became absolute leaders of the entire world. Stalinism seemed to be installed for eternity. All personal, private, individual aspects evaporated into an eternal and general collective state. Language was reduced to slogans, space diminished into typical décor, and persons were deprived of their freedom to act so that the viewer was left with the feeling of watching the same story, endlessly repeated. Artistic creation was thus identified with the task of creating a new and surreal world while the only remaining role of the artist was to implement everything Stalin imagined and to transmit to the masses the message of the party and its leader.

As the success of cinematography was exclusively measured through its ability to transmit political messages, and as the avantgarde and the Soviet school of editing had failed in this sense, a new artistic vision was prepared for implementation, and this was cinematography for the people, large masses of people, meant to produce entertaining films, with simple story lines and heroes easy to identify with. This is how beside production dramas, gradually other popular genres were tested, such as adventure movies, musicals, banal tales based on a false conflict between good and bad and solved through superpower allegories and the party was immersed in a sweet dip of forced optimism. The attempt at mixing Marxist-Leninist ideology with an array of Hollywood motion picture cliché only generated schematism and conformism. Even though representing a privileged category, historical movies were reduced to mere allegories of the image of Stalin. The intention to create a secondary reality fit to serve as a model for the entire society got stuck under a mountain of propaganda lies. Owing to its openly fake nature and the rigidity of presentation, this type of art became absolutely hideous.

With the ascension of Nazism and the imminent danger of war, official Soviet cultural policy adopted a steady and efficient formula, thoroughly prepared during the nineteen thirties:

nationalism. The initial goal was to totally overrule all internal and external organisations and concentrate power in Moscow and in the hands of Stalin, and even though this rather looked as an attempt at Russification, it actually turned out to be a process of homogenization. The danger of war also raised the issues of mobilization and loyalty. As this sense of loyalty was backed neither by economic nor by social means, the solution seemed to be a fake sense of patriotism, a mix of self-praise and a demonized non-Soviet world. International political events had no influence over this paradigm. During the pact with Nazi Germany, anti-German slogans were temporarily abandoned, and plays, films, art works containing open attacks against Germans were withdrawn. After the assault against the Soviet Union on June the 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941, anti-Brit and anti-American slogans and films were automatically removed from circulation while the anti-Fascist pieces were introduced anew. Nevertheless total mobilization triggered a new element: reality. Gradually, aspects formerly eradicated appeared on screens as parts of Soviet society. Religion, poverty, suffering became weapons transferred to the population sent to total war. This was by far not a return to reality, as only certain elements, deemed to be useful in the fight, were allowed to make a comeback. The process nevertheless had a positive impact upon cinematography and upon the entire Soviet culture. The approach became more sincere, directors could own up to the message of their new productions which thus turned out to be much more authentic. Many elements though still remained unchanged: voluntarism, a victorious and pathetic tone, happy endings and above all the image of the almighty leader, infallible and loved by his people. The war heightened the significance of propaganda, so the leaders were compelled to ensure resources for maintaining activity in the field. Cinematography benefited the most from this policy, as an efficient propaganda tool. During the period of *spontaneous destalinization* the artifice of social realism lost ground to a certain situational sincerity appealing to any Soviet citizen. Just as the heroism and sacrifices of the population were real, the pathos, hatred and sense of solidarity expressed in motion pictures were sincere. For a short period, film directors benefited from the luxury of creating films they believed in. Even though a lot of clichés of social realism survived during this period, too, the films produced during the war enlivened the world of Russian cinematography. Following a short period of regress, in the context of destalinization a new impetus is born, while the artistic heritage of these productions will have a long term impact.

After the war, from a more or less isolated country, the Soviet Union turns into a superpower, having gained not only new territory but also a leading role in the post-war world. The temporary partnership of people and state leaders, established to save the Soviet Union, is hastily denounced and Stalinist order is reinstated. Soviet society, exhausted with terror and

war, was subjected to a new wave of repression. The new ideological line was nothing more but a recontextualization of Marxist-Leninist principles, while the opposition between the capitalist and communist systems was reinforced, with emphasis on the superiority and vitality of the Soviet one. The new cultural policy, named Zhdanovchina after the person who was in charge with implementing it, was coined as a global offensive. The key concept of the period between the end of the second World War and Stalin's death was *the fight*. Not only language was militarized, but the entire system was re-structured and further centralised. The passivity of the artisan, endlessly repeating the official *incantation*, so characteristic of the social realism of the thirties, was turned into a state of continuous soldierly alert, a readiness to perform as ordered. The party used instruments such as creating and maintaining an atmosphere of homophobic hysteria and of obsession over foreign attack to counterbalance the ideological dilution caused by the war. In the new bipolar global situation, with a world divided between the *antidemocratic imperialist* and the *democratic antiimperialist* camps, the Soviet Union adopted a new line of isolation, rejecting any type of cooperation with the capitalist world, and it required complete obedience from all communist organisations and parties. These years were the darkest period for Soviet cinematography, The rigidity of the system led to a drastic decrease in the number of productions and to a never before experience stylistic homogeneity, which severely affected quality. The popular genres of the twenties and thirties were discarded and new genres sprang such as the *artistic documentary* or the so-called *publicist films*. Torn into two parts, the post-war world hid behind two distinct ideologies. None of the two accepted any neutral position, thus society was compelled to adopt a military attitude while supporting the official ideology of the camp it belonged to. In the Soviet Union this manifested first of all as an aggressive anti-Western and *anti-cosmopolite* campaign. The new genres were nothing more than cinematographic renderings of soviet reality, *correct* interpretations of the basic evolutionary tendencies in the world. Censorship, the rigidity of the system and the uniformity of the industry triggered a drastic regress in production. The obsessive urge to control put the word before the image. The supremacy of scripts, static visual spaces, stereotypes and schematic characters and situations led to a state of agony. The main flaw of these films, their lack of conflict, was an outcome of ideological factors and not of artistic phenomena. Officially, Soviet society, having liquidated the exploiting class, managed to reach a state of evolution where there were no contradictions. Presenting an ideal society devoid of any form of antagonism resulted in works lacking in conflict. The entire Soviet culture seemed to be frozen into eternity. Contradiction, movement and individual character could only spring from a change in the political system or from its annihilation.



Under the new geopolitical circumstances determined by two political poles, besides a re-establishment of the former tsarist Russian borders, the Soviet Union also aimed at gaining control over areas that could influence the security of the country. In this race for power, Central and Eastern Europe were considered not only territory gained through efforts made during the war, but also key elements in the new Soviet *prophylactic* policy. As between the two world wars Central and Eastern European countries proved to be totally incapable both of maintaining democratic systems and of forming a coalition to defend, interethnic conflicts fractioned this geographic space. The Soviet Union could only benefit from maintaining this process by destabilizing these countries and by weakening their power of reaction. Nevertheless after the clear delineation of barricades, this area needed to be ideologically purged and stabilized. The process of Stalinization was fast and ruthless. In the fight for eternal peace and democracy, these countries became simple provinces where a new political system was instituted. They were nevertheless never totally transformed into soviets and incorporated into the *empire*. The Yugoslavian schism reinforced Moscow's fears. The aim was to establish a compact bloc, capable to resist Western threats. This should have been realized through a well-organized and disciplined structure, evidently based on the ideological element. The bloc was nevertheless uniform only on the surface. No true cooperation between Eastern European nations was ever established, not even among those who truly believed they were communists. Internationalism remained an empty slogan imposed from above. The official cultural policy proclaimed the supremacy of Soviet art, as the only one to be pursued, it imposed thematic planning and it fixed the accepted forms of representation. The clichés of social realism were reproduced in numberless instances and Eastern Europe was soon webbed over with such artefacts. Nevertheless aggressive propaganda failed to reach its original aim, wide layers of society did not assimilate the message, staying rather hostile or indifferent. Even if in each new popular democracy there were certain artists who were willing to produce works within the lines of the values of the Zhdanovchina, their works remained in a narrow, isolated sphere of society.

The already existing thematic sketches were turned into national variants, and the resulting productions were broadcast in all the regions of the Eastern bloc. To each type of film an ideal place and form was assigned. This is how Eastern European societies developed the concept of a "correct interpretation of history", national history included, and they each adopted their respective roles in the "fight for eternal peace" and in the construction of the communist society of the future. The image of this grand future was constructed according to Soviet standards, and it was meant to replace old aspirations. Thus, class identity was placed above

national identity and collective progress before individual progress. History and folklore were heavily manipulated within a general policy of reinterpreting and homogenising the cultural and historic traditions of these nations in an attempt to integrate them into the idealised mythology of the communist party. This is how movements for national and social emancipation, religious reforms, legends and fairy tales, reality and fiction entwined were all processed to serve the myth of the eternal class fight. Significant characters in the culture of these nations, artists, researchers, generals or doctors all were turned, through an a-temporal perspective and an ideological lens, into activists of global revolution. But these productions failed to trigger the interest of the general public. The social realist film dripping with propaganda slogans proved to be inefficient, owing to the repulsion it rose through its fake moralising and artificial essence. This is how popular genres were also integrated into propaganda strategy. Operettas and old famous plays were all reinterpreted in a Zhdanovchina manner. Historical and social fakes perpetuating elements of national romanticism were brushed up according to the new official ideology and got imprinted into the collective memory of several generations of audiences. Soviet efforts failed to reach results. There wasn't enough time and financial resources were also lacking. In the majority of cases the reaction was the opposite of the desired one, meaning that the sense of nationalism intensified while political and social responsibility was transferred onto the occupant power.

The social realist film stuffed with propaganda slogans proved to be inefficient. Under totalitarian regimes, kitsch reached the status of official art and it succeeded in reducing any other cultural manifestation to a minimum, which was possible not so much owing to the personal preferences of the leaders but much rather to falsity, lying at the base of both totalitarian regimes and kitsch. Wide social categories, deprived of culture and art, lived under the illusion of owning real values, while they were actually degraded, from participants, to a status of mere spectators with no right to action and no prospect of evolution at all.

### **Bibliography:**

Bazin A., *Mi a film? (Ce este filmul?)*, Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2002.

Beumers, B., *Istoria filmului rus*, IBU Publishing, București, 2015.

Dobrenko, E., *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History. Museum of the Revolution*, Yale University Press, 2008.

- Egorova, N. I., *Stalin's Foreign Policy and the Cominform, 1947-1953*, in Francesca Pori, Silvio Ponce (eds.) *The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943-1953*, St. Martin's Press INC., New York, 1996.
- Enzensberger, M., "We were born to turn a fairy tale into reality"; *Grigori Alexandrov's the Radiant Path*, in R. Taylor, D. Sping (Eds.) *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, , Routledge Inc., New York, 1993.
- Fedorov, A., *Hermeneutic Analysis of the Soviet Feature films of 1941-1942 on Military Theme*, European Researcher, file:///D:/OTTI/muvtori/filmtori/Soviet\_Films\_1941-1942.pdf, 2014
- Gibianskii, L., *The Soviet Union and the Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe 1944-1954: a Documentary Collection*, The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, Stanford University, 2004.
- Golomstock, I., *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's republic of China*, Duckworth, London, 2011.
- Groys, B., *Art Power*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008.
- Groys, B., *The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-garde, aesthetic, dictatorship, and beyond*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992.
- Herzog, Ph., "National in Form and Socialist in Content" or rather "Socialist in Form and National in Content"?: the "amateur art system" and the cultivation of "folk art" in Soviet Estonia, *Nar. Umjet.* 47/1, 2010, p. 115-140.
- Kenéz, P., *Cinema and Soviet Society from the Revolution to the Death of Stalin*, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. London, 2009.
- Kramer, M, *Stalin, Soviet Policy, and the Consolidation of a Communist Block in Eastern Europe, 1944-1953*, in *Stalin and Europe* (T. Snyder and R. Brandon eds.), Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 264-294.
- Lynn, V., *Stalin's Empire: The Gulag and Police Colonization in the Soviet Union in 1930s*, in *Stalin and Europe. Imitation and Domination 1928-1953* (ed. T. Snyder, R. Brandon), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.

- Mackay, J., *Vertov and the Line: Art Socialization, Collaboration*, 2012, [https://www.academia.edu/3046027/\\_Vertov\\_and\\_the\\_Line\\_Art\\_Socialization\\_Collaboration](https://www.academia.edu/3046027/_Vertov_and_the_Line_Art_Socialization_Collaboration)
- Martin, T., *The origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing*, <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/3229636/Martin%201998.pdf?sequence=2>, 1998.
- Margalit A., Buruma I., *Occidentalismul. Razboiul impotriva Occidentului. O scurta istorie a urii față de Vest*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2016.
- Miller, J., *Soviet Cinema. Politics and Persuasion under Stalin*, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. London, 2010.
- Pechatnov, V. O., *The Cold War: a View from Russia*, Journal of Azerbaijani Studies, Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Moscow, p. 5-15, 2003.
- Szilágyi Á., *Szálini idők mozija (Cinema în vremea lui Stalin)*, [http://filmvilag.hu/xista\\_frame.php?cikk\\_id=4903](http://filmvilag.hu/xista_frame.php?cikk_id=4903), September, October, November 1988.
- Snyder T., Brandon R., *Stalin and Europe. Imitation and Domination, 1928-1953*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014.
- Taylor R., Spring D. (eds.) *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, Routledge, New York-London, 1993.
- Taylor, R., *Film Propaganda. Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, Croom Helm Ltd. London, 1979.
- Taylor, R., *Ideology and Popular Culture in Soviet Cinema: The Kiss of Mary Pickford*, in Anna Lawton (ed.) *The Red Screen. Politics, society, art in Soviet cinema*, Routledge, New York, 1992.