

Film as a Mirror of History, Ideology, and Individual Freedom

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Course Outline:

This lively and original course is open to students who have an interest in studying the social, political and cultural transitions in Central Europe through an understanding of its cinema, from masterpieces of Czechoslovak New Wave to the contemporary fiction and documentaries.

The main goal of the course is to unveil the complexities hidden behind the clichés of communist and post-communist societies and define the phenomena of the transition of the individual human mind as a consequence of political changes. Central Europe, its changing borders, and its dynamic and violent 20th century, is a deep and surprising source of knowledge and inspiration. Among other things, it says a lot about identity and otherness.

In this course, students with diverse backgrounds in political science, ethnography, sociology, or literature will join in lively discussions on the themes that emerge from the films and reveal the dynamics of society. This is not a traditional film course: we will not analyze films purely as works of art. We will focus on the films' social, political, cultural and historical contexts.

Films produced behind the Iron Curtain were not considered commercial products. They were instruments of artistic expression and ideology, and also of protest and testimony. The stories of the Czech, Slovak, Polish and Hungarian film industries – the fate and the moral dilemmas of their most talented artists and their specific and strong film language before and after the political changes in Europe of 1989 – will be a discovery for those seeing the films for the first time (as well as for those already familiar with them but who wish to enlarge their knowledge).

We will analyze the questions of national and cultural identity of inhabitants in multicultural Central Europe. Furthermore, we will explore the specific conditions of film production in “state owned” film industries under communist rule.

Finally, we will consider the moral and artistic dilemmas of artists working in totalitarian societies, as well as the general position of intellectuals in the post-communist development. We will also study the contemporary arthouse scene of post-communist Europe. The films can help us to understand not only the mindset of the artist, but the mentality of the whole society.

Grading:

The goal of the course is to gain a better understanding of communist reality and post-communist development through the individual eyes of the best filmmakers. Our students come from diverse backgrounds, therefore both class activities and personal research play important roles.

Grading is as follows:

20% - Student participation and activity during and between classes

20% - Mid-term Exam is under the form of the test. The test is delivered to students 5 days before the deadline.

60% - Final Paper. The final paper is the most important outcome of this course. Personal guidance in the research phase of the paper is provided by the instructor.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A	93-100	Outstanding work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

UPCES Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The UPCES program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristic, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

UPCES Diversity Policy

UPCES fully embraces diversity and strives to create a safe and welcoming environment for students from all backgrounds. Prague is a wonderfully diverse community and UPCES is no different. All students should feel at home while studying abroad and UPCES will do its utmost to make sure that becomes a reality. Although unique challenges may arise, we believe that students from all walks of life will encounter wonderful opportunities for enrichment as they explore a new culture while studying abroad.

Week 1

UPCES Orientation Lecture Series

Week 2

Confidantes and Their Heirs

The legacy of secret political police and informers in post-communist society

Film

Kawasaki's Rose by Jan Hřebejk, 2010 (Kawasakiho růže)

In communist countries, hundreds of thousands of citizens were caught in the web of the political police. They became informers. They denounced their friends, lovers, and neighbors. Kawasaki's Rose is the real story of a respected psychiatrist and former dissident who tried to hide his past. Is he a victim, is he guilty, or both? The film is key in understanding the present moral trauma of post-communist societies.

Week 3

The State as a Producer

The nationalization of film industries in Central and Eastern Europe after World War II. From Ideology to Czech New Wave.

Films

Examples (show reels) – historical drama and ideology - **Jan Hus** by Otakar Vávra, 1951

Musical comedy - **Green Gold** by Ladislav Rychman (1963)

“Diamonds of the Night” by Jan Nemeč

“The most important of the arts for us is film”, said V.I. Lenin before nationalizing the film industry in the Soviet Union and creating from it an instrument of communist ideology. But in Czechoslovakia, the “nationalization” of the flourishing film industry in 1945 was not simply ideologically-driven by communist politics. In the beginning, it was a non-ideological economic project shaped by film professionals. How could such a film industry structure function in the post-war period? Subsequently, ideological rules were applied to film production and killed all creativity for years. At the beginning of the 1960s, new trends emerged – the “Czech Film Miracle” and the “Czechoslovak New Wave”. The Czech New Wave directors found themselves in a complete paradox: They made films which criticized the very state and system which produced and paid for the films, and which employed and paid the directors.

Reading

Peter Hames, - Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition, Peter Hames – Czechoslovak New Wave

Week 4

USA, the Dream Land

The role of collective and private memory

Films

Sample of 20 min: “Lemonade Joe” by Oldrich Lipsky

“See you in Denver” by Jan Šikl. From the project “Private Centuries.”

During the Cold War, relations between Western and Eastern Europeans were diminished. But relations between “easterners” and US citizens were forbidden. In this isolation, many people developed a picture of the U.S. as a “dreamland,” a mythical kingdom of freedom and justice. American Westerns, in particular, became symbolic of escape and victory. The documentarian Jan Šikl explores this topic through family film archives. His documentary tells the story of an ordinary Prague family of cinema owners who become victims of the regime, demonstrating how even the twisted symbols of American Westerns became important in the battle for ideological control.

Week 5

Outsiders and Losers as Heroes

Film

Closely Watched Trains – Jiri Menzel, 1966

Closely Watched Trains was Menzel's most realized and coherent narrative, including stories and observations involving 22-year-old Milos Hrna, a signalman at a rural railway station in the last days of the Second World War. Hrna embodies the Czechoslovakian fondness for the "little man who seems to wander cheerfully into large historical events" (as critic James Woods puts it) exemplified by *The Good Soldier Svejk*.

This is one of the most cherished Czechoslovak films of the 1960s. *Ostře sledované vlaky* (1966) was the recipient of the 1968 Oscar for Best Foreign Film. Similarly, this feature-film debut of director Jiří Menzel is also celebrated at home as a milestone of cinema, and as one of the key films of the Czechoslovak New Wave.

In most minds, a hero is someone who is famous and well known for his heroic deeds. But in unfree society, heroes often live and die as without recognition. Some are heroes for heroic deeds as well. But others are heroes just because they are able live in unfree society in dignity and to find their indestructible inner freedom.

Probably the most complex expression of the principle of "outsider as a hero" is the good Soldier Svejk by Jaroslav Hasek. The very best work on this field in cinema was probably done by artistic tandem of writer Bohumil Hrabal and director Jiri Menzel.

Week 6

Krzysztof Kieszlowski

Mediating East and West in the Beautiful Nineties

Film

"The Double Life of Veronique" by Krzysztof Kieszlowski (1991)

Related films: Red, Blue, White, or Decalogue – Kieszlowski

When the Cold War ended in 1989, joy, optimism and new spiritual trends invaded most European countries. Many "westerners" and "easterners" looked at each other as long-lost siblings. But the gap between the mentality and life experience of a divided Eastern and Western Europe was larger than imagined. Krzysztof Kieszlowski was one of the rare filmmakers who reflected the new situation in his late films, mainly in "Veronique." He observes a reality impossible to capture in scholarly texts in his search for artistic truth.

Optional

Promised land by Andrzej Wajda, 1978

Knife in the Water by Roman Polanski. 1965

Popiol i diament (Ashes and diamond) – by Andrzej Wajda or

Man of Marble by Andrzej Wajda

Reading

Stok, Danusia: *Kieślowski on Kieślowski*. London Faber 1995

Week 7

Animation

Spiritual Rescue, Handcraft, and Play: Trnka, Švankmajer, Zeman and contemporary animation

Films

"Perak and SS" or **Galina Vogelbirdae**

"Documentary about Jiri Trnka."

"The Hand" by Jiri Trnka, 1969

Dimension of Dialogues by Jan Švankmajer

Something from Alice by Jan Švankmajer

Modern Czech and Slovak animation - Diana van Nguyen (Little one), Kateřina Karhánková Fruits of the clouds

State ownership of the film industry created a unique phenomenon: generously-funded animations for children and festival audiences. Among other legendary eastern animation studios, the Prague Bratři v triku had a symbolic history: It was founded by Nazi Germans, later flourished under communist rule, and at the end collapsed in freedom under the dictate of capitalist free markets and developments in technology. The names of the leading figures – Trnka, Švankmajer - are the keys to understanding the nature of this art form, and also how these world-famous studios functioned.

Week 8

Family and Freedom

Family and Gender Roles in Post-Communist Europe

Film

Matrimonial Pieces (Manželské etudy) by Helena Třeštková, 2005

Related films - show reels, Apple Game, Daisies, by Vera Chytilova, 1978

The social status of women and family values in communist Europe were different from the rest of Europe: All women were either working or studying. After the Soviet Occupation in 1968, the government in Czechoslovakia started to promote a generous family policy, in order to keep citizens away from political rebellion. The housing crisis accentuated the difficulties of balancing motherhood and a profession. Helena Třeštková followed five couples and families over a period of 20 years. Her film is a fascinating testimony of everyday life “before” and “after” the fall of communism. “Match Making Mayor” is a tragi-comic documentary about a Slovak village, where surprisingly people prefer to remain single. Is this phenomenon in fact proof of a successfully functioning society? Or does it represent a collapse of family values?

Optional

Pupendo by Jan Hřebejk, CZ 2003

Heitlinger, Alena. “Women’s Equality, Work, and Family in the Czech Republic.” *Family, Women, and Employment in Central and Eastern Europe*. Ed. Barbara Lobodzinska. pp. 86-96. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1995

Week 9

Jewishness as a Symbol

Paradoxes of Pre-war Jewish Assimilation

Film

“Distant Journey” by Alfred Radok, 1949

In the beginning of the 20th century, most German and Czech Jews became mostly totally assimilated with mainstream society. Regardless of their language (Czech or German), Jews in the modern Czechoslovak state voluntarily became Czechoslovak citizens with no mention of their religion in their documents. Many children learned their otherness only when they were forced to wear yellow stars after the Nazi occupation. Radok’s film is the first postwar movie about the holocaust in a global context. It tells the story of mixed families that fell into the Nazi trap – the famous Terezin ghetto or the resistance movement. Because of the anti-Semitism of communist Czechoslovakia, the film was banned for almost 40 years.

Optional

“The Shop on Main Street” by Kadar and Klos, 1965 Reading: **Jacob Edelstein** by Ruth Bondy

Week 10

The “Gypsy Question”

The Postwar Tragedy of the Roma People

Film:

The Gypsy (Cigán) by Martin Šulík, 2007

The fate of Roma (“Gypsy”) communities in Central and Eastern Europe is a sensitive point in the transition from totalitarianism to democracy. Hundreds of thousands of central and eastern European Romas in varying living conditions are children of parents who were forcefully integrated into mainstream society. This integration has stripped Romas of their language, home, and dignity. The film “Marian” by Petr Vaclav is an existential study of one such mistreated individual who can no longer connect to and live integrated in this mainstream society, and so becomes a bewildered animal. Today’s animosity between Roma communities and mainstream society can be understood as an echo of past heritage.

Related films:

Marian by Petr Václav

Brats (Smradi) by Zdenek Tyc, 2005

Week 11

Transition to the consuming society

Film

Czech dream - 2004, (Klusák - Remunda)

Czech Dream captures the moment of newly-born commercial mentality after the political changes of 1989. As the culture of super-markets evolved in post-Communist countries, their citizens involuntarily participated in a “reality show” created by two courageous filmmakers.

Week 12

The angry Face of Poland

Film

The Mug (Twarz), dir Malgorzata Szumowska 2017

The clever and ironic style of new generation of Filmmakers in Poland make us understand the movements in their society.

Małgorzata Szumowska’s Twarz (Polish for “face” or “mug”, t delivers the pleasure of vigorous storytelling. It is scabrous, mysterious and surprisingly emotional – inspired partly by the giant statue of Christ the King in Świebodzin in western Poland, completed in 2010, the tallest statue of Jesus in the world and a fierce religious and nationalist symbol. It is the face of patriotic Poland, and this is a film to put you in mind of Eliot’s lines about preparing your own face to meet the faces that you meet.

Szumowska’s movie imagines a guy named Jacek (Mateusz Kosciukiewicz), employed as a builder on a giant statue like this as it begins to loom surreally over the landscape.

Then Jacek is involved in a horrible accident at work. Standing on Jesus’s neck, preparing for his huge head to be lowered on to the shoulders, Jacek stumbles and falls face-first into Jesus’s huge hollow concrete torso. His injuries are horrendous and he has to have a face transplant.

Week 13

Hidden spirituality in consuming times

About body and soul - Ildikó Enyedy 2017

The contemporary Hungarian cinema represents the study of contemporary urban loneliness

It's a brilliantly-directed, and surprisingly poignant study of two outsiders and slaughterhouse employees who share a most unusual bond: a dream world that intimately connects them even though their waking lives remain rigidly isolated.

Endre (Géza Morcsányi) is the company's long-time financial director, with a crippled left arm that contributes to a ruffled disposition. After numerous relationships over the years that have resulted in an adult daughter, he has resigned himself to a twilight of loneliness.

Mária (Alexandra Borbély) is in many ways his polar opposite. The new quality inspector at the slaughterhouse, she's a social outcast who can barely have a conversation with her colleagues, is obsessed with order and rigidly follows the rules.