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Cultural Opposition and Filmmaking in Communist East Central Europe: Lessons from Poland and the Former Yugoslavia

Focusing on the cases of the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL) and the former Yugoslavia, this chapter examines leading representatives of two different cinematic movements in East Central Europe, the Yugoslav Black Wave and the Cinema of Moral Anxiety in Poland, which expressed opposition to the party state or contested specific ideological constraints imposed on the cinema by communist authorities. The films discussed in the chapter include documentaries and feature movies, works that either deliberately attacked communist authoritarianism or stopped short of questioning socialism, but fell victim to censorship due to their critical portrayals of society and politics.

The chapter also analyses the relationship between the party state and filmmakers. Although state-owned and centrally controlled, socialist cinema was not a mere extension of party ideology, propaganda, and official historiography. Following the collapse of Stalinism and the brief reign of Socialist Realism, the treatment of filmmakers by the party stemmed from the regimes' policies toward the artistic intelligentsia and oscillated between rigid dictates, mutual accommodations, and negotiated autonomies. De-Stalinization and various "thaws" and "normalizations" led to shifts in attitudes on both sides, but did not set unitary trends. On the one hand, the Polish October of 1956 and liberalization in Czechoslovakia that culminated in the Prague Spring contributed to the phenomena of the Polish School and the Czechoslovak New Wave, two flagships of auteur cinema which firmly established Polish and Czechoslovak filmmakers on the cinematic map of the world.¹ On the other, the immediate period after the construction of the Berlin Wall saw an outburst of artistic creativity among East German filmmakers which was crushed by the notorious eleventh plenary session of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party in Germany in December 1965.²

Titoist Yugoslavia, which parted with the Soviet Union in 1948, followed a different trajectory. The country's opening to the West in the 1950s and 1960s

1 On the Polish School see Coates, *The Red and the White*. On the Czechoslovak New Wave see Hames, *The Czechoslovak New Wave*.

2 On the collective ban of twelve feature films and its impact on culture in the GDR see Kötzing and Schenk, *Verbotene Utopie*.

benefited its film industry, which participated in numerous co-productions with West European filmmakers and quickly became a substantial source of hard currency. Yet Tito's relatively liberal regime applied comparatively harsh censorship on its cinema, which was expected to promote the patriotic and legitimizing myth of "Brotherhood and Unity," the primary source of Yugoslav (i.e. pan-ethnic) socialist identity. By the mid-1960s, a group of young *auteurs*, commonly referred to as members of the Black Wave, began adopting more critical stances towards Titoism. They broke with propagandist and mainstream depictions of World War II and focused their lens on outcasts and eccentrics. Using a mixture of avant-garde cinematography, radical aesthetics, and dark humor, they exposed cracks in the façade of Titoism, attacked the cult of personality, and offered left-wing critiques of the party state.³ The Yugoslav government's crackdown on the Black Wave intensified in the late 1960s and culminated in the early 1970s with the purge and emigration of several filmmakers.

Finally, the chapter pays close attention to contemporary scholarship, and it reflects on new findings and methodological approaches. Recent scholarship on the institutional history of national film industries in the Soviet bloc and former Yugoslavia also highlights the role of economic factors and market mechanisms. Inasmuch as political shifts and economic and global aesthetic trends determined the fate of film under communism, so did the gradual erosion of institutional censorship and its replacement by what Miklós Haraszti has defined as "the velvet prison," in which the state displayed a substantial permissiveness and even co-opted dissent.⁴ In this respect, the contributors to this chapter, Nevena Daković and Dominic Leppla, discard the mythical figure of a primitive film censor.

The first case study deals with a cinema of former Yugoslavia and focuses on Yugoslav director Lazar Stojanović (1944–2017), associated with the Black Wave and mostly known for his film *Plastični Isus* (Plastic Jesus, 1971), which earned him a three-year prison sentence. The movie was banned until 1990. Experimental and iconoclastic, it simultaneously targeted the Titoist myth of "Brotherhood and Unity" and the cult of Marshal Josip Broz Tito from countercultural, left-wing positions characteristic of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this respect, Stojanović's first feature can be coupled with Dušan Makavejev's *W.R. – Misterije organizma* (W.R.: Mysteries of the organism, 1971), which bore a similar message and was expressive of a similar aesthetics. Makavejev's film also reflected the state offensive against Yugoslav *auteurs*, and it was banned shortly after its release. Less known than his older

3 The very term Black Wave was coined by party journalists who attacked young filmmakers for their pessimistic outlook for socialist Yugoslavia. The leading figures of the Yugoslav Black Wave included Dušan Makavejev, Aleksandar "Saša" Petrović, Želimir Želnik, and Živojin Pavlović. See Goulding, *Liberated Cinema*, and Levi, *Disintegration in Frames*.

4 Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison*.

contemporary, Stojanović was a dissident, anti-communist activist and opponent of the ethnocentric nationalism that swept Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The COURAGE Registry contains an exhaustive description of Stojanović's personal collection, which consists of audio-visual materials, newspaper articles, scripts, the director's prison file, and the 2016 restored version of *Plastic Jesus*. Stojanović gave two long interviews to COURAGE researchers in 2016, months before his death in 2017.⁵

In her contribution to this chapter, Nevena Daković eloquently analyses the radical aesthetics and socio-political message of Stojanović's masterpiece and provides the historical contextualization necessary for an understanding of the plot of the movie and the circumstances of the director's persecution and its impact on Yugoslav cinema. She argues that the history of Yugoslav cinema can be divided into "the two periods before and after *Plastic Jesus* (Daković)." She sees the affair as the culmination of the party state's offensive against the Black Wave, which sealed the end of this artistic formation. Stojanović's arrest was accompanied by the marginalization and emigration of Yugoslavia's leading filmmakers and it was part of a broader wave of repression against the Serbian liberal intelligentsia and 1968 rebels.

Dominic Leppla's essay focuses on Polish documentary and feature film director Krzysztof Kieślowski (1941–1996), one of the most influential figures of European cinema. Though he was not as overtly political as Stojanović, Kieślowski fought numerous battles with film censorship, and he exposed authoritarian aspects of the Polish People's Republic and made self-censorship the central motive of his beloved masterpiece *Amator* (Camera buff, 1979), a tale of a non-professional documentary filmmaker. Associated with the Cinema of Moral Anxiety, which biting criticized a society in crisis and corruption in Gierek's Poland, Kieślowski was also a moralist.⁶ The 1984 assessment of Kieślowski by the Department of Culture of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party provided a mixture of condemnation and respect. The party cultural apparatchiks saw the director as the ring leader of oppositional documentary filmmakers and a representative of a different worldview, but they also praised his talent and the fact that he confronted the party line openly and accepted arguments of the other side.⁷ In 1983, when the Polish government purged the leadership of the Association of Polish Filmmakers, removing several opposition figures (for instance Andrzej Wajda), Kieślowski was spared and remained in the governing body of the association.

5 COURAGE Registry, s.v. "Lazar Stojanović Collection", by Sanja Radović, 2018. Accessed April 15, 2018.

6 Other leading members of the Cinema of Moral Anxiety included Agnieszka Holland, Krzysztof Zanussi, Janusz Kijowski, Feliks Falk, and veteran filmmaker Andrzej Wajda. See Dabert, *Kino moralnego niepokoju*.

7 Archiwum Akt Nowych, KC PZPR, Wydział Kultury, LVI-1712, fol.20.

In his insightful contribution to the chapter, Leppla reminds us of a fact that often escapes the attention of historians and film scholars working on the cinema and culture of the Polish People's Republic, namely that documentaries and shorts were often more thoroughly censored and banned than feature films. A quick look at lists of films banned under Martial Law confirms this observation.⁸ This is not paradoxical, since the production of feature films demanded considerably more funding than documentaries and shorts. Depending on political circumstances, a banned film could always be shelved for later release, which could lead to substantial revenues. Cheaply produced documentaries aimed to catch the spirit of socio-political momentum and the mores of society and institutions. At the same time, the state-owned TV served as a producer and distributor of these films.

Kieślowski's gradual transition from documentary filmmaking to feature films partly stemmed from his pitched battles with the censors who blocked his documentaries. Furthermore, as Leppla shows, Kieślowski's style evolved from the realistic and para-documentary takes that dominated his early feature films to movies that contained metaphysical and universal themes. This move paved the way to the final stage of Kieślowski's career, which begins with the TV series *Dekalog*, which was less political than his earlier oeuvre, but not devoid of episodes reminiscent of earlier, socially engaged themes.⁹ The change facilitated his delayed international recognition in the late 1980s and 1990s.

To conclude, the chapter signals the necessity for a more nuanced approach to film censorship and filmmakers' reactions to the policing of cinema by the party states in East Central Europe. Left-wing critic and innovator Stojanović suffered a much harsher fate in seemingly liberal Titoist Yugoslavia than anti-authoritarian Kieślowski in Gierek's and then Jaruzelski's Poland. In this respect, the Yugoslav government showed stronger determination to crush dissenting views, whereas the Polish authorities proved more flexible and opportunistic, often permitting the development of potentially subversive forms of expression, as the Polish documentaries of the 1970s or the Cinema of Moral Anxiety show. But both outright repression and facilitation of safety vents had negative and, at best, mixed results. While Stojanović's film career derailed before it really began, Kieślowski had to wait for late international recognition until the endgame of the communist system.

8 AAN, Naczelny Zarząd Kinematografii, Departament Programowy, fol. 5/74, Zestawienia filmów niedopuszczonych do rozpowszechniania na mocy dekretu o stanie wojennym, 1981–1987.

9 *Dekalog* did contain political and social references to the situation in Poland in the late 1980s. One of its episodes was expanded into a full-length feature, *Krótki film o zabijaniu* (A short movie about killing, 1988). The movie reflected Kieślowski's opposition to death penalty and significantly influenced the nationwide debate about capital punishment, which was suspended in 1988 and abolished in 1998.

Courage and Punishment: Plastic Jesus (1971)

The new reading of the story of the film *Plastični Isus* (Plastic Jesus, 1971) and its story of great courage, after almost half a century, raises many questions and dilemmas. The “case of the film” became the defining moment of the life of its director, Lazar Stojanović, a dissident, remarkable figure of political opposition, ferocious social critic, and rebel. It is also the paradigmatic case of censorship and political oppression of the era. Therefore, it is difficult to offer new interpretative perspectives while meticulously keeping the two dimensions, cinematic and socio-political, separate. However, it is possible to compare the reception of the film in different times and social contexts. The first context is the period of 1968–1973, when the film was made and recognized as a controversial, provocative example of a strong “anarchic, anarcho-liberal and anti-communist” discourse. The second is the contemporary era, when it meets with different expectations and diverse critical readings. In his book about the Yugoslav Black Wave, which was conceived as an attempt to write the history of ex-Yugoslavia through a parallel history of its cinema, Bogdan Tirnanić rejects any call for an aesthetic re-evaluation of the film.¹⁰ Furthermore, he stresses that Plastic Jesus should not be read as a work of art *per se* but only as the document of the time.¹¹ The term “document of time,” in my assessment, has two meanings: the film is a document of time due to interpolated archival and documentary footage; yet, due to the reactions of society, party officials, and the state apparatus it provoked, it became testimony to the brutality of the regime and the intensity of the repression of the freedom of expression and the suppressive measured suffered by artists, especially filmmakers, in Yugoslavia in the 1970s, under the firm rule of Josip Broz Tito.

Research on the ways in which the film survived the challenges brought by the passage of time is conceptualized along the two axes of art history and political history. First, I will reassert the place of the film in the history of world film through its contextual placement within European cinematic Modernism and the Yugoslav Black Wave. Second, I will analyse the political and social turbulence it caused, i.e. its traces and influences, which testify to the revolutionary spirit of 1968 and the downside of democratic Titoism or Yugoslav socialism.

10 The title of the chapter about Lazar Stojanović and his film paraphrases Rebecca West’s famous travelogue *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon* (1941), alluding to perennial Serbian myths and rituals (the ritual sacrifice of the black lamb and the mythomoteur of Kosovo). According to the latter, the Prophet Elijah turns into the grey falcon and flies over from the holy city of Jerusalem to Kosovo Polje on the eve of the 1389 battle to ask Emperor Lazar whether he would choose an earthly or heavenly kingdom (Daković, “Documentaries from Post-Yugoslavia,” 18). Playing with words, Tirnanić labels Stojanović a black sheep; stigmatized and ostracised; and as the one who showed exceptional courage by choosing moral triumph at the price of a prison sentence, the banning of his film, and his nearly derailed career as a filmmaker.

11 Tirnanić, *Crni talas*, 144–45.

Plastic Jesus as film-text

Made as a thesis work at the Academy of Theatre, Cinema, Radio, and Television (in 1974 renamed the Faculty of Dramatic Arts), *Plastic Jesus* is an unsurprising yet curious mixture that marks a radical break from and goes against mainstream Yugoslav cinema. In terms of production, it is a modest school work, but it demonstrated the auteur's courage, revolutionary ideas, fiction-fiction structure and style, which marked the peak of the cinema of resistance and social criticism of the time. These two facets, production and textual, make the narrative of critical ideas coming from the left-wing spectrum of political opposition unconventional. Set in Belgrade at the time of the student protests of 1968, the movie follows the strayed and promiscuous filmmaker (Tomislav Gotovac), his romantic involvements and sexual affairs, and his obsessive and compulsive collecting of various films. The mixture of films shot by the protagonist and archival footage allows *Plastic Jesus* to "be viewed as the very attempt to make this film that Gotovac has in his head, as well as the result."¹²

The interlacing of fiction and reality follows the best tradition of the Black Wave. The characters have the same names as the actors (Tom, Vukica); the events or facts of real life, for instance the wedding of Ljubiša Ristić (the actor in the film) or Gotovac as a Croat in Belgrade, are cleverly used in the narrative.¹³ The additional irony stems from the fact that Ljubiša Ristić plays a seedy character who hypocritically manages to keep up middle class appearances and lead a comfortable life, very much as in real life his family name and father, a high-ranking general in the Yugoslav Army, kept him above all suspicion and most of the persecutions. The destiny of honest, naïve, and socially marginalised Gotovac who suffers an array of tribulations and eventually is killed, on the other hand, confirms and mimics Ristić's actual personal position as an unprotected "other" and alternative filmmaker, performance, conceptual artist, and social contester from Zagreb living and studying in Belgrade.¹⁴ The transgressive fiction-fiction interplay points to a system of allusions and citations which further probes the political and ideological foundations of the society.

The element "responsible both for the high quality of the film and for the ill fate of Lazar" is the specific style of Serbian cutting.¹⁵ In his eponymous book, Mihajlo P. Ilić explains Serbian cutting as a phase of editing that establishes associative, symbolic meanings; it supplies the context by (inter)cutting shots from various sources. As a departure from mainstream narrative norms,

12 DeCuir, *Yugoslav Black Wave*, 243.

13 The family names of the characters, Đilas and Pribičević, are also the real names of the controversial politicians and dissidents.

14 Tirnanić, *Crni talas*, 146.

15 Ilić, *Serbian Cutting*, 270.

the specific editing style, which creates a critical assault on politics, history, and society, is comparable to Russian Formalist notions of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization, making strange) and *zatrudnenie* (making difficult) and their effects in language and literature. In a broader sense, it refers to all manipulations of various film material, while the intercut, hybrid material functions on all levels of the “technology of representation and (...) narrative structure.”¹⁶ The diversely-acquired shots evolve into a distorted and expanded film story, highlighting original meanings. The film becomes a bizarre and effective supra-narrative which smoothly accommodates all sorts of interactions between text and context, signs and messages which produce social and institutional significance and difference.¹⁷ Likewise, the associative montage as practised by Stojanović makes his style similar to “one of Makavejev and, to a certain degree of Žilnik.” The film text reveals the strong influence of “the amateurism of the GEF, the work of Fluxus, and, especially, the films of Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Bruce Conner, and other names of the American film avantgarde of the 1960s.”¹⁸

The courageous invocation of the taboos of the era, from the political to the sexual, is, at a more specific level, underpinned by Eisenstein’s montage of attraction and Dziga Vertov’s constructivism. On one side is the simple, daring choice of historically provocative or even censored archive material. Stojanović uses Nazi films and movies on Hitler and concentration camps,¹⁹ *Hrvatski Slikopis*, the newsreels of the Ustashe quisling state, and documentaries about the Chetniks. On the other are the daring cuts which relate the elements of historical and political binarisms, producing unconventional, critical meanings that break all social rules and violate censorial guidelines. The shots of the Partisans (with voice-over in English) are followed by the images of the Nazi blitzkrieg and the cheering crowds in the cities²⁰ (with inserted pseudo-documentary shots of Gotovac and his friends and shots from the films directed by Gotovac). The images of the Nazi edifices are interpolated in the camera takes of the motorcycle drive through Belgrade, and the intercut cityscapes comparatively imply the uncanny resemblance between the totalitarian regimes, Nazism and Communism.

One of the two scenes that made the film “censored without censorship” in fact combines the archival shots of the Chetniks and home footage of one of the actors. “Stojanović cuts to archival home footage of the wedding party of Ljubiša Ristić (...) and Višnja Poštic. Both of whose fathers happened to be

16 Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 5.

17 Daković, “Invisible and Visible Theory,” 77.

18 Tirnanić, *Crni talas*, 145.

19 Tomislav Gotovac shooting the corpses of the concentration camp prisoners resembles Ralph Feinnes shooting, from the balcony, the prisoners building the barracks of the concentration camp in the film *Schindler’s List* (Spielberg, 1993).

20 The same warm welcome given to the Nazis in Zagreb and Maribor can be seen in Emir Kusturica’s *Underground* (1995).

army generals and who were there on attendance at the party along with other government officials (...)," writes DeCuir. "As a result of the associative montage the idea was produced that these officials could be equated with Chetniks—or even worse *were* Chetniks."²¹ Many years later, Stojanović recalled that after he had been given back the copy of the film, he realised that the scene had been removed in a very professional way. The discovery gave him hope that one day the censored shots, replaced by the caption "this scene went missing while the film was kept by the State," would be found carefully preserved in some film box. The missing shots were restored only in 2016, when the brand-new copy was made for the special screenings in MOMA.

The second problematic and "subversive" scene begins as Tom and his girlfriend are standing at the window watching the student protests, and it continues with documentary shots of Josip Broz Tito preparing and delivering his famous speech that ended the demonstrations.²² In sharp contrast to the habitual image of the vital, immortal leader and the lifetime president of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Tito is depicted as a confused old man (he was 76 years old at the time), unsure and hesitant about what to do.

The distinctive features of Stojanović's work, such as the divorce of sound from image (which critically deconstructs the original footage) and the dissolution of classical narrative, are trademarks of both the Yugoslav Black Wave and European cinematic Modernism, the latter defined in the exhaustive work by András Bálint Kovács. Kovács's analysis includes the films of Dušan Makavejev, which are found in the same intersection with Black Wave. Thus, the oeuvre of Lazar Stojanović, which follows the same style as Makavejev and meets the criteria set by Kovács, is the prime example of cinematic (and political) Modernism.²³ Furthermore, as a mean of direct political action, it proleptically fits with the principles of counter cinema. The elements, including narrative intransitivity, estrangement, foregrounding, multiple diegesis, aperture, unpleasure, and reality achieved by renouncing and deconstructing fiction as the artifice, deception, and illusion (these are the elements listed by Peter Wollen in "Godard and Counter Cinema" after his "close reading" of the film *Le vent d'est* (Wind from the East; Group Dziga Vertov, 1970), are already visibly present in the film *Plastic Jesus*. The poster of the analysed God-

21 DeCuir, *Yugoslav Black Wave*, 248.

22 In his speech, Tito declared that the students were right; that the protests in Belgrade were an autonomous thing and not simply an echo of the demonstrations in other European cities. He blamed the party leadership and praised the Yugoslav youth, which he characterized as politically conscious, awake, and responsible. Tito's ambiguous and manipulative speech was (mis)understood as a promise to fulfil the students' demands. The protests ended on the same evening, i.e. June 9, 1968. See Miller, *The Nonconformists*, 158–59.

23 For Bálint Kovács, the notion of political Modernism derives from Peter Wollen's concept of avant-garde as politically radical narrative cinema. "In art history, all distinctions (if any) between modernism and avant-garde emphasize that the latter is an extreme, radical form of the former." See Kovács, *Screening Modernism*, 30.

ard-Gorin masterpiece, which hangs on the wall of the apartment in Stojanović's film, represents elegant homage by the Yugoslav filmmaker to his colleagues.²⁴ The innovative narrative form and reinvented film language subvert and resignify the classical and traditional meanings and make the film text produce different and opposite ones. Revolutionary political ideas are recognized as an amalgamation of "critical attitude, anarchism, theories of the far left, and the ideology of the flower children and the sexual revolution" imbued with the 1968 energy and will for change.²⁵

Punishment without Crime

The intricate and intense reactions of the government, state, and party turned into major retaliations against the Black Wave, 1968 protesters, and political opposition.²⁶ Instead of being granted permission for theatrical release, *Plastic Jesus* was met with a long list of mandatory edits and changes. These demands aimed to blunt the edge of the political criticism of the socialist state and Tito. In 1973, the film was finally banned and officially "put in the bunker," but not before being used as evidence in the trial of Stojanović and in the indictment against him for the working for the enemy and producing anti-state propaganda.

Since the film was also Stojanović's graduation work, the affair shattered the Faculty of Dramatic Arts. The whole production, from the approved scenario to the rough cut,²⁷ and the students and professors involved in its production were carefully investigated. The process ended with the demise of Saša Petrović, who was accused of political and pedagogical negligence, while Živojin Pavlović was relegated to an administrative position, more as an author who belonged to the Black Wave than as a professor related to the case. The case of *Plastic Jesus* became a threatening example of the power of state repression against "liberated cinema" (Goulding). The authors of the Black Wave, Petrović, Makavejev, and Žilnik, left the country. They continued to work abroad and received prizes at the leading world festivals. Yugoslav cinema returned to the approved routine.

24 Godar's and Gorin's group *Dziga Vertov* used the theories of *kino oko* and *kino pesnica*.

25 Tirnanić, *Crni talas*, 145. Modernism defines the reinvented language through the thesis of *Nouvelle Roman* adapted for cinema. We do not need the films about revolution, but we have to make films in a revolutionary way. In linguistic terms, as Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni argued in their famous editorial "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" in *Cahiers du cinéma*, the most important films make the revolution not only on the level of the signified but more importantly on the level of signifiers.

26 The core of the political opposition and criticsers were Serbian liberals: Marko Nikezić, Latica Perović, Mirko Tepavac, Koča Popović, and leaders of Croatian Maspok: Savka Dabčević-Kučar, Miko Tripalo, Pero Pirker, and Dražen Budiša.

27 According to the official report, Stojanović showed the rough cut of the film to professors and committees of the FDA (Tirnanić, *Crni talas*, 147).

The look back at *Plastic Jesus* highlights film's threefold (aesthetical, political, and ethical) aspects and resonance in the present context. The film does not seem as ground-breaking today as it did in 1971, but it has acquired different and broader significance. The documentary and archival materials it used have lost their revelatory and political edge. In Serbia, the history of the Chetniks was glorified in the primetime TV series *Ravna Gora* (Bajić, 2013–2014). During the nationalist turmoil of the 1990s, Ante Pavelić and the NDH (Nezavisna država Hrvatska) became officially accepted and widely glorified as important agents in the pre-history of the Republic of Croatia. Examining the film tape, which contains the takes from Hrvatski *Slikopis*, Tomislav Gotovac prophetically comments that it is very interesting and will someday be worth a lot. Marta Popivoda provides sensational footage of the students' protest in her film *Jugoslavija ili kako je ideologija pokretala naše kolektivno telo* (Yugoslavia – How ideology moved our collective body, 2013). The tribute to Makavejev, Žilnik, and, implicitly, to Stojanović is found in the associative editing of fiction-faction in the films of Emir Kusturica (*Underground*), Goran Marković (*Tito i ja/ Tito and I*, 1992), and Srđan Karanović (*Za sada bez dobrog naslova*, 1988). The self-reflexivity suggested by film-within-the film is further developed in the meta cinematic constructions of Slobodan Šijan (*Maratonci trče počasni krug/ The Marathon family*, 1982) and Milutin Petrović (*Zemlja istine, ljubavi i slobode/ Land of truth, love and freedom*, 2000). *Plastic Jesus* is the text of "polemical cinema," which deals with politics and cinema as essential topics of political Modernism.²⁸ Its textual work concerns the tightly interwoven domains of cultural opposition, political activism, and social engagement; it also aptly captures the historical and social ambience in all its complexity. It is a watershed in the history of Yugoslav cinema, dividing it into the periods before and after *Plastic Jesus*. The opening credits of the version released in 1990 declared that *Plastic Jesus* was filmed in 1971, arrested in 1972, convicted in 1973, and set free in 1990. This statement describes in a nutshell the story of the film, the life of Lazar Stojanović, and the history of the Black wave, and it ironically overlaps with the history of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Taking to heart Lenin's thesis that film is the most important art, Yugoslav authorities kept the film industry under firm and tight control. The ideologically impeccable and politically correct films, like dominant partisan films or red westerns, were powerful and efficient tools of propaganda, including the popularization of the founding principles of socialist Yugoslavia²⁹ and the glorification of the official Communist party-approved history. Yet the mirac-

28 DeCuir, *Yugoslav Black Wave*, 2011.

29 Partisan films narrated the official version of World War II and the socialist revolution, which according to this narrative forged brotherhood and unity among different nations and ethnicities of the country.

ulous year of 1967,³⁰ the emergence of the Black Wave, and the case of *Plastic Jesus* confirmed that Yugoslav cinema liberated itself from the tight grip of the party and state authorities. Furthermore, the attacks on and criticism of Yugoslav socialism coming from the left intellectual and art circles coincided with the liberal's demands for the special status of the republics of Serbia and Croatia. Faced with opposition coming from different ideological stands, Tito and his acolytes reacted by taking radical measures. The political purges set the pattern for repressive measures against filmmakers and artists.

At the same time, in spite the brutal measures, as noted by Žilnik, the censored films enjoyed unprecedented success in the world; the critical acclaim with which they met was hardly ever repeated afterwards. The frantic international reception underlined the impotence and strengthened the rage of the Yugoslav authorities at the fact that a critical image of Titoism had been shown to the world; that the cinema pointed to the first cracks and problems, which could not have been amended or solved, of Yugoslavia's political and ideological system. The last traces of the period of censorship disappeared with the release of *Plastic Jesus* in 1990; in the same year, the country began to break up, bringing to a head the escalation of nationalism and discontent that had disrupted two decades earlier.

Film Censorship and Political Struggle in Polish People's Republic in the Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski

Despite Polish cinema's relative creative freedom compared with other post-war Soviet-type societies before 1989, which was enabled in part by its somewhat unique, decentralized system of *zespoły filmowe*, or filmmaking units,³¹ the list of censored or banned films in the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL) is long. Many works that were shelved by the censor in the 1970s eventually saw the light of day in the heady if short-lived revolutionary atmosphere that reigned for eighteen months following the signing of the Gdańsk Agreements in August 1980 and the formation of Solidarity. After the clampdown of Martial Law just prior to Christmas in 1981, the most infamous case of a banned film is perhaps *Przesłuchanie* (Interrogation, 1982) by Ryszard Bugajski. A unrelentingly dark prison-cell drama about the horrors of Stalinism in the early 1950s featuring a stunning performance by the great Polish star Krystyna Janda, *Interrogation* would become one of

30 1967 saw the production of outstanding films such as *Skupljači perja* (I even met happy Gypsies, Petrović), *Kad budem mrtav i beo* (When I am dead and gone, Pavlović), *Ljubavni slučaj ili tragedija službenice PTTa* (Love story, or the case of the missing switchboard operator, Makavejev), and *Jutro* (The morning, Đorđević).

31 See Dorota Ostrowska's piece on the origins and development of film units in Poland, "An Alternative Model of Film Production," and the recent bilingual collection, Adamczak, Małatyński, and Marecki, *Restart zespołów filmowych*.

the most popular Polish films of the 1980s, distributed underground on illegal video cassettes.³² There were also many interesting, often repeated censorship battles involving Poland's "accursed émigré auteurs," as they were recently dubbed.³³ They were transnational film directors, whose "new wave" stylings came barbed with a (censored) political edge, like Roman Polański (*Nóż w wodzie/ Knife in the water*, 1962) and Jerzy Skolimowski (*Ręce do góry/ Hands up!*, 1967–1981), or *enfants terribles* like Andrzej Żuławski (*Diabeł/ Devil*, 1972) and Walerian Borowczyk (*Dzieje grzechu/ The story of sin*, 1975),³⁴ whose often scatological or erotic content met with as much if not more censorship in the West. But I wish to approach the problem of censored films under Polish state socialism by considering the preeminent figure of Polish cinema in the 1970s, the insider who was always part outsider, even among the opposition. Krzysztof Kieślowski was the leading light of a post-1968 generation of film artists who cut their teeth on observational documentary before moving on to features, teaching the older generation—including Andrzej Wajda himself—how to make films about contemporary events in Poland, about how to articulate its reality.

1.

Many film directors in Poland from the 1950s through the 1970s began in documentary—a form of cinema nearly on par with fiction filmmaking in terms of popularity³⁵ (the censor was well aware of this). Building on a rich tradition of Polish documentary emerging during the period of De-Stalinization and reform after 1956 and lasting into the 1960s, especially the mature work of their mentor Kazimierz Karabasz, Krzysztof Kieślowski's generation infused documentary that had straddled the observational and poetic modes³⁶ with newly politicized, Fred Wiseman-like portraits of beleaguered institutions and the individuals struggling within them in films like *Office*, *Hospital*, *Factory*, etc. A few of these filmmakers, led by Kieślowski and Tomasz Żygadło along with older, renegade Party member Bohdan Kosiński, drew up a manifesto as "The Kraków Group" in 1971, in which they characterized their future work as revelatory "film-protest." With their camera the scalpel and human behavior the object, they would "find (the) disease and bring it to light. We

32 Haltof, *Polish National Cinema*, 165.

33 Goddard, "The Impossible Polish New Wave and its Accursed Émigré Auteurs."

34 In a bit of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" circumvention of the censors, Borowczyk apparently gained approval for this film from the Minister of Culture by telling them, "I've just come out of a meeting with the bishop, and the Church opposes the making of this film." Coates, *The Red and The White*, 88.

35 Many anecdotes testify to the documentary's privileged status, for example how undesirable docs were released solely in hard-to-access, small-town cinemas, only for film fans to arrive in busloads in droves from bigger cities to catch a glimpse.

36 To frame it in film scholar Bill Nichols's terms. See Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 104–58.

treat situations like this as models, using them to reveal the nature and repeatability of a phenomenon and to question the inert structures that distort the meaning and substance of social affairs." Quoting Marxist playwright/theorist Bertolt Brecht ("reality must be looked at not stared at"), The Kraków Group would capture an individual's "gabbing" close-up and penetrate the social thought that lie behind it. They would uncover the mechanisms of a reality felt by but hidden from the Polish people.³⁷

It is not difficult to see how this program placed them on a collision course with government censors. *Robotnicy '71: Nic o nas bez nas* (Workers '71: Nothing about us without us, 1972), co-directed with Zygadło and others, was made following the December and January strikes and protests of 1970–71 along the Baltic Coast, their bloody repression by the state, and the subsequent concessions to Polish workers all over the country. It was, Kieślowski said, "my most political film because it gives no humanistic point of view,"³⁸ instead taking the "collective hero" as subject.³⁹ The filmmakers intended to allow the workers, a ruling class perhaps in name only, to speak for themselves and feel their power. "We travelled all over Poland and tried to film those heated times before they disappeared."⁴⁰ They captured workers' testimony and their negotiations with foremen and bosses, organized into a 24-hour "day in the life" under chapters with titles like "hands," "heads," and "the division of labor." Political winds shifted quickly against the work, and the film was lost to the knives of the censors, who edited it and re-titled it *Gospodarze* (Hosts, 1971) and slated it for Polish television. Kieślowski, meanwhile, much to his bemusement, found himself accused of smuggling contraband to Radio Free Europe when several sound rolls for the film were lost from the production.⁴¹ This failure helped in some measure gradually to convince its makers that to be successful in the future they needed to construct something less transparent to the Party censorship, be it fiction or non-fiction. However, the production was successful in its testament to artistic solidarity with the working class, in a way presaging the formation, in 1976, of the Workers' Defence Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników*, KOR), the beginning of true worker-intellectual solidarity. It would also provide the model for a later, celebrated, collectively-directed documentary record of the August events of *Solidarność* as they unfolded—*Robotnicy '80* (Workers '80, 1981), a film now held in the European Centre for Solidarity in Gdansk.

37 "Documentary Filmmakers Make Their Case (Poland, 1971) Bohdan Kosiński, Krzysztof Kieślowski, and Tomasz Zygadło," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, 464–68.

38 Kieślowski, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, 55.

39 Haltorf, *The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, 10.

40 Kieślowski, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, 55.

41 *Ibid.*, 57.

2.

The experiences of the Kraków Group and those of their like-minded colleagues⁴² seemed to lead inexorably towards feature films, i.e. to the production of allegorical, Gogol-like cinematic microcosms rooted in reality, a movement usually known as the Cinema of Moral Anxiety. Its leading lights were not necessarily steeped in the documentary aesthetic/ethos, but it is clear they drew inspiration from it, and from Kieślowski himself. They included Agnieszka Holland, the director of *Aktorzy prowincjonalni* (Provincial actors, 1979), Kieślowski's friend and frequent co-scenarist, and older colleagues like the philosophically-minded Krzysztof Zanussi (*Barwy Ochronne/Camouflage*, 1977) and even Polish School lion Andrzej Wajda himself (*Bez znieczulenia/Without anesthesia*, 1979), the ultimate cinematic survivor. Kieślowski's second feature of 1976, *Spokój* (The calm, 1976), an early example of this movement, spoke less allegorically and more directly—albeit with typical Kieślowskian ambivalence and subtlety—to the problems facing Polish society. It swiftly met with the censor's wrath and was immediately suppressed. Kieślowski's stated objective in *The Calm* was to show how under the current social reality a humble individual—here played by consummate Cinema of Moral Anxiety actor Jerzy Stuhr, who also contributed dialogue—could not achieve even the modest goal of a little “peace and quiet” (*spokój*) in his life. But as it depicted its protagonist caught up in a workers' strike, something expressly forbidden (and indeed the reason for which the film was banned), upon its eventual release in 1980 it was experienced by many critics and viewers as a militant film about *Solidarność*.⁴³ However, despite its notoriety as a banned film, *The calm's* neorealist poetics⁴⁴ sat oddly next to—and have perhaps aged better than—triumphalist records of the time like Andrzej Wajda's Palme D'or-winning *Człowiek z żelaza* (Man of iron, 1981).

Kieślowski would become more autobiographical with one of his best-loved and most moving achievements in *Amator* (Camera buff, 1979). Once again utilizing the magnetic Jerzy Stuhr as the lead, the film is a tale of self-censorship within the Polish People's Republic, as a young father, Filip, discovers the power of cinema to reshape the world around him as well as the complications this entails. Its most memorable images include budding documentarist Filip destroying his reel of footage that had exposed government corruption yet provoked the sacking of his kindly colleague. They also include shots

42 See avantgarde directors—themselves no stranger to the censors' scissors—such as the brilliant Wojciech Wiszniewski and Grzegorz Królikiewicz.

43 One contemporaneous critic, Mirosław Winiarczyk, entitled his review, “The Calm, or a film about Solidarity” (Winiarczyk, “*Spokój czyli o Solidarności*,” 11; Haltof, *The Cinema of Krzysztof Kieślowski*, 157).

44 In this, it had more in common with old-guard Polish School filmmaker Kazimierz Kutz's gentle observations in *Paciorki jednego różańca*, on the state's impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people.

of Filip finally turning the camera on himself and seeking the political through the literally personal in a kind of answer to the bureaucratic demand posed at the conclusion of Kieślowski's very first documentary, the Kafkaesque *Urząd* (Office, 1966): "What have you done throughout your lifetime?"

3.

The Polish August of 1980 saw the measured Krzysztof Kieślowski swept up, not unlike his diffident, ingenuous protagonists, if not quite in revolutionary fervor, then at least enough to answer the call of this great loosening of censorship towards art and scholarship known among Poles as the "Carnival of Solidarity." He responded⁴⁵ with a film that has long been called something of a turning point in his oeuvre—towards a consideration of destiny, metaphysics, and mortality—but following its recent restoration of censored cuts and re-release, it looks more like his masterpiece. *Przypadek* (Blind chance, 1981) consists of an intricate tri-partite flashback structure following our initial encounter with the protagonist, screaming, onboard a plane. We are then witness to three different planes of reality, or versions of the life of a consistently open, good-natured young man, Witek (rising star Bogusław Linda, appearing the same year in Holland's riveting *Kobieta samotna* (A woman alone, 1981), following his furious attempt to chase down and board a train to Warsaw. In the first, Witek, finding a sympathetic, rueful mentor aboard the train, becomes a Communist Party activist; in the second, having wound up in trouble for crashing into a railway guard, he becomes a Catholic oppositionist in the underground; in the third, Witek is an apolitical doctor who starts a family and keeps his head down, until that life—like the first two—becomes itself untenable. The film's vivid, rhyming detail and documentarist eye for the times—including the striking, originally censored inclusion of a performance by popular anti-regime folk balladeer Jacek Kaczmarski—emphasizes throughout the artificiality of the barriers—personal, political—that separate us, even as it reaches for something beyond the surface choices and paths we take in our lives.

Unfortunately for Kieślowski (and Linda, who nowadays is largely known in Poland as an action film hero), their timing was as off as Witek's attempt to catch his train. The need to reshoot a number of sequences for quality control⁴⁶ resulted in delays that saw *Blind Chance* miss its window of opportunity. On December 13, 1981, General Wojciech Jaruzelski ordered the military to declare a "state of war" in Poland, bringing oppositional filmmak-

45 He also made an interesting if odd film banned and unreleased until after its maker's death, *Krótki dzień pracy*, based on the worker insurrection in Radom in 1976 as observed by his close friend, journalist Hanna Krall.

46 This improved the film immeasurably, according to Holland. See her video interview in the Criterion Blu-Ray.

ing and other cultural life to a grinding halt. Immediately, several films, Kieslowski's among them, faced an outright ban. When finally released in 1987, it nevertheless remained censored for content; in some cases, this meant the loss of entire sequences (for example, Witek's vicious beating at the hands of *milicja*, the PRL police), and at other moments shot to shot. Since its restoration in 2012 and subsequent release by the Criterion Collection, it is possible not only to watch the film as intended, but to view the censored parts alongside what was allowed to pass, in a supplement to the Blu-ray presentation. In this context, it is interesting to consider the conclusions drawn on the subject by cinema scholar Paul Coates, who, writing in English, made extensive use of the collections of the Filmoteka Narodowa-Instytut Audiowizualny (National Film Archive-Audiovisual Institute) and New Documents Archive in Warsaw. Musing over "the myth of the obtuse censor" with respect to cinema in the PRL (and elsewhere), Coates refutes our tendency to imagine the censor as someone either utterly lacking in competence or as consumed by the jealousy of a failed artist. In reality, the censor could be quite intelligent, as meeting transcripts make clear, though with ultimate motivations nevertheless hard to discern because of the multiple levels at which censorship operated—within the Script and Film Assessment Commissions, within the highest reaches of the Politburo, and within the artists and their collaborators themselves.⁴⁷ It is also worth mentioning, in further illumination of the film censor's role in the popular imagination, Wojciech Marczewski's successful, post-1989 *Ucieczka z kina 'Wolność'* (Escape from the "Liberty" Cinema, 1990) about a beleaguered government censor forced to improvise when a film's character comes to life before the eyes of its audience and begins to think—and act—for itself.

Watching the cleverly reassembled edits in the restored version of *Blind Chance*, in which censored materials appears in color only to fade into black and white when we find ourselves in the realm of the 1987 version, one is struck by the extent to which the censors understood the power of visual storytelling to connect with viewers and inflame their presumed discontent. Of course, there are a few juicy bits of dialogue censored within a scene that we can easily imagine raising the censor's hackles ("Join the Party and life will be easier." Witek: "What they do is despicable. I'm not interested"). But more often than not, what was cut was wordless visual information. We see the reaction shots of Witek during scenes of his quicksilver reality as an opposition activist, but, in the censored version, there are no eyeline matches of these experiences or scenes, namely the joyful, non-alienating labor of operating an underground printing press; the apartment, ransacked by the secret police, of his pious landlady—a character inspired by Solidarity hero Anna Walentynowicz; the ironic, affective singing of the communist anthem "The Internationale" when Witek is with his lover (whose pubic hair, incidentally, went uncensored—the same would not have been true in a Hollywood-type setting). Ta-

⁴⁷ See Coates, *The Red and the White*, 75–78.

deusz Sobolewski is right to consider the mission of the censors here to erase traces of the revolutionary enthusiasm of 1980.⁴⁸

4.

Kieślowski's final two projects in Poland, which he undertook in the bleak 1980s, found him newly paired with two collaborators essential to the rest of his career—gifted composer Zbigniew Preisner and lawyer-turned-screenwriter Krzysztof Piesiewicz. Following the imposition of Martial Law, Kieślowski sought to insert his camera, quite literally, into the ongoing legal battles taking place throughout the country, but, frustrated both by lack of access and the camera's inevitable inability to become a "fly-on-the-wall" (as it always influences the events one seeks to capture objectively),⁴⁹ he turned, as he had so often done, to fiction. Piesiewicz, who had himself defended oppositionists and successfully prosecuted the murderers of activist priest Jerzy Popiełuszko, was engaged to write the scenario. In *Bez końca* (No end, 1984), sometimes seen as a dry run for the haunting late masterpiece *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (Blue, 1994), they captured, for better or worse, the utter despair of this grim period. The most important character in the film appears only sparingly—the ghost of an opposition attorney, played by Man of Iron star Jerzy Radziwiłowicz as "[...] a man whose conscience is clear, yet who couldn't do anything in Poland in 1984," as the director put it.⁵⁰ While the film was vilified both by oppositionists for its alleged quietism and by the Party, which withheld it for a year and then distributed it erratically,⁵¹ Kieślowski claimed he'd never before received so many letters and phone calls or had so many personal conversations about one of his films, nor he had he ever received such thanks for testifying to the mood of the time.⁵²

Despite this, its reception seemed to signal that his days of making films in Poland were numbered—as was, so it happened, the PRL itself. With *Dekalog* (1988), Piesiewicz and Kieślowski turned to the world of television co-production, opening the door to Western European financing, yet choosing a topic that would seem to resonate with a nation of Catholics: ten short films—two

48 Interview with Tadeusz Sobolewski in the booklet for the Blind Chance Criterion Blu-Ray.

49 His presence in the courtrooms, however, was positive, in the sense that Party judges who sought to pass harsh sentences were terrified of the camera's power to record. For the extraordinary account of Kieślowski's tortuous role in these affairs see Kieślowski, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, 125–30.

50 *Ibid.*, 134.

51 "If a newspaper wrote that *No End* was being shown somewhere, then when you turned up at the cinema you could be sure that *No End* wasn't on. Some other film was showing. And when it was written that some other film was being shown, then it would be that *No End* was on. You couldn't find my film." *Ibid.*, 136.

52 *Ibid.*, 136–37.

longer films grew out of it⁵³—loosely based on the Ten Commandments, each of them set within a single housing estate block in Warsaw. Despite the surface specificity, this world was constructed as timeless, made with an eye for distribution abroad, its director confessed, with subtle character overlaps and correspondences and characters who didn't seem to work or suffer materially—their pain was ethical, existential. The result was universally acclaimed, but did *Dekalog's* proximity to 1989, to the censor's lack of teeth, serve, paradoxically, to limit its content? Reflecting on the state of Polish cinema and its past one year before his early death in 1996, the old documentarist had this to say: "We're allowed to say everything now, but people have stopped caring about what we're allowed to say. Censorship bound authors to the same extent that it did the public...We were together, us and the public, in the aversion we had for a system we didn't accept. Today, this basic reason for being together doesn't exist. We're lacking an enemy."⁵⁴

What is to be done, short of conjuring false images? Perhaps, even at a time when social bonds seem to be at a low ebb, when traditional ties have been loosened or severed, new forms of solidarity—beyond borders—can be forged. Cinema, the original mass art that knew no borders, may yet play some undiscovered role.

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53 Based on *Dekalog* episodes 5 and 6, *A Short Film About Killing* and *A Short Film About Love*—the former a Jury Prize winner at Cannes in 1988—were Kiesłowski's first real tastes of international recognition, while the whole series itself went on to great acclaim in critical and cinephile circles.

54 Kiesłowski, *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*, 152.

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