

Introduction: “Of All the Arts, Cinema is the Most Important for Us.” Cinema Behind the Iron Curtain

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Abstract: This argument explores the pivotal role of cinema in shaping and reflecting the sociopolitical landscape of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Under Stalin, Soviet cinema evolved into a state-controlled instrument of socialist realism, influencing cultural production throughout the Eastern Bloc. While some countries with established cinematic traditions adapted to or resisted the Soviet model, others adopted it wholesale, leading to varying degrees of creative expression and control. Through interdisciplinary contributions, the latest issue of HCE highlights the duality of cinema as both a tool for ideological control and a medium for dissent and creative resistance, revealing the complex interplay between art and politics in communist societies.

Keywords: revolutionary cinema, Stalinist model, socialist realism, ideological control, dissent

In their pursuit of creating a new society to replace the old order, Communists regarded cinema as the ideal medium for communicating their political ideals. After gaining power in Russia, the Bolsheviks utilised cinema as the most effective tool to convey their revolutionary message to a largely illiterate population, which spoke over a hundred different languages and came from diverse cultural backgrounds (Taylor 1979, 46–47). Cinema, as a predominantly visual, dynamic, and modern form of expression, was inherently revolutionary. This context underscores Lenin’s famous quote: “Of all the arts, cinema is the most important for us.” Politics supplanted the market, and films

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were tailored to align with the authorities' preferences, who even dictated their aesthetic direction. While the first generation of Soviet filmmakers sought to innovate cinematic art, political leaders prioritised ensuring the ideological accessibility of films for the masses. Consequently, the experimental films of the 1920s, which aimed to establish a distinctive Soviet cinema, were dismissed by Boris Shumyatsky, the head of Stalinist cinema from 1930 to 1938, for their perceived lack of clarity to the public—a characteristic that made them ideologically suspect (Taylor 1983, 451). Under Stalin, “revolutionary cinema” became entirely state-controlled and centralised, meticulously supervised by the political hierarchy, with aesthetic guidelines conforming to socialist realism. Control mechanisms ranged from filmmakers' self-censorship to preserve their careers to direct intervention from Stalin himself (Jitea 2021, 26).

After World War II, the USSR exported its model of revolutionary cinema to its satellite states. While the implementation of this model varied depending on the local conditions, all these film industries remained state monopolies focused on disseminating the propaganda of the new communist regimes. Simultaneously, socialist cinemas in these countries were influenced by Western genres such as historical epics, crime films, comedies, and even westerns. As Daniela Berghahn pointed out in her case study of East German cinema, Stalinist cinema shared a fascination with Hollywood akin to Nazi cinema. Both systems adopted elements from Hollywood, including a vertical structure, centralised management, and the integration of production, distribution, and broadcasting under a unified framework (Berghahn 2005, 22).

Not all communist states in Eastern Europe followed the same trajectory. The degree of ideological control exerted by local communist parties and the pre-existence of national film industries played crucial roles. In Central Europe, where cinema had a robust tradition, the Soviet model had to be adapted and modified. Conversely, the Balkan states—where cinema was underdeveloped during the interwar period—adopted the Stalinist model without significant resistance. Albania, for instance, had no cinema at all, and Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia had only rudimentary film industries. In these countries, the Stalinist model persisted longer. In contrast, nations with prewar cinematic traditions like Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary were able to distance themselves from Soviet influence more rapidly. Bulgaria and Romania only shifted away from the Stalinist model later, while in Albania, the model remained intact indefinitely (Stoil 1982, 55).

The forms of cinematic expression under communist regimes were diverse. The construction of film industries extended beyond feature films to include animated films, documentaries, utilitarian productions, and experimental works at the intersection of cinema and other visual arts. The political discourse in communist cinemas was not linear. Alongside conformist filmmakers who adhered to ideological directives, several directors stood out for their dissent,

whether subtle or overt. Filmmakers like Milos Forman and Věra Chytilová (Czechoslovakia), Miklós Jancsó and István Szabó (Hungary), Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Zanussi (Poland), Lucian Pintilie and Mircea Daneliuc (Romania), and Dušan Makavejev and Želimir Žilnik (Yugoslavia) used their art to challenge boundaries. They often employed allegory, satire, and innovative techniques to critique the regimes, navigating strict censorship laws. Many faced bans, censorship, or exile for their work.

The volume is structured to explore the duality of deeply politicised cinemas and alternative discourses that transcended dominant ideological frameworks. Contributions from historians, anthropologists, filmmakers, film critics, visual artists, cultural journalists, and curators address the complexities of cinema in communist societies.

The first section examines the role of the film industry during the Cold War. The governments behind the Iron Curtain used films to promote socialist values, highlight their regimes' successes, and counter Western influences. Films often carried political messages aligned with Soviet interests and served as instruments to strengthen alliances with other socialist states and the Global South. Alongside internal propaganda, Eastern European countries engaged in cultural exchanges, leveraging cinema to solidify political and economic ties with non-aligned and developing nations.

Marta Paszek's article, "*Show Trials in Poland during the Stalinist Period in Film*", explores the use of film as a propaganda tool in Stalinist Poland, focusing on show trials in the 1940s and 1950s. These trials, modelled on Soviet practices, were staged to humiliate defendants, intimidate the public, and legitimise the communist regime. Audiovisual materials, such as newsreels, manipulated reality through selective editing, portraying defendants as "enemies of the people" while glorifying state authority. These trials targeted political opponents, resistance members, clergy, and others, crafting narratives that aligned with Party ideology. The study underscores the widespread use of similar propaganda techniques across Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe.

Adrian Epure's article analyses Romanian Cold War spy films (1948–1965) as tools blending propaganda with entertainment to emphasise communist values. These films depict Western "imperialist" spies whose actions are thwarted by Romanian heroes, highlighting national and ideological superiority. Initially, intelligence officers were marginal characters, but their prominence grew, reflecting shifting narratives. These films bolstered patriotism, projected soft power, and shaped public perceptions. While they failed to create iconic spy characters akin to Western counterparts, the genre contributed to Romania's cultural diplomacy and Cold War storytelling.

Bogdan Jitea's article examines the evolution of Romanian cinema under Nicolae Ceaușescu, focusing on its trajectory from liberalisation in the 1960s to growing ideological control in the 1970s. The censorship of Lucian Pintilie's

Reconstituirea / *The Reenactment* exemplifies this trend. The “July Theses” of 1971 signalled a return to socialist realism with nationalist overtones, prioritising politically aligned films over artistic experimentation. This shift, contrasting with the relative openness of other Eastern Bloc cinemas, led to increased isolation and stagnation in Romanian cinema, disconnecting it from international trends and markets.

Iulia Popovici’s contribution, “*Exporting Culture in the Global South—Cinema as Economic Diplomacy*”, reveals how socialist Romania used cinema as a strategy for economic diplomacy in the 1980s amidst economic austerity and a debt crisis. Shifting from ideological propaganda, Romania prioritised trade relations with the Global South. Cultural agreements, training programmes, and co-productions—such as the Moroccan-Romanian film *The Arms of Aphrodite*—highlighted this effort. However, inefficiencies and limited resources often hampered success, yielding mixed outcomes.

The second section delves into alternative forms of artistic expression in socialist cinema, often emerging in response to state control and censorship. These films challenged dominant narratives through personal stories, historical reimagining, and experimental techniques while superficially adhering to the state’s expectation of promoting socialist values.

Andrei Rus’s article, “*The Avant-garde and Experimental Film in Socialist Romania*”, explores experimental and avant-garde cinema created on the margins of the state-controlled industry. Produced by amateurs, students, and visual artists with minimal institutional support, these films often relied on improvised methods and abstract themes, avoiding direct political critique. Influenced by global trends, they challenged conventions through innovative aesthetics. Notable contributors included the kinema ikon group and artists like Ion Grigorescu and Constantin Flondor. These works, though overlooked at the time, now reveal a vibrant facet of Romanian cultural production under socialism.

Alexandra Bardan’s study investigates the impact of video home systems (VHS) in 1980s socialist Romania. Using the concept of “paracinema,” it examines the tension between state-sanctioned film repertoires and the alternative offerings of the black market, which introduced Western films to Romanian audiences. The VHS phenomenon reshaped film consumption, bridged cultural gaps, and gradually challenged state control over cinema culture during late socialism.

The third section features essays intertwining personal perspectives with scientific rigor.

Susanne Altmann’s essay, “*Muratova, Chytilová Meeting Miss Butterfly and Franziska Linkerhand: Female Directors and Female Protagonists Subverting Socialist Housing Schemes*”, examines how socialist-era films by Věra Chytilová and Kira Muratova critiqued urban planning and collectivist ideologies through subversive female protagonists. Films like *Daisies* and *Miss Butterfly* used experimental aesthetics and satire to highlight the tension between individuality and

socialist conformity, emphasising the failures of utopian ideals and the human cost of enforced uniformity.

Delia Bran's article analyses how Romanian socialist cinema utilised cultural heritage. Authentic artifacts, architectural landmarks, and historical props were integrated into films to glorify socialist ideologies while rewriting art history. However, preservation often suffered due to ideological priorities and poor conservation efforts. The study highlights the tensions between exploiting heritage for propaganda and ensuring its preservation.

Finally, Dani Sărăcuț and Ion Indolean's article, "*Allegory as a Form of Criticism in the Cinematography During the Ceaușescu Regime*", explores how Romanian filmmakers like Dan Pița, Alexandru Tatos, and Copel Moscu used allegory to critique socio-political oppression during the 1980s. Films such as *Va veni o zi / A Day Will Come* (1985), *Concurs / Contest* (1982), and *Secretul armiei... secrete! / The Secret of the Secret Weapon* (1989) addressed themes of repression, societal control, and economic hardship while navigating censorship. The authors position these works as significant examples of cultural resistance and creative expression under repressive regimes.

Conclusion

This issue of the HCE journal provides a multidisciplinary perspective on how cinematic art shaped and was shaped by communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Beyond its political instrumentalisation, socialist cinema also addressed the population's genuine needs for cultural enrichment, escapism, and entertainment. The contributions in this volume highlight the interplay between public and private spheres, which often blurred under communist systems.

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