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**GENDERING POPULAR CULTURE: PERSPECTIVES FROM EASTERN EUROPE
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Women's Cinema, Women's Concerns

Dina Iordanova

The essay discusses the work of a number of women film makers in East Central Europe, called by the author "reluctant feminists". It also addresses problems women encountered during state socialism as well as after 1989 such as astonishing sexism, reductive representations of women and their sexual objectification in visual culture; lack of attention to serious social gender issues.¹

Women in East Central European cinema

State socialism maintained elaborate policies designed to secure gender equality. This, however, did not significantly change the situation of women in filmmaking, who were

traditionally marginalised and had fewer chances to become directors. Still, women were actively involved in filmmaking in various other capacities – as screenwriters, set and costume designers, actresses, film critics, and, occasionally, as directors of photography. Despite their limited number, female directors managed to make films addressing all the major women's concerns: restricted opportunities, abusive relationships, unwanted pregnancies, single parenthood and the glass ceiling.

The Hungarian director Márta Mészáros is probably the most productive and best-known figure among the region's women film-makers. She came to feature films after graduating from Moscow's VGIK in the mid-1950s and then pursued a career in documentaries; her feature film debut was made at the age of 37.² Dealing exclusively with the problems affecting women of various generations Mészáros' filmography includes over 25 feature titles, made in Hungary, France and Canada. In traditionally low-key plotlines she tackles questions of motherhood, adoption, marriage, the generation gap and victimization. Her fragile heroines spend many rainy afternoons inquiring about severed family ties, often returning at night to cold rooms in orphanages and dormitories; they explore the painful vulnerabilities of human sensuality, frequently through stubborn introverted struggles for love. The tensions between the imposed routine of compulsory communal settings and the individual's pensive craving for privacy involve the exploration of various social problems such as drug addiction, hidden unemployment, incest and rape. Mészáros work also includes fine explorations of eroticism and women's sexuality, nurturing friendships, loneliness and aging. An intellectual director, whose best films are shot in black-and-white, she has often been classified as a feminist filmmaker, a qualification which she rejects.

Other active women directors from Hungary are Livia Gyarmathy, who has made films focusing on social issues and inter-ethnic relations, and Judit Elek, director of a historical

drama centred on a woman (*Mária- nap/Marias Day*, 1983) and of films exploring various dimensions of anti-Semitism (*Tutajosok/Raftsmen*, 1989; *Mondani a mondhatatlant: Elie Wiesel üzenet / To Speak the Unspeakable: The Message of Elie Wiesel*, 1996). Women-directors of the younger generation have also been active. Ildikó Enyédi first came to prominence with *Az en XX. Szazado/ My Twentieth Century* (1989), a black- and-white stylish feminist treatise about the interplay of history and personal fate. In the 1990s, Enyédi made several films that confirmed her as an original and innovative figure within European film-making. Ildikó Szabó has worked mostly on contemporary topics, and has shown a persistent interest in Romani- related themes or sub-themes (*Gyerekgyilkosságok/Child Murders*, 1993; *Csajok/Bitches*, 1995; *Chacho Rom*, 2001). Of this generation it is Ibolya Fekete, however, who enjoys the widest recognition beyond Hungary. A ‘late bloomer,’ she made her first feature, *Bolse vita/Bolshe Vita*, only in 1996 at the age of 45, and her second one, *Chico*, at the age of fifty in 2001. Both received deserved international acclaim for their originality.

The leading female figure in Czech cinema is Věra Chytilová – known best for the avant-garde *Daisies*, the story of two rebellious and subversively destructive girls – who is often quoted as a classic example of a feminist filmmaker, having mostly made films focusing on gender relations.³

Chytilová’s unique approach has been variably described as “post- modernist [...] playfulness” (Bird 2002: 1) or “more ironic and distanced than respectful” (Radkiewicz 2002). In addition, she has been spoken about as a “dadaist” rather than a feminist film-maker (Eagle 1991) for her extensive use of fragmented narratives, her tableaux-like settings showing naked bodies involved in beach games and surrounded by her favourite trademark backgrounds with displays of apples and cut news- print, familiar from the time of *Daisies*.

Critics have noted her radically subversive attitude to traditional ideas of gender appropriateness and have classified her as an outspoken, anti-patriarchal activist. It has been difficult for male critics, in particular, to swallow some of the extreme situations in her films, often showing women acting aggressively and disrespectfully towards men, as seen in her classic *Daisies* and, particularly, in the recent *Pasti, pasti, pastičky! Traps* (1998).⁴

Two other women of Chytilová's generation need to be mentioned here. Screenwriter Ester Krumbachová, one of the most important figures of the Czechoslovak New Wave, wrote scripts for many of the prominent avant-garde and surrealist features.⁵ Director Drahomira Vihanová routinely suffered censorship problems, and even though she had made her debut in the 1960s, she was only able to work again in the 1990s (Slovak documentary filmmaker Kamila Kytková had very similar experiences). A member of the next generation, Zuzana Zemanová has made several features in the 1990s. Working in the comedy genre, young director Alice Nellis proved to be as good as her male counterparts in delivering the subtle Czech humour with her *Ene bene/Eeny Meeny* (2000). Slovak director Eva Borusovicova also belongs to this younger generation.

Holocaust survivor Wanda Jakubowska was the female doyen of Polish filmmaking. Her best-known film is *The Last Stage* (1948), a personal account of women's lives in concentration camps, one of the earliest Holocaust films to be internationally acclaimed and distributed. Even though most of Jakubowska's work is associated with the clichés of the socialist realist paradigm, the interest in her work was recently revived and her films were featured at many international film festivals throughout the 1990s.⁵ Ewa Petelska often worked in tandem with her husband, Czesław Petelski, and directed many historical features. Other important women directors in Polish cinema include Barbara Sass, director of *Bez miłości/Without Love* (1980), *Debiutantka/The Debutante* (1982) and *Dziewczęta z*

Nowolipki/The Girls of Nowolipki (1985) and the younger Magdalena Łazarkiewicz, director of *Przez dotyk/By Touch* (1985) and the adolescent drama *Ostatni dzwonek/The Last School Bell* (1989). Both have displayed a continuous commitment to making films about women, and their works are particularly interesting within the socio-political context of the 1980s.

The career of Pole Agnieszka Holland, who has been working predominantly in the West since the late 1980s, is a story of talent and ambition led by the imperatives of success. In Poland, she directed some remarkable films of the “moral concern” strand, and a key subversive feature exposing the moral faults of Communist ideology (*Fever*, 1981). She was also active in screenwriting (having worked on Wajda’s *Rough Treatment* (1979) and *Korczak* (1990), and on Kieślowski’s *Three Colours: Blue*) and in acting (in Bugajski’s *The Interrogation*, 1981, for instance). Her early work presented sensitive female protagonists (for example in *A Woman Alone*, 1981) but the director did not pursue the representation of women as a special interest, even though she created fine female portraits in her German *Angry Harvest* and American *Washington Square* (1997). After emigration, Holland continued working very actively; her career is an example of overcoming unfavorable marginalisation through exceptional motivation, hard work and talent.⁶

The work of Dorota Kędzierzawska including *Devils, Devils, Wrony/Crows* (1995) and *Nic/Nothing* (1998) has enjoyed a considerable international acclaim. Most recently, the names of younger female directors have been in the focus of attention, such as Urszula Urbaniak (*Torowisko/The Junction*, 1999) and actress-turned-director Krystyna Janda (*Pestka/The Pip*, 1995).

Reluctant Feminists

Film-making by women represents a different kind of sensitivity. If you interpret my films as strictly political, you will see that I approach power relations differently from the way they are portrayed by male directors. Not because my films are necessarily better, or theirs worse, but because they are different. [...] What I want to work for is to help women become conscious of their being, the essence of their womanhood: this is what I want to express in my films, to make them aware of their own female personalities. (Márta Mészáros, in Portuges 1993: 130-1; 133)

Although these statements, as well as her entire oeuvre, appear to conform to feminist thinking, Márta Mészáros has vigorously refuted the “feminist” label and repeatedly insisted she is not a feminist (see interviews with Portuges 1993). Similarly, other leading female directors from the region have distanced themselves from “feminism”, a situation that leaves us facing the curious phenomenon of clearly committed feminist filmmakers who are nonetheless reluctant to be seen as such.

These women’s dissociation from what was publicly believed to be “feminist causes” deserves special consideration. The reluctance appears to be a reaction to the somewhat aggressive importation of Western feminism in the immediate aftermath of 1989. Feminist ideology explained most women’s problems with the male-dominated patriarchal culture. Under state socialism, however, both men and women shared common problems; they were both on one side, facing the same “enemy” embodied by the adverse social system, which was proving insensitive to the needs of the individual, was disrespectful to privacy and thus regularly destroying people’s intimate relationships. Placing the emphasis on men as representatives of patriarchy would inappropriately divert the attention of filmmakers from where they believed the focus of their critical attention should be (on concrete social issues, and not on abstract patriarchy) and would unnecessarily add another tension (between men

and women). It was the unspoken consensus that it was not patriarchy but the social system that was ultimately to blame. Hence, even though much of the filmmaking by women in the region would undoubtedly qualify as “feminist”, female directors have often publicly dissociated themselves from what feminism was perceived to be.

In addition, women intellectuals were sceptical about uncritically adopting the categories of a discourse that had developed in a different social setting. According to feminist author Slavenka Drakulić (1991: 123-33), for example, Western feminist critiques tended to impose a ready-made template over a reality that did not easily fit into the framework they could offer. The problems of East European women, emerging from behind the Iron Curtain, she insisted, were not identical to those of women in the West, and the differences needed to be accounted for. While Western feminism was more worried about domestic violence, abuse, rape and the glass ceiling, the leading concerns in the former Eastern Bloc were the legacy of state socialism and the manipulation of women’s voices within the public sphere. In the aftermath of Communism women’s exclusion from public life was rapidly defining a new range of problems specific to the area: growing unemployment, loss of social benefits, and closure of women-focused social programmes (Funk 1993). It was in order to recognise these specific needs that many outspoken women from the region displayed reluctance to the imported “feminist” cause that appeared rooted in a different set of problems.

In a move typical of this attitude, Chytilová has dismissed journalists’ questions on the issue of her feminism as “pointless and primitive” (Connolly 2000: 3). Evidently, even though her work clearly belongs to the feminist strand, the director did not want to be regarded as blindly committed to any identifiable feminist cause. Indeed, her “feminism” could be seen as more complex than a simple engagement with the political causes of the day; it is a feminism found

more in images than in spoken words. Still, she has never really cared to articulately explain where she stands on these issues.

Yet another variation of the reserved stance on feminism that East Central European female film-makers have taken is the one of Hungarian Ibolya Fekete. When asked why she prefers to focus on men in her films, she said:

Normally, the female film used to be concerned with the so-called 'female issues'. I was accused of not being a real woman because I wasn't dealing with these things. [...] I understand women, what they do and why they do it. But I don't really know why men are doing what they are doing. What is their motivation for acting that way? (Clark & Federlein 2002)

It is true that in her films Fekete has focused on men rather than women, and she is quite articulate on the reasons why this is the case. A truly liberated female filmmaker should not need to limit herself to the women's domain especially if men appear to her a more challenging and interesting territory. Women are surely as capable of creating fine cinematic portrayals of men as male directors, and male directors have created female portrayals for decades; so why wouldn't women venture in exploring men's experiences and concerns?

Ultimately, however, the issue of "reluctant feminism" remains un- resolved, at least for the time being. It was Anikó Imre who brought to my attention a further dimension to this issue which may indeed contain useful clues for extending this investigation. In considering the fact that it is certainly problematic to assert that Márta Mészáros or Věra Chytilová are feminist given their explicit insistence to the contrary, Imre maintained that we need to keep in mind that the very concept of "feminism" means very many different things for different constituencies at different historical moments. On the one hand, a certain consensus about

‘feminism’s’ meaning is always taken for granted: these film-makers are feminist because they provide sensitive portrayals of female characters and typical women’s troubles. On the other hand, Imre noted, these directors’ refusal of the “feminist” label should not be seen as the result of a simplistic, demonised understanding of a limited, liberal-activist feminism. Another possible explanation would be that it is also the result of these female directors’ implication, whether acknowledged or not, in an oppressive patriarchal- nationalist social reality. And indeed, it is more often than not that some of the female representations and the representations by female directors that we analyze here turn out to be allegories of specifically masculine themes and causes, thus suggesting unspoken endorsement of nationalist patriarchal causes (as seen in the excessive use of the mother figure as nation-symbol, for example).⁷ Indeed, it may well be that the need for thinking East Central European cinema “outside” of the boundaries of Europe, Imre noted, is felt most clearly in the discussion of this “reluctant feminism” issue and the corresponding investigation of representations of various feminine themes. This is especially evident in those instances where female and feminine representations are radically cut off from any sort of budding consciousness, and are most often appropriated in the service of the national cause.⁸

When investigating these issues, we need to bear in mind that some of the finest portrayals of women in East Central European cinema have come from male directors who, in most cases, are not explicitly concerned with feminist ideology and who, furthermore, often use female images as allegories of the respective nation. In Hungary, for example, they are found in the work of directors such as Károly Makk (for example *Macskajáték/Cat’s Play*, 1974 and *Egymásra nézve/Another Way*, 1982), Péter Gothár (*Ajándek ez a nap/A Priceless Day*, 1979), or János Rózsa (*Vasárnapi szülők/Sunday Daughters*, 1979), and in Poland in the early work of Krzysztof Zanussi (*Quarterly Balance*, 1975). This discussion will examine the

way cinema in the region has presented women's concerns by using examples not only from films made by women but also from films made by men. Looking at the representation of communal confinement, women's solidarity, loneliness, motherhood and sexuality we will identify the discourse in which the social and gender limitations faced by women have been explored. The focus of attention will be on the plots and specific themes that seem to be most representative of East Central European cinema. One such aspect is the preoccupation with women and history, most often used to deliver serious social criticism of certain adverse periods.

Women and Stalinism: Mothers of Missing Children and Children Looking for Mothers

Extending the "burden of history" attitude, family drama was often used to comment on historical fate, usually by depicting the adverse effect of history on the family and intimate relationships within it. The interest in women's fates comes within a concrete socio-historical context; the woman is shown against a certain historical backdrop, which determines the direction of her actions and often limits them. Traditionally positioned against history, the female protagonist most often has to struggle against a fate that is imposed from the outside, usually in order to shelter her children from a destructive force that endangers the family entity. This is clearly visible in those films that focus on the relationship between mother and child in the period of Stalinism.

Typically, the focus is on strong women as mothers. The husband-father is usually missing, presumably taken away, and often appearing only in dreams (a classic example is Andrei Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo/Mirror* (1975), but also films by Marta Meszarós, Kiesłowski and others). Mother and child are left alone to struggle in a crippling social setting. Finding a substitute father or starting a new family is not a solution; even if a supportive partner was

there things would not be profoundly different; the problems are seen much more as social rather than personal ones.⁹

Within the template of Socialist Realism, mother and child would share the same ideological beliefs. In times of revolutionary struggle, they would be on the same side of the barricade, witnessing the triumphant arrival of the new times. The classic example of this type is found in Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mat'/Mother* (1926), based on Maxim Gorky's 1906 proletarian novel; David Bordwell categorises this film as a "prototype" of Socialist Realist film-making (1993: 200). In this film, the mother, a typical product of patriarchal society, is initially opposed to the revolutionary activities of her son. Gradually, however, she grows class conscious, joins the revolution and becomes a leader. The famous ending – the mother carrying on the flag of revolution – was one of the key propaganda images of Soviet cinema.

By the time Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia were "assigned" to the "Soviet sphere of influence" after the Second World War, the Soviet model of state socialism was already sufficiently compromised. In addition, the early years of state socialist rule in the region are associated with the period when the pattern of Stalinist purges was imported from the Soviet Union. Communist rule was more or less coerced on people in the region; those who dissented became victims of the purges, and those who opted to remain in silent disapproval witnessed a string of false trials and political incarcerations. It was a process of forced social "trans-formation" that could not be openly spoken about; the means with which Communism was imposed were to be deleted from the annals of history and only the record of its final triumph was permitted to stay on record. Filmmakers were unable to tell the story as it was, but wanted to. The only way to depict the wrongs of the period was by exploring the private arena where the repercussions were reflected, focusing on cinematic plots in which the family and the private individual were positioned against politics. These were stories of families

ruined by the “revolution”, of mothers forced to give away their children and of children whose mothers are taken away. The plots ultimately recycle the same indictment: one of the deepest consequences of Stalinism is the destruction of the sacred relationship of mother and child; the nurturing function of motherhood could not take place within the context of the absurd and irrational society of the early 1950s. By making this statement over and over again, by reiterating it through a variety of plots, film techniques and approaches, filmmakers indicted Stalinism’s inhumanity.¹⁰

The protagonist of the Hungarian film *Szerelem/Love* (Károly Makk 1971), played by the legendary Lili Darvas, is a fragile old lady in her nineties whose days on Earth are numbered. She lives in seclusion, with no idea what is going on outside the walls of her home and surrounded by the memorabilia of her Austro-Hungarian youth. Her son is imprisoned by the Stalinists, which she is not supposed to know. Her daughter-in-law (Mari Törőcsik) lies to the old lady, making her believe that the son is away in America, involved in making movies. During her visits, the daughter-in-law “reads” to the old woman imaginary letters from the son. The scenes of letter reading are interspersed with the old woman’s flashback visions and dream-like reminiscences of her missing son’s childhood and adolescence, all scenes carrying the specific flavour of glorious imperial Austria-Hungary. The son has been taken away and will not be back before her death; the only private encounter between mother and son that can still take place is the mother’s daydreaming. With its cinematic and psychological subtlety, *Love* is simultaneously one of the finest treatments of the bond between mother and child as well as an indictment of Stalinism.

Janusz Zaorski’s *Matka Królów/Mother of Kings* (made in Poland in 1983 but only released in the late 1980s) also critiques Stalinism by looking into the damaging effects it has on a family. Teresa (played by Magda Teresa Wójcik) is a widow who struggles to raise several

sins through the difficult years of the Second World War. Having managed to bring the four boys up to her own, she lives on to see them destroyed one after another in the 1950s. Each one of them is ruined in a different way: one becomes an amoral conformist, another is deprived of chances to grow in society and a third falls into petty crime. The favourite son becomes a Communist activist but then falls victim of the purges in the early 1950s. Kept in jail without being formally charged he dies during an interrogation. His wife, herself a Communist, cannot believe that the Party would destroy him so easily: “Nobody is in jail without reason”, she says, “there might be crimes my husband has committed that we do not know about.” The mother’s attitude is different: she will do her best to help her son, unconditionally. All her efforts are of no avail. In one of the key scenes of the film, we see the mother waiting at the bottom of the staircase at a government office to be received by a highly placed acquaintance. He never comes, though, and she remains there waiting, staring at Stalin’s portrait at the top of the stairs: an allegory of ordinary people’s deprivation in the face of totalitarian hierarchy. The story of the powerless protagonist of *Mother of Kings* is, once again, the story of a mother whose child is taken away by an unjust and adverse social system.

In Bugajski’s *The Interrogation*, a new-born child is taken away from the mother. The protagonist, Antonina (Krystyna Janda), is another victim of the Stalinist terror of the early 1950s. She is kept in jail for several years without clear charges or trial. In the course of her ordeal, she is impregnated by one of the prison guards who has a strange affection for her. A baby girl is born, but, after a short period of mothering in the prison’s infirmary, it is taken away from Antonina. Only three years later, after she is finally released, Antonina is able to find her daughter in an orphanage; mother and child are reunited. Stalinism has taken away everything but this child she never planned for. For Antonina, the hope of motherhood, after all other hopes have been abandoned, comes as compensation. But can it be a fulfilling

solution to the moral devastation and desperation the protagonist was forced to undergo? Will she be able to invest this forced motherhood with a new meaning?

In many of these films mothers see their children taken away. In others, it is the children who suffer the loss of their mother to an adverse social reality. This is, for example, the defining theme of Márta Mészáros' autobiographical "Diary" films where the loss of mother is closely associated with the inhuman Stalinist regime: *Napló gyermekeimnek/Diary for My Children* (1982), *Napló szerelmeimnek/Diary for My Loved Ones* (1987) and *Napló apámnak, anyámnak/ Diary for My Father and Mother* (1990).

Mészáros' father was a Hungarian sculptor and an outspoken Communist sympathiser. In the 1930s, the family had moved to the Soviet Union, and shortly thereafter the father fell victim to the Stalinist purges. The mother died a few years later, during the war. Tracing the time from the director's adolescent years (the time of her return to Hungary) to her later twenties (including the period of studies in Moscow), the films of the 'Diary' feature finely crafted dream sequences and flashbacks enhanced by an exquisite black-and-white photography. The memories of the lost mother and father appear in a lighter tone than the overall dark grey that refers to the austere grim reality, associating the longing for lost parents with sunshine and calmness.

The first instalment of the series deals with the legacy of Stalinism most directly. Here the orphaned Juli, the adolescent protagonist, is shown returning to Hungary after the war. She is entrusted to Magda (a relative who has been too busy to have children of her own) who enjoys the privileges of a highly placed Communist official. Magda is not loved, but this is not a concern for her; she prefers to know that everyone fears her. She plans to raise Juli the way she sees fit for the Communist future, disregarding Juli's growing resentment.

Even though the power-play develops within the realm of a personal relationship, the uneven struggle between Juli and Magda takes on an allegorical meaning. Juli's resentment of Magda's intense, inconsiderate and imposing "motherly" interest stands in for the attitude of ordinary people to the political regime. Magda is directly associated with Stalinism: she plays "Suliko", Stalin's favourite song when her comrades are visiting, she accepts the offer to become a prison guard, and she likes to wear uniforms. She is seen exercising her power at home in one of the key episodes of the film, when she makes Juli take off her boots and enjoys watching the girl kneeling in front of her.

Magda's lack of femininity is juxtaposed with the pervasive dream-like visions of Juli's mother, whose idealised fragility ultimately overpowers Magda's strength even though it is only an imaginary presence. It is the eternal search for the lost motherly warmth that is the main predicament of Mészáros' protagonist. Intercutting contrasting images of daily life with dreams and visions of memories about the mother represents the symbolic struggle between the missing real mother and the imposing stepmother.

Juli's coming of age is associated with an evolution towards the rejection of Stalinism, accomplished only in the final part of the trilogy. But if Juli is meant to stand in for Mészáros, there are some questions to be asked here. Mészáros' was an offspring of a Communist family; her parents believed in the same ideals that Stalin did. Juli's (and perhaps Mészáros') denial of Stalinism should then logically lead to rejecting her missing parents' Communist beliefs altogether (and thus to disrespect the memory of the parents). The director, however, does not reach such an extreme collision point; she never accepts that the orphaned feelings that Stalinism creates may be associated with the Utopian Communist dream of her parents; the first is exposed as anti-human while the latter remains unquestionably good and humane. Ultimately, Mészáros' choice is to preserve a somewhat

idealised vision of the Communist ideal and indict only Stalinism as its perverted extreme version.

Communal Confinement

With the industrial growth of the early 1960s, significant numbers of women entered the work force. Many took jobs in plants having moved from smaller towns or villages, where they could exist independently and leave patriarchal lifestyles behind. The lives of these women – typically working in factories and living in dormitories – became the topic of numerous films made in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than glorifying these new developments, however, cineastes proved to be critical of the adverse effects of progress. In some places the migration had resulted in a disproportionate concentration of women and had affected the local demographics; the new way of life appeared more confining than liberating. One of the earliest films focusing on the personal discomforts of communal life was Forman's classic comedy *A Blonde in Love* (1965).

The premise of the story is one of demographics. In a provincial Czech town, girls far outnumber boys; there is a large shoe factory, employing mostly women. Girls do not want to stay since they have no real chances of getting married so the factory's director makes arrangements that army reservists come to town for a night out with the girls. The arrival of the army men, many of whom are middle-aged and married, cannot provide a miraculous resolution to the mating crisis (and the story of the film is soon taken to Prague where the protagonist ends up chasing the good-looking pianist with whom she has had a one-night stand). Yet the encounter between the reservists and the factory girls gives rise to a number of humorous situations, explored with great subtlety by the director. As testified by film historian Antonín Liehm, the film had an impact on the social policies of the region:

When [*A Blonde in Love*] was released, the Ministry of Light Industry began to howl. The authorities claimed they were already having enough difficulties recruiting girls to work in these factories and now, after we had shown the situation on the screen in such a dismal light, nobody would want to take such a job. [...] The noisy protests tapered off after a while; but as the weather got warmer, a funny thing happened: hundreds of boys began to head for Zruč to spend Saturday and Sunday there. [...] The movie was like a big classified ad announcing that there were hundreds of boy-starved girls in Zruč. (1975: 67-8)

A Blonde in Love was a comedy, but it tackled a serious problem: one of communal confinement experienced by large numbers of women entering the labour force in the newly industrialised cities across the region. Forman had used this macro-sociological development as a backdrop for his fine psychological study of interpersonal relations.

For other film-makers, however, the focus remained more concerned with the social dimensions. A range of low-key dramas from Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia made between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s presented a damaging picture of the alienation resulting from the new social realities.

Some of Márta Mészáros' early films represent this strand in East Central European cinema the best. Her films are no longer about the relationship between the sexes as in *A Blonde in Love*; Mészáros' attention is much more focused on women's quiet plight for recognition, on their silent struggle for legitimation and right of privacy. As Catherine Portuges has noted, Mészáros' women were "at odds with social convention," questioning "the constitution of the self in East-Central Europe which has favoured group identity at the expense of the individual" (1993: 126). Mészáros knew how to show the confining nature of imposed communal space and positioned her protagonists against it in a difficult and sometimes desperate search for privacy. In Mészáros' debut feature, *Eltávozott nap/The Girl* (1968),

there is a scene from a girls' orphanage: in a typically egalitarian festive meal for their 'graduation', the girls all get the same plate with the same food on it, the same kiss, and the same amount of love from the people who run the place. The protagonists in *Szabad lelegzet/Riddance* (1973) are young female factory workers who share a room in a dormitory, all equally deprived of better chances, and all struggling to free themselves from the communal life they have taken on.¹¹ Juxtaposing such scenes of communal confinement with scenes of private intimacy is Mészáros' key narrative technique. She balances the mass scenes with intimate ones, usually showing a woman searching out for "a room of one's own", for some little space where at least some privacy would be granted: taking a walk, showering, or simply looking through the window to winter trees with freezing sparrows.

Mészáros' subtle critique of the communal confinement of state socialism is the best-known example for such socially critical cinema. However, there are numerous other films that have explored individual tragedies triggered by imposed compulsory communal settings. They all show women destined to spend their lives desperately craving for privacy, inhabiting a variety of ghetto-like surroundings, ranging from reformatory schools (for example, in Hungary, János Rózsas *Vasárnapi szülöki/Sunday Daughters*), orphanages (in Czechoslovakia, Filip Renč's *Requiem pro panenku/Requiem for a Maiden*, 1991), jails (in Poland, Wiesław Saniewski's *Nadzor/Surveillance*, 1985), factory dormitories (in Poland, Barbara Sass's *Without Love*), hospital wards (in Poland, Magdalena Łazarkiewicz's *Przez dotyk/By Touch*), to work places of feminised occupations, such as schools and nursery schools (in Hungary, Péter Gothár's *Ajándék ez a nap/A Priceless Day* and István Szabó's *Edes Emma, drága Böbe – vázlatok, aktok/Dear Emma, Sweet Böbe*, 1992). Differing in details, all these films nonetheless focus on serious social problems such as addiction, neglect, unemployment, incest and rape. All explore individual trauma caused by the coercive setting of communal life.

Sunday Daughters, Janos Rózsa's shattering film of teenage girls confined to a correctional establishment for juvenile delinquents, opens with raw interview footage from a series of brief encounters with the inmates. The opening sequence gives no indication which one of these troubled teenagers will be the focus of the story, allowing Rózsa to suggest that they all have individual stories worth telling. Blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction (the young delinquents play characters similar to themselves) helps the director draw attention to the grim reality of the protagonists' struggle for self-determination. Skilfully using this seemingly detached documentary style, relying on grainy interview footage, the director creates a moving portrayal of emotional trauma and rejection.

Gothár's *A Priceless Day* looks at another dimension of the same plight for self-determination. This time around it is literally about the struggle for personal space. The protagonist, Iren, works at a day-care centre staffed by women. Her lover is married to one of the other teachers and everybody at work knows about the affair. Iren cannot even make a personal phone call without being watched by a dozen curious eyes. She cannot afford to be with her lover, as she has no dwelling of her own; she cannot even be by herself if she wanted to. She needs to get a flat, a realisation that defines her struggle for privacy and will soon become an obsession: "If I get this flat", Iren says, "I will ask nothing more of life." In order to fulfil her trivial dream she is prepared to enter into a number of dubious deals and engage in hard and dirty bargaining. The "priceless day" of the title is the day when she finally gets access to the dwelling. She has secured access to the apartment at the cost of entering unwanted relationships and making questionable compromises, so it comes as no surprise that soon thereafter she is left disappointed and disillusioned.

Many more films, made mostly in the 1980s, but also in the 1970s and the 1990s, could be discussed here. Taking place around various communal premises, they all focus on female

protagonists involved in drunken revelries behind locked doors, unwanted pregnancies and attempted suicides, and all offer complex and moving portraits of young women driven towards despair by a cruelly monotonous routine.

But why always women? Why female dorms, girls orphanages and feminised spaces of toy factories or nursery schools? Why not military reservists, barracks, male factory dorms, and settings that men are confined to? Why not films like *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, US, 1987) or *Scum* (Alan Clarke, UK, 1979)? It seems this has something to do both with the unstated sanctions of film under Communism and the unspoken general gender conventions. On the one hand, depicting the plight of women would somehow fall among the permitted themes of state socialism. If the story was about men it could be seen as a direct indictment of the social system; as long as it was about women, it would not come across as direct social criticism or a revolt. To tell stories of female communal confinement meant to practice social criticism and still avoid an open confrontation with the regime. The fact of the relative safety associated with the treatment of female themes, however, only confirms that state socialism had not gone far enough in abandoning widespread gender conventions. As in the West, women's concerns here were traditionally relegated to the "private" sphere (as opposed to the "public" one). The equality between men and women, even though an officially declared goal (and a proclaimed achievement) of socialism, was still a distant prospect.

In Search of Privacy: Loneliness, Betrayal and Solidarity

While most of the films discussed here approached the issue of communal confinement in a similarly critical manner, directors differed in the way they viewed women's chances in the search for privacy. One can distinguish three main interpretations. First, according to some, the only alternative available to those women who react adversely to the communal society is loneliness. A woman may be an accomplished professional or may have achieved a high

social standing; nonetheless, she remains alone in her personal life. Second, there are films that cast a sceptical look at female friendships, ultimately questioning the ability of women to be loyal and genuinely supportive of each other. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a third range of films asserts the union of two women as an act of genuine solidarity that creates a universe of self-sufficiency and offers an alternative to the alienating communal space of state socialism. There are several examples that illustrate each one of these approaches.

Loneliness

Even women who are among people may be lonely and it is this existential loneliness, persisting in the intimate corners deep below the facade that female filmmakers have done so much to explore. It is the kind of suppressed loneliness that is a continuous interest for female (Mészáros, Holland) and male (Zanussi, Kieślowski) directors alike.

The protagonist of Marta Mészáros' first feature, *The Girl*, is raised in an orphanage. As soon as she comes of age, she undertakes a painful search for her biological mother who has brought her to life only to reject her. When she finds the mother – who turns out to be a peasant woman, committed to her other children and family, reluctant to admit she has had a child out of wedlock – the girl realises she is more alone than ever. It is too late, and life has taken its toll; mother and daughter can no longer bond. The girl remains as alone as she was at the onset.

The atmosphere of Mészáros' subsequent films is permeated with this same loneliness, marked by existential fear and insecurity. The encounter of two women, each one of whom is lonely in her own way, is the theme of her *Örökbefogadás/Adoption* (1975). Loneliness is also the leading motif of *Kilenc hónap/Nine Months* (1976), the quasi-documentary report of the lonely pregnancy of a young woman (remarkably played by Lili Monori). Mészáros'

protagonists are often shown spending time alone. They may be strong and independent but, when alone, it is revealed that, like others, they also suffer emotional trauma and struggle for personal space. A trademark image for the director is to show the protagonist taking a shower alone, watching water run down her body, a rare intimate moment of privacy.

In Agnieszka Holland's shattering *A Woman Alone*, the loneliness comes hand in hand with misery and social indifference. The protagonist, Irena, is a plain-looking single mother in her thirties who works for the post office and lives on the brink of poverty.¹² On top of that, as if fate is conspiring against her, everything that can go wrong does: she loses the chance to get a better job; a recently deceased aunt leaves her in debt. With prospects getting grimmer every day, Irena is driven to desperation; she gives up on her son and takes him to an orphanage. She will try to get back on her feet before being able to take the boy back. Irena has met a young handicapped and equally marginalized man, Jacek, with whom she has a romance of sorts. They make a botched robbery attempt and end up in despair; as an act of mercy killing, Jacek smothers Irena with a pillow. *A Woman Alone* is a film of grim realism that looks at a weak and helpless protagonist left alone to face a hostile world. Every step she takes deepens her isolation: the shattering scene when she leaves her boy in the orphanage is the moment when she cuts the final tie that links her to this world. From here on she becomes a straight tragic character who is doomed to die.

While Holland's view of the loneliness of her protagonist is clearly reinforced by anger at a society that fails individuals, Zanussi's 1970s films also look at lonely women, but focus more on the existential dimension. A representative example is *Quarterly Balance*, which tells the story of another woman in her late thirties, Marta (Maja Komorowska). She is happily married, has a nice child and good office job, and on the surface everything is going just fine. Marta feels suffocated by the monotonous routine and has all the symptoms of a

mid-life crisis. She starts an affair with a friend, an energetic man who comes across as very different from her balanced and ultimately boring husband. But is this a real passionate love or simply a romantic detour in the face of approaching old age? There are many scenes when Marta is shown alone in silence, thinking, reflecting on whether she should leave her husband: Marta sailing, Marta drinking tea at home, Marta on a windy beach. Even if she left her marriage, what would this change for her? The affair and the family are only part of her life. She is a professional woman who cannot simply escape her place in society; she may leave the husband but there are mounting problems at work (the quarterly balance suggests that a colleague has been embezzling funds), she will have to go on. The pressures at work mount; she grows impassionate with her lover, fights with him and insults him for no apparent reason. Later on she embarks on more affairs, but soon, disillusioned, comes to the realisation that these are not a solution to her loneliness. Her child is alienated and is now closer to the father. The crisis in the relationship with the husband deepens, and yet in the end Marta surrenders and returns to him. She comes to terms with the alienation that bothered her so much at the outset, and perseveres with work and the family. Deep inside she may still have rebellious inclinations and may not be reconciled, yet she accepts the reality and enters the next stage in life.

It is important to note that the protagonists of these films are always working women – be it in professional or lay occupations. It is almost impossible to find films about the loneliness of the woman confined to the home; the neurotic housewife of Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) is not the type of female character encountered in East Central European cinema. Ultimately, the message of these films is that even the working woman, one who presumably has a role equal to men in the social world at large, is equally lonely and disoriented as the woman confined to the family setting. State socialism claimed to have

provided adequate socialization for women, yet this did not appear to solve women's existential problems.

Betrayal

The accomplished professional woman in the centre of many films from the 1970s and the 1980s, however, was often presented as selfish and incapable of genuine love. She was ultimately alone in all relationships, by her own choice. She was often shown as incapable of sincere female friendship and loyalty, thus suggesting that relationships between women are based on betrayal and mutual mistrust rather than gender solidarity.

The protagonist of Barbara Sass' *Without Love*, Ewa, is an aspiring journalist of ruthless ambition. Her realism borders on cynicism; she is fully aware of her good looks and exploits her sex-appeal in affairs that help her professional advancement: "The main thing in life is to live", she says, and she has got "to have it all at any price." One day, Ewa is asked to write about the life of female factory workers. She approaches the assignment in a streetwise manner by using a chance acquaintance, a victimized young woman called Marianna. The resulting sensational reportage paints Marianna's life in excessively grim colours and presents a picture of drunkenness and promiscuity in the workers' dorms. Marianna is offended, while Ewa claims she has exploited her in order to help others in the same situation. She even helps Marianna to move out of the dorm and passes some nice clothes on to her. Seemingly acting out of female solidarity, Ewa's actions are clearly dictated by shallow careerism.

Sass is clearly sceptical about Ewa's morality and loyalty to women. Ewa routinely ignores her daughter, and her masquerade of impenetrability renders her unsympathetic. Because she has suffered from trusting men in the past, she now does not want to depend on anybody. It is

Ewa's inconsiderate struggle for independence that, the film suggests, is at the root of her questionable ethical motives. She is, indeed, an independent and strong working woman; but the director clearly indicates she disapproves of this kind of strength.

Another film from around the same time, Ryszard Bugajski's *Kobieta i kobieta / A Woman and a Woman* (1980), deals with the relationship of two active professional women. In the first part, their friendship is put to a test, they argue and separate. Ten years later life brings them together again; each one has grown into a strong and experienced executive woman. However, professional and personal conflicts erupt again and yet another collision is unavoidable. Thus, while women may be trying to be friendly and even forgiving, the film seems to suggest, it is nearly impossible for them to be loyal to each other; female friendships are always marred by opportunism and shaky moral foundations.

Lazarkiewicz's debut drama, *By Touch*, is also ambiguous about the chances of genuine female friendship. The film features two women sharing a small hospital room, surrounded by an atmosphere of sickness and death; many scenes show them staring through the window into the foggy day outside. One of the protagonists is the beautiful Anna (Grażyna Szapołowska), a former ballerina who has a loving husband and a child. She is gradually dying from cancer of the uterus and has now suffered a miscarriage.¹³ The other one is an almost autistic teenage girl with a shaved head, an incest victim who has had an abortion and suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome. The women befriend each other; the girl starts telling her story to Anna, gradually recovers and returns to normal life. While the beautiful Anna fades away, the girl, who has identified with her, takes over Anna's child and, after her death, more aspects of her life. Reminiscent of Kieślowski's later style, *By Touch* is shot through a blue filter, and changes into colour only towards the end. The bluish tint prevails also in the key scene, where the camera focuses on the hands of the protagonists, stretching

towards each other and touching. The touch of the two women appears as a vow of loyalty. And yet while seemingly believing in the strength of female solidarity and mutual support, Łazarkiewicz shows the bond of the two women as ultimately destructive: one of them has to perish for the other one to thrive.

Solidarity

For other directors, the encounter of two women can turn into a strong alliance helping them to resist the rough and unfriendly reality. Such is the union of the two teachers in Szabó's *Sweet Emma, Dear Böbe*, for example, or the improbable friendship between Irén and the wife of her lover in Gothár's *A Priceless Day*. Women bond as part of their resistance to communal confinement and, within these friendships they finally become subjects of their own relationships. Sometimes such unions of two women are seen as a spontaneous creation of a private universe, a world of complete sufficiency and spiritual satisfaction.

Makk's *Another Way*, for example, is one of the rare films dealing with the issue of same sex love, looking at the relationship between two female journalists working in Stalinist times. In a plotline that goes far beyond exploring their strong physical attraction, the director focuses more on the staggering limitations imposed upon the journalistic profession and on the social and political repercussions that their affair leads to.¹⁴ Makk lets his protagonists show their affection in public, thus provoking widely accepted social conventions. He wants to suggest that to become real, the union of women needs to endure the judging gaze of strangers. Only when tested in this way can women assert that they can meet each other's needs.¹⁵

The director who believes most in the power of female solidarity, however, is Mészáros. In her classic film *Adoption*, she explores the gradual bonding of two women. Anna is a teenage girl neglected by her youngish biological parents, who has run away from home and taken a

factory job. Kata is in her forties, a lonely woman who works at the same factory, and who gives Anna shelter and emotional comfort. The two women's relationship soon becomes like that of loving mother and daughter, a symbolic temporary "adoption".

The film looks into a fragile but deeply satisfying union, which has come into being as a result of the suppressed emotional struggle each one of these women has been undergoing, a union richly permeated by intimacy. Shot in black-and-white, the framing and use of camera movement in the film help to reinforce this constructed intimacy and raise the relationship of the two women above any heterosexual interests. There is a scene when Kata and Anna are shown sitting at a table in a restaurant, being watched by a group of men at the bar. The camera starts with a medium-close shot of the two women, and then repeatedly pans back and forth between them and the men who watch them. The emotional bond and mutual absorption of the two women is projected onto the space that now becomes impenetrable for the man. The juxtaposition of medium- close shots of Anna and Kata with long shots from the perspective of the intrusive male patrons suggests that their bond is simultaneously strong and vulnerable. The display of the women's intimacy is intentional, but not meant to be challenging. It is not meant to attract attention; it is not extroverted. These two women do not care anymore about the male gaze, they are not like the women on display in *A Blonde in Love*, who are willing to be objectified and obtain legitimization through dance invitations. In *Adoption*, the male gaze is pushed back by an invisible wall of self-sufficiency and solidarity. The women's union is impenetrable since it is legitimized from within.

The two women are together only for a while. Anna gets married, mostly because she wants to be independent; it is hinted, however, that her new independence is elusive and she may be bound for trouble with the new husband. Kata adopts a baby girl, whom she is determined to

raise on her own. Their union is no more, but has been a deeply fulfilling experience for both, having helped them to come to terms with their identities.

Sexing-up the Post-communist Woman

In post-Communist times, the representation of women in East Central European cinema has undergone substantial changes. First and foremost, one observes astonishing sexism which accompanies a great emphasis of women's sexuality and less attention paid to the social problems faced by women.

One of the biggest ironies of this transitional social environment seems to have been translated to the screen: sociologists have noted that the situation of women in the aftermath of state socialism has barely improved; many writers have discussed examples which show that women's social position has, in fact, worsened, and that gender inequalities are on the increase (Einhorn 1993; Berry 1995; Gal and Kligman 2000). New problems such as growing unemployment, pay inequality, overwhelming feminisation of certain sectors and the exclusion of women from others have been reported, and various benefits and rights, previously in place, have been cancelled. Having seen many of their earlier social privileges scrapped, women have largely been losing out in the new developments.

In addition, there is an overwhelming fascination with sexuality across most mainstream media. The coverage of women by the thriving tabloid press has been more than problematic. (One can regularly stumble across reports about women who have not only enjoyed being raped, for example, but have eventually even married the assault perpetrator.) It may be tempting to see this obsession only as a compensatory 'catching up' after the years of state socialism when open discussion of sex-related matters was more or less absent from the

public sphere. It seems that the explanation should rather be sought, however, by recognizing the growing importance of simple market forces: sex and violence sell.

While films made during Communist times would regularly feature scenes depicting intimacy, representing explicit sex was usually taboo, and sex was off limits in the context of print and broadcast media. The import of Western publications, even of the more innocent *Playboy* variety, was illegal. In its place developed a context in which the semi-naked women smiling from the pages of smuggled Western magazines not only helped to satisfy suppressed user desires but also functioned as one of the most effective strands of Western propaganda.

Over a dozen years into the democratic transition, it is difficult to avoid sex even in the remotest corners of East Central Europe. The overall “tabloidization” of media across the region today is compounded by a boom in indigenous and imported pornographic publications, a whole range of which (from straightforward erotica to hard-core magazines) are openly sold in every kiosk.¹⁶

All these transformations take place within a context of absent regulation (or lacking enforcement where regulation is in place) and an absent political will to tackle problems that adversely affect women. At the same time, increasingly there are groups of women who are acutely aware of the difficult situation and attempting to organize themselves in order to resist it. The growth of such groups is accompanied by a process of establishing women’s studies programmes at universities across the region. Even though today feminists are more active than before, their voices remain quite isolated and prove unable to counter the growing social marginalisation and compulsory “sexing-up” of women. As far as cinema is concerned, the situation is not much better, given that veteran feminist directors like Chytilová or Mészáros have been so articulate in rejecting their feminist roots (and even though each one

of them released several films devoted to women's issues, these have been works that have not managed to gain the critical acclaim earned by their earlier works).

Overall, the number of films featuring complex and psychologically plausible female characters has been on the decrease since 1989. The best women's films of post-Communist times seem to be made by members of the younger generation, such as Dorota Kędzierszawska (who tackled the sensitive theme of motherhood and of abortion in *Nothing*) and Urszula Urbaniak (who looked into issues of chances for women in *The Junction*).¹⁷ The most popular films of the post-Communist period, however, the comedies and action-adventure releases, present women in a different light. Yesterday's overworked factory dorm girls become today's sex-kitten playmates, regularly cast as constantly horny creatures mostly interested in playing out their erotic fantasies and in entering new sexual relationships at any time of day or night.

In Róbert Koltai's Hungarian comedy *Sose halunk meg/We Never Die* (1993), for example, one of the traditional film settings – a train travelling through the countryside – is transformed into a terrain for the exciting sexual adventures experienced by an insipid uncle and his nephew: while the uncle moves to a neighbouring compartment to indulge in the pleasures of lovemaking with a young woman, the teenage nephew undergoes a sexual induction with a nymphomaniac lady. Many other recent films rely heavily on a similar celebration of promiscuity. The message is: real women want to have sex all the time.¹⁸

The men, on the other hand, are all lining up to cater to these women. Sexual relations between mature men and "hot" teenage girls are a fixture in these cinemas, and the sexual advances are most often made by the women. In the Polish film *Kolejność uczuć/Sequence of Feelings* (Radosław Piwowski, 1992) an aging actor has a sexual affair with a teenager and

in the box-office hit *Psy/Pigs* (Władysław Pasikowski, Poland, 1992) the protagonist, a former police officer, picks up a former teenage prostitute from a home for juvenile delinquents. She definitely does not intend to return to the streets, yet as soon as she is out of the “establishment”, she makes sexual advances to her rescuer.

Thus, in post-Communist cinema, women are rarely given more complex social roles than being preoccupied with extra-marital affairs and a variety of other sexual adventures. This approach to women’s representation and sexuality is doubtlessly offensive and often humiliating. It does not seem, however, that there has been much public outcry against these films, celebrating “femininity” as their authors would claim. For the time being it appears that the best works of East Central Europe’s feminist cinema are strictly those made in the past.

Notes:

¹ The text was originally published as “Women’s Cinema, Women’s Concerns”, in: Dina Iordanova. *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*. London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003, pp. 119-143.

² Mészáros was married to prominent director Miklos Jancso during the 1960s, his most important creative period. In interviews with Catherine Portuges (whose book on the director is one of the rare studies dedicated to a single Hungarian filmmaker), Meszaros extensively discussed matters of personal creativity and relationships with men. Meszaros’ relationship with Jancso and later on with Polish actor Jan Nowicki (who appears in most of her 1980s films) are particularly interesting to tackle in that they seem to represent situations where balance between two artistic personalities has been achieved. Despite her marriage to Jancso,

for example, Meszaros never imitated the unmistakable visual idioms of his films. She does, however, admit to needing Nowicki's advice on issues of style and aesthetics.

³ Other films by Chytilova, revealing an uneven career, include *Ovoce stromu rajskych jimel/The Fruit of Paradise* (1969), *Hra o jablko/The Apple Game* (1976), *Panelstory/PrefabStory* (1979), *KalamitalCalamity* (1981). *Faunovo prilis pozdni odpcedne/The Very Late Afternoon of a Faun* (1983), *Vyhnaní zraje/Expulsion from Paradise* (2001) and others.

⁴ Nicknamed the 'Margaret Thatcher of Czech cinema', Chytilova has attracted controversy with her provocative film *Traps* (1998), which split critical opinion, mostly on the issue on how far feminism can go in its vicious reaction to male dominance. The film tells the story of a female veterinarian who is raped by two acquaintances and who then seeks revenge by castrating her rapists and arranging a situation in which one of them eats, without realising, his own testicles. *Traps* was described as a cruel feminist black comedy, that was celebrated by a handful of hard core feminists' (Connolly 2000). Male critics had serious problems endorsing the film. Horton declared it 'notorious' for its 'depressingly reactionary' message, which, he thought, was delivered with 'smutty toilet humour' (1999a: 2). Herbert Eagle, talking in 1999 at the AAASS's annual convention in St. Louis, was less dismissive but admitted that the film was not easy viewing for men.

⁵ Krumbachova scripted films such as N'emeč's *The Party and the Guests* (1996) and *Martyrs of Love* (1966), Jires' *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* (1970), and Chytilova's *Daisies. The Fruit of Paradise* (1969) and *Tie Very Late Afternoon of a Faun* (1983).

⁶ Once abroad Holland first worked in Europe, making films with a clear social commitment (like the Holocaust-themed *Angry Harvest* and *Europa, Europa*, and the Solidarity-themed

To Kill a Priest). In the 1990s, she continued working on European art-house productions, switching to themes of subtle psychology and somewhat more popular appeal (a family drama of a lost child, *Olivier, Olivier*, 1992, and a drama exploring the tempestuous relationship between French poets Rimbaud and Baudelaire, *Total Eclipse*, 1995). In the 1990s, she was noticed by Hollywood and invited to work on project; to which she did not appear to have a specific artistic commitment but which she nonetheless directed competently (*The Secret Garden*, 1993 and *Washington Square*, 1997). Acclaimed for her work, by the end of the decade Holland established herself as one of the few international female directors whose name can guarantee good pre-sales. Having become the established and respected director she is, Holland keeps putting out one film after another, her work becoming more versatile but less recognisable. Most of her films do well at the box office, and she enjoys the robust reputation of a reliable professional who is equally comfortable in low-key dramas and in lavish period productions, and who is every bit as competent as her male counterparts.

⁷ There is a whole strand of scholarship that explores the use of female images within the range of nationalist symbolism. It is an enormous topic, one which is beyond the scope of this study. East Central European cinema offers an equally rich material for explorations of this nature as any of the other European film traditions (see, for example, Elzbieta Ostrowska's 1998 text on the 'Polish Mother'). Writing on European cinema in general, authors Jill Forbes and Sarah Street correctly noted that, 'Perhaps the most interesting representation of the national question through the sensibilities, and above all, over the bodies of women. [...] In *Le Mepris*. the body of Brigitte Bardot became the site of a cultural contest between Europe and America, the locus of both pleasure and conflict. In the New German cinema, and especially perhaps in films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978) or Helma Sanders-Brahms' *Germany, Pale Mother* (1980) the suffering, sometimes prostituted, woman becomes the symbol of the state of Germany, while in Spanish

cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, in the work of the director Almodovar, sexually mobile bodies establish “a new cultural stereotype for a hyperborated Spain” (Kinder, 3) in films like *Matador* (1986) and *The Law of Desire* (1987), 2000: 41). If East European film was included in the discussion of European cinema, this observation could undoubtedly be expanded to encompass similar examples from the work of Holland and Bugajski (Poland), Makk and Szabo (Hungary), and Menzel and Jakubisko (Czechoslovakia), to name but a few.

⁸ Aniko Imre in personal correspondence, 2003. She also adds: ‘A postcolonial analogy is most useful here: Third World women and feminist critics of postcolonial cultures insist on demystifying a system of representation that turns women into metaphors and allegories of the masculine project of nationalist decolonisation. In this context it is still far from certain if East Central European female filmmakers’ attitudes towards the brand of imported feminism can be read as a challenge to the white, liberal, late- capitalist, affluent connotations of this particular brand (just like Third World women’s resistance to the very term can).’

⁹ A woman with a child finding a solution by looking for a new partner is not a typical narrative move for these cinematic plots. Such a turn is more likely to be found in American cinema (for example in *This Boy’s Life*, Michael Caton-Jones, 1993). Only lately has it been explored in Russian cinema: in the acclaimed *Vor/Thief* (Pavel Chukhrai, 1997), a story told from the point of view of a boy whose mother finds a new partner and tries to build a new life (but fails).

¹⁰ Within Soviet cinema the film that fully fits this description – Stalinism as an adverse force that destroys the family – is Tengiz Abuladze’s *Monanieba/Repentance* (1986). It is not by accident that this film was received as one of the strongest indictments of totalitarianism.

¹¹ One would expect to find interesting depictions of life in dormitories in Soviet cinema, but surprisingly it has not been such a prominent feature there: Russians seem to be more preoccupied with featuring life in communal apartments (*komunalka*). Vladimir Menshov's *Moskva slezam ne verit/Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (1979) shows life in female dorms in a comedic way which is far removed from the sensibility of Meszaros' approach.

¹² At the time Holland's *A Woman Alone* was released, a very similar film featuring the difficult life of a single mother was censored in Bulgaria. Hristo Hristov's *Edna zhena na trideset i tri / A Woman at 33* (1981) was taken off the screens after an orchestrated critical campaign in the Party-controlled media, a situation suggesting that this type of social critique was becoming unwelcome.

¹³ It was the tradition in the Eastern Bloc that terminally ill people were not told of the true nature of their ailment. Cancerous patients were kept in the dark about their real condition while their relatives were informed of the outlook by the doctors. Hiding from one's loved ones that they only have a limited time to live, pretending that everything is alright and they are on the road to recovery, created a number of sad situations between close people, bordering on absurdity. Many East Central European films dealt with this game of hiding the truth from the terminally ill, all featuring dramatic plots structured around a simple premise that would not be there if the film was set in the West (where the patients would be informed of their true condition).

¹⁴ Scenes of lesbian attraction are featured in a number of films, particularly those focusing on women in forced confinement, like *The Interrogation* (Ryszard Bugajski, 1982) or *Surveillance* (Wieslaw Saniewski, 1985). These remain marginal subplots though. Here same-sex attraction is never tackled with the subtlety found in Makk's film.

¹⁵ Makk, who has created some unique portrayals of women, is particularly interested in exploring women of an advanced age. In *Love* his focus is on the close relationship between the elderly protagonist and her daughter-in-law, both women united by the concern of the absent son/husband. This interest is further developed in *Cat's Play*, a film about the relationship of two elderly women who share an apartment but do not like each other. Like in *Love*, here Makk also uses interiors full of antiques and flashback references to a distant Austro-Hungarian youth twinkling in foggy vignettes. Behind the daily routine of cooking and eating, of letter writing and talking on the phone, a whole range of political and generation gap problems gradually come to the surface. Elderly women have regularly been the centre of attention for other Hungarian directors as well, resulting in remarkable films featuring women of an advanced age, such as Judit Elek's *Sziget a szarazfoldon/The Lady from Constantinople* (1969) or Istvan Szabo's *Tuzolto utca 25/25 Firemen Street* (1973).

¹⁶ In addition, by the year 2000 the Hungarian capital Budapest was believed to have become the most active production site for Europe's thriving porn film industry.

¹⁷ East Central European cinema, for example, is still to produce a serious film tackling one of the key problems of women in the region: international trafficking, the coercion of scores of young women into sexual slavery. Marta Meszaros did make a film that looked into this problem (*A Szerencse lanyai/ Daughters of Luck*, 1998), but, like most of her work in the 1990s, it triggered mixed critical reactions. A lesser-seen film on the theme of trafficking was Romanian Nae Caranfil's *Asphalt Tango* (1997), starring Charlotte Rampling as a callous Madam who has come to Romania to recruit hopeful young girls to work for her as 'dancers'. It is symptomatic, however, that the best film on this issue so far, one that tackles the roots of the trafficking problem as well as its appalling consequences, was to be made by a Swede (Lukas Moodysson's 2002 *Lilja 4-Ever*).

¹⁸ For a good discussion of an art-house film which represents yet another carnivorously sexual woman (Zulawski's *Shaman*, 1996) see Mazierska 2002.

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Questions and Activities

1. How would you define the concept of “feminism”? Why does Iordanova call East European female film-makers “reluctant feminists”? What is state socialist understanding of the term “feminism”?!

2. Go to Dina Iordanova’s blog *DinaView* (<http://www.dinaview.com>), find more film examples and discuss the reasons for women’s personal discomfort of communal life during the 1960s and 1970s; the major

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achievements of East European cinemas in presenting women’s plight for recognition and their silent struggle for legitimation, right of privacy and individuality.

3. Why do you think under state socialism film directors chose to deal with female dorms, girls’ orphanages and feminized spaces of factories or nursery schools, avoiding typically male settings such as military barracks or male factory dorms?

4. How did East European film directors – both male and female – differ in the way they viewed women’s chances in the search for privacy? (Here are some suggested movie titles: *Eltávozott nap/The Girl*. (Hungarian), dir. Mártha Mészáros, 1968; *Edna zhena na 33 / A Woman at 33*. (Bulgarian), dir. Christo Christov, 1982.)

5. How would you comment on the following words by Mártha Mészáros: “Filmmaking by women represents a different kind of sensitivity. If you interpret my films as strictly political, you will see that I approach power relations differently from the way they are portrayed by male directors. Not because my films are necessary better or theirs worse, but because they are different [...] What I want to work for is to help women become conscious of their being,

the essence of their womanhood: this is what I want to express in my films, to make them aware of their own personalities.”

6. What are the new representations of women, which appeared in the East European cinemas after 1989? (Here are some suggested movie titles: *Chiya e тази pesen/Whose is This Song* (Bulgaria) dir. Adela Peeva, 2003; *Mila ot Mars / Mila from Mars*. (Bulgaria), dir. Zornitsa Sophia, 2004; *Snieg / Snow* (Bosnia), dir. Aida Begic, 2008; *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile / 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Romania), dir. Christian Mungiu, 2007; *Ninta muta / Silent Wedding* (Romania) dir. Horatiu Malaele, 2008.)

Further reading

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