



The Surfaces of Interiority: What Do Women Dream about in European Socialist Cinemas of the 1960s?

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This audiovisual essay investigates cinematic interiority by engaging more than a dozen European socialist films that center on female characters whose behavior in one way or another doesn't conform to societal norms. Since inner activity can never be fully legible, expressions of interiority have a transgressive quality in a society that prized the collective above the individual and prescribed transparency as a key aspect of a film aesthetic. The moments of such cinematic nonconformity can be understood as zones of defiance, which we are able to access, in addition to narrative and other linguistic tools, through cinema's affective affordances. Thus, the video suggests that cinema is uniquely suited to represent inner life through its ability to evoke aural and visual textures and appeal to the senses.





Creator's Statement

This audiovisual essay suggests that presences and expressions of cinematic interiority include but also extend beyond verbally expressed thought, facial closeups, or point-of-view shots. How do spaces mediate and communicate a character's inner experience? Can film imagine interiorities that are nonverbal and nonvisual—and what might such imaginings feel like in material and sensory terms? If inner transparency is hardly attainable, can its onscreen displays be regarded as potential zones of defiance in certain political contexts? With this video essay, my pursuit is twofold: to investigate cinematic interiority guided by the above questions while also engaging a constellation of films that mark the emergence of a new kind of figure in East-Central European and Soviet cinemas of the 1950s and 1960s—the thinking, and thus nonconforming, woman.

Giuliana Bruno's work on the surface and visual images as sites where "different forms of mediation, transfer, and transformation can take place" was on my mind as I set out on this project (2014, 3). There are a substance and textural layers to the image, generating a material engagement in the beholder. Hannah Arendt's ideas in *The Life of the Mind* (1977) resonated with my thinking about onscreen renderings of interiorities. The philosopher questions the commonly held conception of one's inner life as more meaningful and profound than its appearance and suggests the reversal of the hierarchy: she urges us to pay attention to the surface and consider it as significant as what it may cover, conceal, or protect. Both Bruno and Arendt explore the relationship between surface and depth, the outer and the inner, the dichotomies I am interested in as well but in relation to interiority expressed in cinematic terms.

During the later 1950s and 1960s, many filmmakers working in state-socialist cinemas of Eastern Europe turned away from heroic, stock characters toward a more probing exploration of ordinary people and their concerns, men and women alike.

The 1960s in particular saw a wave of fiction films featuring multifaceted female characters who are given space to be lost in thought—alone or in a crowd, unobserved or scrutinized by others. While in actuality their time and bodies, their creative and intellectual utterances, were considerably regulated by the state, in these screen spaces, we encounter the women absorbed in their own worlds, the rhythms and textures of their thoughts and feelings, often unwilling or unable to divulge them. I chose films that center on or prominently feature women characters who in some aspect of their personality or behavior struggle to be compliant members of society. They don't fit in. Further, the clips depict the characters in a moment of reflection, boredom, pleasure, or "misbehavior." The films the audiovisual essay gathers by no means exhaust the topic of female interiority onscreen and its defiant potential.¹

Since inner activity can never be fully legible, expressions of interiority would have a transgressive quality in a society that prized the collective above the individual and prescribed transparency as a key aspect of a film aesthetic. The moments of such cinematic nonconformity can be understood as zones of defiance. By centering on the thinking and daydreaming woman, these films also foreground the visibility, audibility, and hapticity of her "sensations of interiority."² To foreground these qualities is to assert a person's presence not as hidden and out of reach but as something that takes various cinematic forms of *appearing*, to use Arendt's word, that are open to the viewer's analytic and affective engagement. The audiovisual essay proposes that, in addition to narrative content and such formal devices as the closeup and interior monologue, cinematic interiority extends to visual and sonic surfaces of the screened image and isn't always concerned with linguistic legibility.

The video consists of three parts. The first introduces the films and the women who don't seem to fit in, particularly when they take time to daydream, reflect, and thus ignore a constantly monitored life; the second, following Arendt's thinking, highlights the relationship between onscreen interiority and its different forms of expression, where *appearing* is the key idea; and finally, the last section proposes that cinema is uniquely suited to represent inner life through its ability to evoke aural and visual textures and appeal to the senses.

¹ The films at the center of my inquiry come from richly distinct cultures, which, as a result of the postwar redrawing of Europe's map and the subsequent consolidation of the communist regime in 1948, ended up grouped under the geopolitical designation "Eastern Bloc." The position of these countries as "satellites" of the Soviet Union to a considerable extent determined the economic model of film practice alongside ideological constraints. A regionalist framework in the study of East-Central European cinemas under state socialism allows us to explore shared thematic and stylistic concerns (Iordanova 12–13).

² The phrase *sensations of interiority* is Joel Burges's, who used it in his response to a version of this video essay presented at the 2023 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Denver.

Works Cited

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Biography

Viktoria Paranyuk is a lecturer in the Department of Film and Screen Studies at Pace University and freelance programmer in New York City. Her research interests include gender and socialist cinemas, cinema's engagement with history, environmental approaches to moving images, and theories of the senses. Viktoria's book, *Cinema of Sincerity: Soviet Films and Culture during the Thaw*, is forthcoming in 2025. Her work has been published in *Film History*, *Slavic Review*, and *Tecmerin: Journal of Audiovisual Research*.

Review by Ewa Mazierska, University of Central Lancashire

The author of this video essay carefully chose fragments of many films from Eastern Europe, produced in the 1960s, to show the inner lives of women living in this period. She "zooms" in on moments when these (usually young) women are by themselves and are daydreaming or focusing on private activities, such as playing, looking through the window, browsing through books, or laying in the grass. In this way, the essay points to the 1960s as a period when private life was tolerated by the authorities, unlike in the 1950s, during the Stalinist period, when both men and women had to serve the collective. It also points to the similarities between films of this period made in different countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Soviet Union, resulting from the filmmakers embracing auteurism.

In doing so, the author universalizes the situation of Eastern European women, as represented on screen, by rendering them similar to introverted and somewhat lost heroines of directors such as Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni. At the same time, various details of interior design point to them coming from Eastern Europe.

The video improved in comparison with its previous version by providing clearly its sources and being clearer in its argument by using off-screen commentary.

Review by Irina Trocan, Universitatea Națională de Artă Teatrală și Cinematografică “I. L. Caragiale”

Since the issue of creative limitations still looms large over USSR cinema history, individual filmmakers are still often appraised by their “dissidence” and exceptionality, in a critical reflex that often blocks further distinctions. This is why videographic technique is intrinsically disruptive to such broad categories. Viktoria Paranyuk’s video essay often resorts to supercuts or split screen editing, citing films with female protagonists from various countries of the former USSR, spotlighting what they have in common and making differences recede to the background. One particularly inspired moment—a centrifugal movement facilitated by astute editing—follows multiple micro-narratives (originally anchored by the women’s initial appearance in the first frame of the split screen), simultaneously integrating protagonists in their surroundings. The voiceover commentary, while authoritative and structurally central, is primarily validated by the considerable force of the clips that illustrate it.

Furthermore, this video that often advances through graphic matches reveals a rarely discussed tendency in state-socialist Eastern European cinema: the young women’s faces in successive shots; their beauty and fashion style as well as their framing often recall the French New Wave and, to a lesser extent, neorealism. Since exposure to foreign cinema in the Eastern bloc was officially strictly controlled, while unofficially it merely followed alternative routes, it is well worth contemplating the proof of a kindred spirit in all European New Waves, even on the separate sides of the Iron Curtain.

