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Est Diva – female portraits in est-european cinema

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As soon as 1923, Leon Trotsky assigned cinema an important role, recognizing it as a propaganda tool. In his article for „*Pravda*” titled „*Vodka, the church and the cinema*”, Trotsky defines cinema as the perfect weapon, that for the working class quickly became part of everyday life, along with the pub and the church. Trotsky noticed that common people need their story and relied on the fact that while the church tells the same tale over and over again, through cinema it can be easily diversified. Easy to understand, spectacular and glamorous, cinema had all the right attributes to convey the message of a new world. All these attributes will establish cinema as a new religion, that will gradually replace the old ones. Therefore since its beginning, cinema played an important strategic role for the communist regime: that of entertainer and story teller.

In the beginning the stories are simple, almost rudimentary and realistic. In 1932, the movement was defined as socialist realism and was imposed in literature, visual arts, film, music and architecture. The glorification the communist values, the emancipation of the working class and the establishing of the new man. This new hero, committed, brave and persistent was the combustible of the cinematic stories. The Russians assigned it the feminine gender, that was easy to distinguish amongst other bourgeois doctrines. In this set up, the role of the female characters, the divas had their well defined place. They were supposed to contribute in educating the new man, and become inspirational role models. The socialist heroine was active, she fought, she pursued, she overpassed, she sang and she understood the order of things. She was more gifted than her western counterparts and far more proactive. The first film to portray such a character is „*Ceapaev*” (1934, directed by brothers Georgi and Sergei Vasilyev). This film is worth mentioned because it was massively broadcasted all over the U.S.S.R and in the other socialist countries. Moreover, it had a direct influence over people’s lives (the research mentions the case of Nina Onilova, heroine fighter in the Second World War).

The second chapter – Russian Glamour is dedicated to the divas of the early Russian cinema, Lyubov Orlova and Vera Maretskaya. Both actresses were Stalin’s favorites, were decorated, invited to private parties, but both had family members and friends killed by the regime. Their biography is extremely interesting and illustrative for those troubled times. They both lived their lives on a tight rope. Riding on the crest of the wave and at the same time living under a threat so close to their families.

Orlova’s first husband was arrested, and when she dared to ask the dictator about him, she was ruthlessly threaten by the NKVD. In fact she was not vulnerable because her first marriage, but

because of her family background. Although she portrayed a lot of common characters (a milkmaid, a housekeeper, a mailwoman or a circus actress), she was a direct descendant of the Orlov family (Grigory Orlov was Queen Ecaterina's favorite) and Vladimir the Great, the prince of Kiev.

She became the Cinderella of Russian socialism, one that in the end gets social accomplishment instead of a Prince. She owes all her successful roles to her second husband, the director Grigory Aleksandrov. A true Pygmalion, Aleksandrov was looking for a Russian Mary Pickford, especially in regard to her physical attributes. Orlova was chosen for her radiant, flaxen, angelic appearance. Her characters made use of her beauty, of her singing and dancing abilities and were defined by social responsibility, perseverance and consistent optimism.

She made several musicals that Stalin loved, amongst which we chose to analyze the film "*Circus*" (1936, directed by Grigory Aleksandrov). The plot is rather daring for the time: the heroine has a black lovechild! During a performance, her secret is betrayed by her former German manager, who tries to humiliate her in front of the audience. But the show takes place in Moscow and the audience can't be manipulated, they prove to be emphatic and democratic – they all sing a lullaby for the kid. The point being that the communist state accepts everyone, no matter what color or nationality they are. Thus, every nation included in the U.S.S.R cradles and sings to the baby. Between 1948 and 1953, during Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign, the Yiddish song sang by Solomon Mikhoels (the president of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the founder and director of the Moscow Jewish Theatre) vanished as it had never existed. (Solomon Mikholes vanished as well, being killed through Stalin's orders in 1948). An integral version of the film was reconstructed as late as 1991.

Orlova was the absolute diva, an astonishing beauty who knew how to obscure the passage of time (She used to say: "*I will never be a day older than 39!*"), always successful, part of a perfect couple (for years she and Aleksandrov were considered the most beautiful soviet couple), stars, battleships and cruisers were named after her.

More down to earth, Vera Maretskaya stood for "everybody who was nobody". She embodies the dramatic protagonist, with political roles, the battlefield warrior, the one who openly accepts the hardship and suffering. She belongs as well to Stalin's entourage and being a talented chef, she also used to cook for his parties. Her life story is as troubled and emblematical as it could be expected at the time. In 1937 she witnesses the public execution of her two brothers, Dmitri and Gregory, journalists, accused to be sympathetic to Nikolai Bukharin. For two months, Vera sent letters and struggled to get an audience with Stalin in order to prevent their execution. In the end, all she could do was to adopt the children of her brothers and raise them together with her own children. She becomes a mother of four, and a few years later, after

her second husband, the actor Georgi Trotsky dies on the battlefield, a war widow. She buries her struggle in silence, she accepts honors and awards from Stalin and she attends to his parties.

Her characters depict contemporary Russian women, which carry their hardship without useless complaining. A detached style, a hidden sadness, a magnetic balance turn her into a model. Maretskaya has the ability to transform her characters, mostly schematic and ideologically confined, into emblematic figures that stood the test of time.

Chapter 3 is concerned with the transition period between Stalin's dictatorship and Hruscirov regime. From a historic perspective, as well as from a cinematographic one, socialism can not be treated as a whole. There are important turning points, naturally followed by a change of mentality.

In 1956, three years after Stalin's death, during the XXth Congress of the Communist Party, Hruscirov makes a speech in which he denounces the cult of personality, consequently influencing the rhetoric of war movies, the bombastic and heroic style being replaced with a realist discourse, oriented towards the people.

Between 1955 and 1960, Russian cinema crosses an ideological border. Until then everything that mattered was activism, the war against Fascism, the resistance against the Nazi invasion, the anti-cosmopolitan campaign and the professed love towards Stalin. Gradually, this tendency changes. Coming first are the influences of neorealism, movement which was initially refuted by the soviet propaganda but finally adopted for its aesthetics. While the Italian neorealism is defined through everyday life stories of the common people, often shot with unprofessional actors in working class neighborhoods, the Russian cinema maintains the exceptional hero assigning him human, daily tasks. He is cooking and washing dishes and still remains a hero.

Certain doubts emerge nevertheless. Changes are noticed from the heroine of "*Ceapaev*" and that of many other socialist realistic films, through the heroine of "*The forty-first*" (1963 directed by Grigori Chukhrai, starring: Izolda Izvitska), to Tatiana Samoilovna from "*Cranes Fly*". The first ones have well defined objectives; they do not deviate and have no doubts. In "*The forty-first*" there is a tension, as the heroine isolated together with an enemy soldier falls in love. It is an arduous, strong conflict between the doctrinal correctness and the needs of the heart. Still the heroine remains a fighter, a real soldier. In "*Cranes fly*" Samoilovna is no longer a soldier at all. She is the kind of passive heroine, drama happening to her because of the war.

Chapter 4 deals with the shifting of the communist utopia from internationalism towards nationalism. Once the Stalinist era is over after Hruscirov's speech, the internationalist feature of the communist doctrine fades out in favor of the nationalist one. It is true that in some socialist countries, like Yugoslavia, this event happened earlier, but it was due to the cooling of the relationship between Tito and Stalin. Anyway, Tito was the first communist leader to create the

“autonomous path towards socialism” for Yugoslavia. In the other socialist-bloc-countries this has been a rather apprehensive and gradual transition.

Though, the strengthening of the national heroes, their mounting on a podium for mythmaking purposes, meant for the feature film (especially the Romanian one) the starting of super-production making. History was rewritten so it may appear as though class struggle existed since antiquity, then socialism is its mandatory fulfillment, just as current communist heroes are the stately descendants of medieval patriot princes.

Super productions and history awareness led to large a number of adaptations, the national spirit of eastern cinemas being better asserted through these screenings. What matters is that the propaganda becomes more refined. Since the bombastic style and straight address of the socialist realism until the modern love-stories from the eighties, the whole garners improved nuances. The pattern is more elaborated but, at a closer look, the red thin line is still in all the fabrics.

As for the screenings I considered briefly those of fairytales as well, especially concerning Romanian-Soviet coproductions. *“Mother”*, a film by Elisabeta Bostan starring an action-movie vector diva, Lyudmila Gurchenko, playing a goat as a brave, smart and firm mother. Lyudmila Gurchenko deserves more than a short adduction of the Romanian film role.

She debuted in 1956 in *“Carnival nights”* (director Eldar Ryazanov) a comic-satirical musical mocking the stiff bureaucrat party chiefs. The harsh flak, even considering the brief censorship chill-out (it was just after Hrusciiov’s speech), disturbs the higher authorities while spawning an unseen enthusiasm into the audience. The outstanding couplets the diva sings in the movie become popular hits, thus appointing her to sing them at several official celebrations. One year later she is solicited by the NKVD, where she gets an assignment. Her refuse of being an informant will cost her more than ten years of her career, as she is accused of illicit collecting, scarcely making a comeback with the film *“Mother”*. Come forth some milestone films in the world of cinema. In 1979 *“Five Evenings”*, directed by Nikita Mikhalkov, then, the same year, *“Siberiade”* (directed by Andrei Konchalovskiy, starring Nikita Mikhalkov as her partner).

The character of Lyudmila Gurchenko in *“Siberiade”* is a fascinating contrariety. Fragile, nostalgic, distrustful of her womanly charm, while strong and brave enough to face reality, gazing upon it with wit and sadness. She seems amused by the irony that life brought her too late what she has been expecting all her life: him, the character played by Mikhalkov. Now she doesn’t want him anymore, she no longer needs him. She’s expecting a child, maybe his, maybe not. Even though he’s ready to take her, the child included, she still tells him:

“ – No, you are someone I don’t need! I’ll have the child, I don’t need anything else. I don’t need you!”.

He answers in a dramatic patriotic manner:

“ – Only Motherland ever needed me, no one else”. The transcribed line looks hilarious, but the moment still remains dramatic. The way Andrei Konchalovski conducts the scene, Mikhalkov’s best acting, and the character’s adventurous enfant terrible eager idealist features makes it all conceivable. We can’t forget some other patriotic lines thrown in Romanian movies that always sounded fake.

Konchalovski skillfully created models from his characters, fashioning Gurchenko into an unforgettable diva. In this movie she is not a diva because of her outer beauty, it’s not about her being photogenic. She is noteworthy for the built up character one easily relates to, understands and admires, wanting to be a bit like her. Up close one finds her beautiful, special, almond-shaped weeping eyed, her shabby clothes she keeps on mending onto her slender body.

Gurchenko lingers in Romanian public’s sensitive consciousness especially with “*Station for two*” (1983, directed by Eldar Ryazanov). Her character, a waitress in a train station pub, crusty while fragile, with her yearnings, fears and courage, is so alive and true one can’t prevent from laughing and crying along with her. Her conferral is contagious inducing to the viewer the wish of total assimilation. The classical theme: impossible love, built around upsetting twists and moments of great sincerity.

Escaping through love, a recipe attended as well by Romanian directors, even if never managed with such artistry. An intertwining of nostalgia, absolute tenderness and filtered social critique. Then comes the acting, Gurchenko being one of the great divas of the cinema, a figure of impregnable womanhood, above times, political regimes or propaganda.

Chapter 5 describes the beginnings of Romanian cinema. The main directions of this chapter concern the nationalization of the cinema halls, the establishing of the National Centre of Cinematography and the building of the Buftea Cinematographic Studios, along with studying the documents that outlined the purpose and the role of this new art. At first, the general objective was to certify, to consolidate and guarantee the endless continuity of the newly instated communist regime, who was considered the highest organizational form of the society, “the best of all possible worlds”.

In 28th of May 1948, the “*Contemporanul*” magazine published the objectives of the “cultural revolution”. The following issues were addressed:

1. The circulation of the doctrines of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin and their appliance to the understanding of all local and foreign phenomena from any field;
2. The fight against imperialist ideologies;
3. The revealing and combat against every form or remain of reactionary bourgeoisie
4. The dissemination of the successes of socialism development in the Soviet Union, the translation and publication of soviet materials and their local applicability;

5. The review of historic events, the representative works and figures from a Marxist-Leninist perspective.

Even more, Trotsky's 1924 definition of the „new man” becomes a creative criteria and also a censorship one. The true communist hero is not governed by emotions, but by higher purposes, the making of history, he doesn't have passions or weaknesses, only a conscience and altruist ideals. Maybe this is the reason why love will hardly find its place in the Romanian socialist films and the negative characters were nearly always the most complex ones.

In this early phase we can include the romance between Romanian cinema and Lica Gheorghiu, the daughter of the Romanian president Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej. The Romanian Film Industry gossiped about her, wooed her and used her, and then in the 70's, she wasn't even mentioned in the Dictionary of Romanian Film Actors. Spoiled and manipulative, Lica forced the heads of the studios to cast her the lead roles in the films they were producing. While lacking aptitude whatsoever, many times she ended up on film credits, film festival delegations and gave interviews in which she talked about the establishing of the new man. Short, rather chubby, with a common figure and a high pitch voice that was very disturbing and even more, completely lacking any acting talent she had only one merit: she contributed to the speedy acquisition of technical equipment for endowing the filming and editing studios. Even considering this temporarily benefit, this episode can be considered a jinx on the Romanian movie history, a bad start: it meant the acknowledgment and establishment of false values.

Chapter 6 is entitled The establishment of the authentic cinematographic values and the refinement of propaganda task of rewriting history. In 1957, Victor Iliu makes the movie „*La moara cu noroc*” and produces the first legitimate feminine star, Ioana Bulcă. With powerful close-ups, she is the receiver and the enhancer of the tensions, with shades varying from the most luminous to the gloomiest. Because of her the love triangle exists, and also because of her the transformation, the change of the characters seems true, genuine. Characterized by Liviu Ciulei as “*our cinematographers' highest instance, our first aesthetic conscience*”, Victor Iliu creates the first substantial film of the Romanian post-war cinema. You can't perceive any enforcements, the heroes don't talk in slogans, there is no propaganda. If there is any dogmatic intention, then it is implicit, the film is an appeal against greed.

Ioana Bulcă remains in the history of Romanian Cinema also because of her character, Lady Stanca from “*Mihai Viteazu*” (the third most watched Romanian film ever). She is the wife of the ruler, his equal, she confronts, demands and commands, she has rights. The scene where she confronts her husband regarding her son's participation in the battle reminds us of the duel with Lică, from “*La Moara cu Noroc*”. Mihai is not a humane hero, he is a symbol, an empty mask, the emblem of the “national epic”, and similarly, Lady Stanca stands for all mothers fighting for their sons. What can this mean in terms of propaganda? That out national heroes

took care of the country, and the history encumbered them so much that it turned them into tin soldiers, totally dehumanized, without desires, without sexuality or appetite, and the women of our country were only mothers, capable of sacrificing themselves, to endure torment and pain, and that never, even for a second surrendered to jealousy or envy and who were never aware of their womanhood.

Unlike Russian, Czech, Yugoslav or Polish films, in Romanian cinema, the positive female characters are lacking their sexual dimension. Even when they are beautiful, when the camera paints them flattering portraits, they don't seem to be aware of their charm or to have any desires. The lack of human goals, of sexual desire constitutes a defining lack.

Irina Petrescu, introduced by Ciulei in „*Valurile Dunării*” and then confirmed by Lucian Pintilie, becomes one of the best and most demanded actresses of the sixth decade. She embodies the model of the young socialist woman, either a worker or an intellectual (which was the case most of the time), lacking any sexual interest, usually immune to masculine charms, a hermit, with a certain coldness of her calm and with a straight glance that is hard to forget. Irina Petrescu was without knowing a mean of propaganda, she constructed models and gave them her face. Even if her hieratic silhouette was far away from the socialist reality, and her grace and discretion were even furthest, Irina Petrescu was their ideal model.

In studying the technique of propaganda, we can not overlook Titus Popovici, novelist and later a prolific scriptwriter, a favorite of the system. Articulate and talented, using glimpses of reality he falsifies the recent history and delivers their counterfeit versions to the audiences. He is one of the leading tools of Eastern propaganda, because he replaces the slogans and the stereotypes with cues that are substantial and even charismatic. A whole generation was manipulated by his mystifying telling of the history. Nicolae Manolescu accused him of creating “*a forged birth certificate*”.

Chapter 7 – Romanian cinema – a “hot” topic for the Communist Party’s management – censorship mechanisms

The movie „*Reconstruction*” (directed by Lucian Pintilie) was shot in 1968, but his screening was postponed for censorship reasons until January 1970. The rebel spirit of the director made the politicians cautious and stirred concern at the higher level, concern that was materialized in a meeting of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party that was held on February the 10th, 1970. The ministers, the propaganda leaders, Ceaușescu himself, they all blame the lack of vision, misdemeanor towards socialism, ill will. Mihai Gere a member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, vice-president of the State Council, member of CPEX concludes: „*Cinema is a branch of labor that needs to be under control at all times*”. They try to assume a conscious focus on the propaganda concerning the choice of

cinematic subjects and areas of interest and at the same time they issue newer, more strict directives of censorship. As a matter of fact, this meeting constitutes and prepares the thesis from July 1971, and its importance gets way beyond the fate of the best Romanian movie, „*Reconstruction*”. They decided the film should be send to a film festival abroad to compensate its withdrawal from the Romanian screen, which was in fact a great achievement for Pintilie and for the Romanian cinema, because it was awarded the prize of *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs* Section at Cannes Film Festival.