

The Politics of Reproduction: Abortion and Authority in Soviet Cinema

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Introduction

On Mother's Day 2017, Russia's Federal News Agency reported that a video of statements about mothers made by President Vladimir Putin had gone viral on the Russian Internet.¹ "A mother is a sacred thing," Putin pronounces. "I say this without any irony [...]. The most sacred thing is a mother. A mother can be likened to the Motherland; they are such closely related concepts."² The President's insistence on the connection between mothers and the Motherland alludes to the significance of motherhood in Russian formulations of femininity.³ As Olga Issoupova observes, there is "a prevalent cultural myth that sees motherhood in Russia as an inalienable part of the female personality [and] the essence of Russian femininity."⁴ Putin's words also invoke a prevalent Soviet myth, however: that of motherhood as a civic duty and a patriotic undertaking of national importance.

The state's appropriation of motherhood ran throughout the Soviet period, finding particularly prominent expression in times of demographic decline. It led to the female body, and in particular the pregnant female body, being used as the site for debates about and the promotion of prevailing socio-ideological agendas. The tension between the choices facing pregnant women – to embrace motherhood or to abort the pregnancy – therefore makes abortion a productive context against which to consider how different forms of authority are exercised and responded to and to explore attitudes toward female autonomy. Given the importance to the Soviet state of cinema as an educational tool and the use of censorship to control discussion of ideological concerns, it is unsurprising that these issues were often addressed through the medium of the fiction film.⁵ However, while there is a considerable body of scholarship on the representation of motherhood in Soviet film,⁶ there has as yet been no sustained consideration of the treatment of abortion. This chapter addresses this gap by providing a critical overview of the representation of abortion in films made between the early-Soviet 1920s and the Brezhnevite 1980s.

Adopting the Weberian definition of authority as a form of power that is defined and supported by the norms of a social system and generally accepted as legitimate by those who participate in it, we consider the treatment of various forms of authority, including patriarchal (in Weber's terms, "traditional authority"), as exercised by protagonists cast in the roles of husbands/boyfriends and parents/older "mentor" figures.⁷ Considering the films in their socio-ideological contexts, we explore how the extra-diegetic authority of the Soviet state (what Weber termed "rational-legal authority"), embodied in abortion legislation and policy, impacts on the films' representation of abortion. We also examine whether the pregnant female protagonists themselves are accorded authority in decisions concerning abortion. Thus we assess the extent to which Soviet cinema reflects, or actively promotes, the biopolitical

¹ Gromov, "Mamu sravnivaiut s Rodinoi".

² Ibid.

³ The Russian word for Motherland, "rodina," is a feminine noun linked to the verb "to give birth" [rozhat'/rodit'].

⁴ Issoupova, "Motherhood and Russian Women," 5.

⁵ Fiction films tell a fictional/fictionalized story in which believable narratives and characters serve to convince the viewer that the world of the film and the events that take place there are real.

⁶ Attwood, "Rodina-Mat'," 15–28.

⁷ Weber distinguished three types of legitimate authority: rational-legal, which depends on the rules and laws of a state or other organization; traditional, which derives legitimacy from long-standing customs and social conventions; and charismatic, which relies on the charisma of individual authority figures. Weber, "The Three Types of Legitimate Rule".

authority of the state, and ask whether film-makers sought to challenge prevailing socio-ideological stances on abortion.

The 1920s: Abortion and Early-Soviet Cinema

With reproduction and motherhood considered to be state concerns, abortion had a conflicted history in the Soviet era. Deemed murder and banned before the Russian Revolution, it was legalized by Lenin's young government on 18 November 1920. However, despite the fact that Bolshevik policy aimed to liberate women from gender-based inequality and oppression, the legalization of abortion was not motivated by belief in the right of women to choose. Nor was it an unqualified endorsement of the procedure; as Susan Gross Solomon notes, "the text of the edict opened with a statement that abortion was an evil."⁸ Instead, it was considered a practical necessity, required to enable more women to join the labor force and to reduce women's reliance on dangerous back-street abortions.⁹

Despite the legalization of abortion, most of the "everyday life" films [bytovye fil'my] made during the 1920s did not directly address this issue. One of the first to do so was Abram Room's *Bed and Sofa*, also known as *Third Meshchanskaia Street* [Tret'ia Meshchanskaia, 1927]. Conceived as a "problem film" [problemnyi fil'm] that would raise questions about contemporary social issues, such as changing gender roles and relations, without providing solutions, *Bed and Sofa* locates its complex exploration of these concerns in the context of a *ménage à trois*. After the Revolution, this was theorized as an alternative to the bourgeois/patriarchal model of marriage which would enable New Soviet Men and Women to live within the collective, in what the politician and sexual theorist Aleksandra Kollontai described, in 1923, as "love-comradeship."¹⁰ By participating in such a relationship, Kollontai explained, "[p]eople's feelings will become collective ones, and inequality between the sexes, as well as the dependence of woman on man, will disappear without a trace, lost in the memory of past centuries."¹¹ The film's script was inspired by a newspaper report of a young mother, visited in a maternity hospital by two men, both of whom she considered her husbands and the child's fathers; they called their relationship a *ménage à trois* and insisted that, as members of the Young Communist League [Komsomol], they did not feel jealousy.¹² *Bed and Sofa* puts these utopian ideals to the test, and its treatment of abortion plays a central role in its analysis.

The film's early sequences introduce us to a married couple, Kolia and Liuda. It is clear that their relationship is based on patriarchal models of male dominance and female subservience, through both their characterization and the symbolic treatment of space: while Kolia is master in their flat and also leaves it to go to work, Liuda remains confined both *to* the domestic space, as a housewife with no role outside the home, and *within* it; as Julian Graffy notes, "[e]ven within the space of the flat she is marginalised, continually retreating to the kitchen."¹³ When Kolia runs into his old friend Volodia, who, newly arrived in Moscow, has found work but not accommodation, he invites him to move in and sleep on their sofa. Initially put out, Liuda is soon reconciled to the idea: Volodia is more thoughtful than Kolia, bringing her gifts, helping with housework and taking her out. Predictably, while Kolia is away on a work trip, Liuda and Volodia enter into a relationship.¹⁴ When Kolia returns,

⁸ Gross Solomon, "The Demographic Argument," 60.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60–1.

¹⁰ Graffy, *Bed and Sofa*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 14–5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴ "De facto" (unregistered) marriage [fakticheskii brak] was passed into law in the Soviet Union in January 1927. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

Liuda, asserting her autonomy for the first time, insists that Volodia stays. Kolia moves out, but cannot find anywhere to live, so Liuda, taking pity on him, invites him to move back and sleep on the sofa. Gradually, Volodia reveals himself to be more authoritarian than Kolia, locking the door when Liuda tries to go out alone. The men swap their sleeping arrangements once more, and they settle into a life *à trois*, in which, far from enjoying equality and independence, Liuda is dominated and oppressed by both men. When, two months later, they realize Liuda is pregnant, they are unsure who the father is. The men agree that she must have an abortion: neither of them wants to look after another man's child.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The men's assumption that this is their decision to make clearly angers Liuda (Figure 1). She appears to accept that they have the authority to decide, however, for the next sequence takes place in the waiting room of a private abortion clinic, where she and several women from diverse social backgrounds are sitting (Figure 2). Hereby Room, as Graffy observes, "hints at the different reasons which would bring women to the abortion clinic."¹⁵ While the director seems to want to convey sympathy for and understanding of some of the women, his treatment of others is less charitable. He makes it clear that two of them (a garrulous older woman and a fashionable young woman, possibly a prostitute) are frequent visitors to the clinic: they both appear unconcerned and, when the doctor arrives, he nods at them, in recognition. As Graffy shows, the male doctor's confident, authoritarian presence is also significant for the way it characterizes the abortion clinic as another place where "a man presides over women"; he also identifies in the clinic other "eloquent echoes" of life in the flat, which serve to link the two places and to characterize them both as spaces in which men impose their authority on women.¹⁶

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Liuda's discomfort is clear: the sequence begins with a close-up of her fidgeting hands. Affected by the tense atmosphere, she opens a window and, in a series of shot-counter-shot sequences, Room shows the viewer both what Liuda sees and her reaction. First, a child cradling a doll; Liuda smiles and leans out for a better view. Then, a pretty baby swaddled in a lace sheet (Figure 3); Liuda's smile grows, before suddenly fading. If she has any remaining conviction that abortion is the right decision for her, it evaporates when an emergency occurs in the operating room. Liuda gathers her belongings and leaves. She will shortly decide to leave another place that oppresses her. For the moment, however, we remain in the clinic. The nurse moves to close the window, but first looks out. Her view – two babies in the same pram, one holding an empty basket in a dirty hand (Figure 4) – is a sobering (but compassionate) counterpoint to Liuda's idealistic vision of motherhood. The sequence ends, however, with the focus on the fashionable woman/prostitute, who stubs out her cigarette and strolls, unperturbed, into the operating room.

INSERT FIGURES 3 & 4 HERE

That this sequence contains notes of criticism and didacticism is clear. Despite showing understanding about why women might, in some circumstances, choose to terminate a pregnancy, the film-makers nonetheless represent abortion negatively, as frightening,

¹⁵ Ibid., 65.

¹⁶ Ibid., 66.

dangerous and, in some cases, irresponsibly, if not immorally, over-used. State policy had remained pro-natalist, even when abortion was legalized in 1920.¹⁷ In the second half of the decade, the medical authorities began to express concerns that abortion was impacting negatively on the birth rate.¹⁸ Pro-natalist discourse intensified and an anti-abortion campaign was launched.¹⁹ According to Paul E. Burns, Room here “bow[s] to authority in his ‘compromised’ treatment of abortion,” because Liuda’s decision not to have the termination “positively conformed to the regime’s desire to discourage this legal option.”²⁰ Judith Mayne makes a similar point, concluding that the film ultimately foregrounds Liuda’s realisation of “the necessity of maternity” and her “acceptance of her social obligation.”²¹

Liuda’s embrace of motherhood does indeed appear to place her within the confines of the extra-diegetic authority of the state and its requirement that female citizens reject abortion. This suggestion is strengthened, moreover, when the men who had insisted that she have an abortion are condemned, albeit gently, and identified as “scoundrels” [podletsy] in an intertitle near the end of the film. As Graffy argues, however, this surface-level reading of the film’s plot overlooks both the way the abortion clinic is represented as an oppressive male-dominated space, akin to the flat, and the ambiguity of the film’s ending. After leaving the clinic, Liuda returns home and packs a bag. She asks the caretaker to remove her name from his register, then leaves to catch a train that will take her out of the city. Thus Room suggests that, in order to escape the men’s assumed authority over her life and her body, Liuda has to leave not only her husbands and the “utopian” model of the *ménage à trois*, but also Moscow, “the ideological centre of the Soviet state.”²²

The film could, therefore, be seen as having “overarching subversive ideological implications,” suggesting that Liuda’s decision is an active *rejection* of Soviet social obligations and of “all Soviet systems.”²³ This was not lost on officials. While some praised the ending for showing “the triumph of the maternal instinct,” many more were critical, arguing that it was not “educational” and did not resolve the *ménage à trois* theme “in a Soviet way.”²⁴ Indeed, in the film’s diegetic world, Liuda’s choice to continue her pregnancy is represented as a personal, not an ideological, decision. It is a rejection of the men’s attempt to impose their patriarchal authority on her body and it empowers her to assert her individual autonomy by leaving. This emphasis on the personal is made clear symbolically. While packing, Liuda takes a framed photograph of herself down from the wall, removes her photograph and hangs the empty frame back on its nail, thus transforming one of the film’s many images of entrapment and oppression into a powerful symbol of personal liberation. The dynamism of the film’s closing sequence, which shows a smiling Liuda, bathed in sunshine, sitting alone by the open window of a fast-moving train, suggests the same (Figure 5).

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

If *Bed and Sofa* displays understanding about why abortion might be desirable in certain circumstances, subsequent films offer less nuanced representations. Fridrikh Ermler’s *The Parisian Cobbler* [Parizhskii sapozhnik, 1928], released almost a year after *Bed and*

¹⁷ Gross Solomon, “The Demographic Argument,” 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁹ Graffy, *Bed and Sofa*, 66.

²⁰ Burns, “An NEP Moscow Address,” 74, 78.

²¹ Mayne, *Kino and the Woman Question*, 122–3, 125.

²² Graffy, *Bed and Sofa*, 73.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73–4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 90–1.

Sofa, is set among the *Komsomol* youth and a certain standard of behavior is therefore expected of the protagonists. When Katia falls pregnant, however, her boyfriend Andrei tells her to abort the baby. Katia refuses, so Andrei takes matters into his own hands. Receiving no support from the ineffectual head of their *Komsomol* group, he turns to Mot'ka, a hooligan, believing his claim that if his gang rapes Katia her pregnancy will be "liquidated."²⁵ However, after his attempt to lure Katia to the gang's hideout is discovered, Andrei is tried and dismissed from the *Komsomol*, whose members promise to support Katia and her baby, thereby compensating for their leader's earlier failure. Denise Youngblood suggests that Ermler intended to make a film in support of the growing campaign against abortion,²⁶ and the film's conclusion seems to support this. We see a close-up of a woman's furious eyes (Figure 6) and an intertitle asks, "Who is to blame?" [Kto vinovat?], encouraging viewers to consider who bears responsibility for Katia's experience.

INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE

There are several differences between these two films. The most striking one is that while the Soviet state is remarkable by its absence in *Bed and Sofa*, in *The Parisian Cobbler* the state, through the *Komsomol*, does step in to assume responsibility for the baby. The treatment of abortion nonetheless shares significant similarities. In both cases, the male protagonists refuse to accept responsibility for the child they have fathered and attempt to impose their assumed patriarchal authority on their pregnant partners, insisting on a termination. In both cases, the women resist the men's authority, choosing to keep the baby. Finally, in both cases the film-makers condemn the men, with the condemnation becoming significantly harsher in *The Parisian Cobbler* (the later film) and involving an element of social/state punishment. Thus they introduce a narrative model that would be repeated and developed in subsequent films.

The 1930s and 1940s: Abortion and Stalinist Cinema

In the early 1930s, the ratio of abortions to births rose sharply and demographic anxieties intensified.²⁷ Concurrently, Stalin's "Great Retreat" engineered a return to traditional gender roles, and state policy became increasingly pro-natalist. An article published on 23 May 1935 in *Pravda*, the Communist Party's official newspaper, announced that "[i]n our country, the mother figure is one of the most respected. We reserve the best conditions for our mothers [...] to give birth... while the barbarian capitalists are depriving their women of what is most dear to them: their right to childbirth."²⁸ Just over a year later, on 27 July 1936, abortion was re-criminalized. That same year, Room's *Bed and Sofa* was banned from exhibition.²⁹ Its nuanced stance on abortion and ambiguous open ending did not satisfy the increasingly hard-line authorities.

It is unsurprising, given shifts in state policy on abortion and the increasing pressure placed on film-makers to make unambiguous ideological films, that films made in the 1930s are wholly negative in their treatment of abortion. A less predictable shift sees women sometimes being cast as the parent who desires abortion, against the wishes of the father, whose patriarchal authority to decide the matter is, in such cases, often upheld by the films' resolution. In Mark Gall's *I Don't Want a Child* [Ne khochu rebenka, 1930], when Ol'ga decides to have a termination in order to continue as factory worker and *Komsomol* member,

²⁵ Ibid., 62.

²⁶ Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses*, 145.

²⁷ Avdeev et al., "The History of Abortion," 41–2, 60.

²⁸ Ibid., 43.

²⁹ Graffy, *Bed and Sofa*, 101.

her husband enlists her fellow workers to dissuade her.³⁰ As Ol'ga prepares to give birth, it is announced that her factory is opening a nursery where her baby can be looked after, while she works. As Gall's film therefore shows, while a woman's working role was a crucial feature of Soviet womanhood, maternity was also expected. Indeed, as our discussion of later 1930s films shows, motherhood was frequently coded as a *sine qua non*, a non-negotiable pre-requisite for Soviet women who aspired to excel in other Soviet roles. Here, then, the state steps in, gently demonstrating its authority and enabling Ol'ga to combine motherhood with her existing Soviet responsibilities. In later Stalinist films, model Soviet women will be shown achieving this through their own actions.

As the 1930s advanced, the contrast between protagonists who embrace parenthood and those who reject it was increasingly used to suggest a value judgment. The idea that characters who promote abortion should be "punished" was also developed. In Eduard Ioganson's comedy *The Crown Prince of the Republic* [Naslednyi prints respubliki, 1934], when Sergei tries to persuade his pregnant wife Natasha to have an abortion, arguing that a baby will hinder his work, Natasha nonetheless continues with the pregnancy. After a series of adventures, the film ends happily: Natasha rejects Sergei, the reluctant father, and leaves with Andrei, who is willing to help her raise the child.³¹ Thus Andrei becomes the first in a line of model (surrogate) fathers, who – unlike Kolia and Volodia in *Bed and Sofa* – are happy to raise another man's child.

These dynamics are exploited in two mid-1930s "sport [fizkul'tura] films", which both feature a pregnant runner. In Iurii Zheliabuzhskii's *Miss Ellen Grey's Laurels* [Lavry Miss Ellen Grei, 1935], Tania is so obsessed by beating the record held by the American athlete Ellen Grey that she decides to terminate her pregnancy to focus on running, despite her husband's conviction that this is wrong.³² When a female doctor – the voice of state authority³³ – refuses to give Tania an abortion, telling her that it will ruin her health and that her motives are "weak" [neosnovatel'ny], Tania goes ahead with the procedure elsewhere.³⁴ Despite training hard, Tania is beaten into third place in the race. Significantly, the woman who wins is a mother, a fact that is emphasized, as Samuel Goff observes, by her child's noisy celebration: "Daddy, look! Mummy's come first!" [Papa, smotri! Mama pervaiia!].³⁵

This plot is reprised, with significant variations, in Igor' Savchenko's *A Chance Encounter* [Sluchainaia vstrecha], released on 21 October 1936, almost three months after abortion had been banned. When Irina, a toy-factory worker, meets Grisha, a sports instructor, they fall in love. Grisha is training Irina, a talented runner, for the All-Union *Spartakiada* games in Moscow, but she falls pregnant. Believing (as Tania did) that pregnancy will scupper Irina's chance of winning, Grisha angrily rejects the pregnancy. While he does not utter the word "abortion" – in the contemporary ideological climate he could not, of course, do so – his meaning is clear. Horrified, Irina has the baby on her own. Three years pass before Irina can resume running, but when she does, she not only wins the race, but also breaks the national women's record. Thus Savchenko rewards Irina for her socially conscious, Soviet choice of continuing her pregnancy and prioritizing motherhood over sporting success. That her victory, like Tania's defeat, is contingent upon her maternity

³⁰ Ibid., 108.

³¹ On this film see Widdis, "Child's Play," 327–8.

³² We are grateful to Julian Grafty for providing us with his viewing notes on this film. We also thank him for reading early drafts of this chapter and for making many invaluable suggestions.

³³ It is noteworthy that here, as in some later films, a female doctor speaks against abortion. However, while the medical profession is no longer represented as a realm of male authority, as in *Bed and Sofa*, female medical personnel do not display compassion or understanding; instead, they are often brusquely dismissive, as here.

³⁴ This plot detail is confirmed in Sobolev, *Iurii Zheliabuzhskii*, 123–4 and in contemporary sources, such as "Lavry Miss Ellen Grei".

³⁵ Goff, "Physical Culture," 166.

is emphasized: while the spectators applaud, Irina embraces her daughter. By contrast, Grisha – who, as Graffy observes, “cannot understand or support the film’s main ideological position, the cult of the child”³⁶ – is punished; shunned by Irina and their child, he is replaced by Petr, an ideal father figure who supported Irina’s decision to keep the baby from the outset (Figure 7).³⁷

INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE

The state’s promotion of motherhood as the Soviet woman’s patriotic duty reached its apotheosis in the mid-1940s, partly because of the devastating impact of the Second World War on the population. On 8 July 1944, Stalin instituted the Motherhood Medal [Medal’ materinstva], to be awarded to women who bore and raised five or six children, the Order of Maternal Glory [Orden “Materinskaia slava”], for mothers of seven to nine children, and – the highest honor of all – the title Mother-Heroine [Mat’-geroina], to be conferred on mothers of ten or more children.³⁸ While abortion effectively disappeared from the Stalinist fiction films after its criminalization in 1936, the positive-negative opposition of women with children and those without continued.

The 1950s: Abortion and “Thaw-era” Cinema

The ban on abortion remained in force for almost two decades, until Nikita Khrushchev overturned it in 1955. As in 1920, however, this was not a recognition of women’s right to choose, but a pragmatic attempt, once again, to reduce underground abortions. Policy under Khrushchev remained firmly pro-natalist, and the government concurrently launched an extensive anti-abortion campaign, which sought to promote fear of the procedure by emphasizing its emotional and physical risks.

Film-makers also began to address abortion again, most noticeably in Vasilii Ordynskii’s *A Person is Born* [Chelovek rodilsia, 1956]. The opening sequence, in a maternity hospital, introduces Nadia, who, unlike the other new mothers, has no husband to send her gifts or letters. A flashback explains why. After arriving in Moscow from the provinces, with hopes of entering university, Nadia had naively entered a relationship with Vitalii and become pregnant. Their relationship had ended when Vitalii berated Nadia for refusing “a first-rate solution” [pervosortnyi vykhod] to this problem: an abortion that he has arranged for her. His phrasing – “I have a tame doctor” [I vrach svoi chelovek] – makes it clear that he has found himself in, and extricated himself from, such situations before.

In its representation of abortion and of characters who promote it, *A Person Is Born* is faithful to the formulae established in earlier films. Thus Vasilii, a “Thaw-era” addition to the long line of fathers who shirked their parental responsibility in the 1920s and 1930s, is unambiguously condemned. Towards the end, Vasilii’s father visits Nadia. On hearing how his son has treated her, the father twice calls him a “scoundrel” [podlets], the word used of Kolia and Volodia in *Bed and Sofa*.³⁹ When he next sees Vasilii, he slaps him. Moreover, as in earlier films, the abortion-promoting “scoundrel” is replaced in the family by a better man/father-figure, the kind-hearted Gleb, who has consistently supported Nadia and her

³⁶ Graffy, “An unpretentious picture?,” 311.

³⁷ The film’s pro-natalist message is bolstered by the fact that the protagonists work in a toy factory; accordingly, the film is “marked by the ubiquitousness of children” and their doting parents. Ibid., 306–7. See also Widdis, “Child’s Play.”

³⁸ Bridger, “Heroine Mothers,” 105.

³⁹ It seems likely that this intertextuality was intended. Documents recording a discussion of the script at the *Mosfil’m* studio reveal that the film was assigned to be made in Abram Room’s workshop. “Shirokoekrannogo goria u nas net,” 55.

child. Thus, by the end of the film, Nadia's explanation that she failed the math test in her university entrance examination because "I forgot the formula" [Zabylyla formulu] has acquired an ironic note.

Members of the *Mosfil'm* studio's Artistic Council were also alert to the schematic nature of these elements of the film's plot and characterization. Mikhail Papava, who praised the film for tackling "such an important theme," commented that its weakest feature was Gleb's role, which was too "functional" [funktsional'no], adding that the character of Vitalii's father also lacked depth.⁴⁰ In other respects, however, there is much in *A Person Is Born* that is new. In his discussion of the theme of happiness in Soviet films from 1956, Graffy describes the film as "one of the [...] least formulaic" in this regard, since Nadia is implicitly depicted as "living with depression."⁴¹ Josephine Woll also comments on the "originality" of its portrayal of the heroine's personal growth and life as a single mother.⁴² For, while *Bed and Sofa* had ended with Liuda's decision to ignore male authority/advice and reject abortion in favor of motherhood, in *A Person Is Born* Nadia makes this decision at the very start. The film's focus is therefore not Nadia's decision itself, but rather the impact that her refusal to abort her baby has on her life. The film charts in vivid detail the practical and emotional challenges she faces as a single mother, thus developing and complicating the representation of motherhood as personal liberation expressed in Room's film.

Another late-1950s film that touched on abortion was Sergei Gerasimov's enduringly popular *And Quiet Flows the Don* [Tikhii Don, 1957–58], an adaptation of Mikhail Sholokhov's novel (1928–32, 1940), in which Natal'ia dies a painful death after undergoing a back-street abortion. Amy Randall describes how 1960s public-health literature exploited the film's "cultural currency," using Natal'ia's demise to exemplify the dangers of illegal abortion.⁴³ State medical authorities even recommended that doctors should read excerpts from the novel at public lectures, because it would have a "significant emotional impact on women listeners."⁴⁴

The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s: Abortion and Brezhnevite Cinema

The anti-abortion campaign intensified during the Brezhnev era (1964–82), as termination rates continued to rise. From the mid-1960s, films featuring abortion became more numerous, invariably resorting to scaremongering and moralizing, thereby mirroring the approach of contemporary anti-abortion campaigns. In Pavel Liubimov's *The Women* [Zhenshchiny, 1965], for example, Dusia's decision to have an abortion leaves her sterile, ashamed and bitter. Years later, she meets Alia, a younger woman who has become pregnant in similar circumstances. Despite her own struggles, Dusia questions Alia's decision to continue with her pregnancy. As in Stalinist films, however, the female protagonists' fates appear to be dictated by their decisions: while Dusia is punished for her abortion, Alia is rewarded for keeping her baby with a promising relationship with the son of Dusia's friend Katia. In line with the tendency of "Thaw-era" films to refuse black-and-white binaries, however, Liubimov – who trained during the political and artistic Thaw under Khrushchev – endows his protagonists with a complexity that was lacking in Stalinist films. Thus he allows Dusia to redeem herself through a good action: when Katia attempts to thwart Alia's relationship with her son, Dusia opens Katia's eyes to her mean-spiritedness, encouraging the potential reconciliation of the couple.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 55–6.

⁴¹ Graffy, "But Where Is Your Happiness," 234.

⁴² Woll, *Real Images*, 44.

⁴³ Randall, "Abortion," 18.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

A striking use of the trope of abortion is found in Aleksandr Askol'dov's *The Commissar* [Komissar, 1967, released 1988]. Intended to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Revolution and set during the Russian Civil War (1917–1922), the film displeased the authorities and was shelved for over twenty years. The censorship documents show that the main problems were the director's sympathetic treatment of the film's Jewish subject and protagonists and his representation of Bolshevik/Russian femininity, through the figure of the eponymous Red Army Commissar, Klavdiia Vavilova.⁴⁵ Heavily pregnant, but only because she could not leave the front in time for a termination, Vavilova repeatedly expresses anger about this, cursing the doctor who refused to carry out a late-term abortion and telling Mariia, the Jewish mother-of-six with whose family she is billeted to give birth, that she tried to rid herself of her unborn child by drinking iodine.

Mariia's shocked reaction to Vavilova's admission makes it clear that she considers her desire for an abortion unnatural and inhuman: "Oh, my God! This woman has lost her mind! Your words will make stones cry. One shouldn't even say such things about the children of one's worst enemy. And you're speaking of your own flesh and blood!" Her words reiterate one of the key tenets of contemporary pro-natalist rhetoric which stressed that "choosing motherhood was natural whereas choosing abortion was unnatural."⁴⁶ The opposition of the "natural" and the "unnatural" is further embodied in the contrast between Mariia and Vavilova, reflected in their different physicalities, clothes, behavior, language and voices. Mariia, with her brood of children, represents the "natural" feminine values that the "unnatural"/masculine Vavilova lacks.

While this black-and-white binary representation of abortion and motherhood is not new, the use that Askol'dov makes of it is. Vavilova is a Commissar, the quintessential ideological figure. The "unnatural"/negative qualities associated with her therefore also extend into the film's portrayal of the values of the Revolution. As Evgenii Surkov, the associate chairman of the State Cinema Committee [Goskomitet] and chief editor of its Scenario Board, observed in 1966, echoing Mariia's response to Vavilova's desire for an abortion:

We all know that the Revolution [...] has revealed [...] humanity to millions of people [...]. Thus we cannot accept the fact that [...] the Revolution appears as a force which distorts the human nature of the heroine, depriving her of simple everyday feelings, even of the instincts of motherhood, love, and femininity.⁴⁷

In this way, the trope of abortion is fundamental to Askol'dov's depiction of the Revolution, the cause Vavilova represents. The inhumanity expressed in Vavilova's desire to abort her unborn child creates an image of a monstrous Mother Russia, devoid of maternal feeling, which fails to affirm the positive humanistic values of the Revolution that commemorative films were expected to celebrate.⁴⁸

A less contentious treatment of abortion is found in Liubimov's *A School Waltz* [Shkol'nyi val's, 1979], produced at the Maksim Gor'kii Central Studio for Children's and Young People's Films. More explicitly pro-natalist than his earlier *The Women*, this film

⁴⁵ Stishova, "Passions over *Commissar*," 62–75.

⁴⁶ Randall, "Abortion," 20.

⁴⁷ Stishova, "Passions over *Commissar*," 67.

⁴⁸ This representation is gradually complicated, for motherhood transforms Vavilova: her "natural" femininity emerges, displacing the "masculine"/ideological persona of Commissar. Finally, however, Vavilova is faced with another choice: remain with her son or re-join her battalion to fight the Whites. For many viewers, her decision to leave the baby was even more contentious than her desire for an abortion. See Berghahn, "Do the Right Thing?," 568–70.

actively re-enforces the Brezhnevite anti-abortion campaign through its *mise-en-scène*. When the teenaged Zosia goes to an abortion clinic, the prominent poster in the background features the silhouette of a crying woman alongside a wilting flower. In case the viewer misses the symbolism, it is emblazoned with the word “Abortion”. This detail explicitly recalls contemporary health-education posters, which often used the metaphor of a dead or dying flower to suggest that abortion would have a negative impact on future fertility.⁴⁹ A nurse reinforces this message, informing Zosia that there is a 90% chance of infertility, or even death, following a termination and thus becoming, like the female doctor in *Miss Ellen Grey’s Laurels*, the uncompromising voice of state authority. Unsurprisingly, Zosia elects to continue with the pregnancy.

In earlier films, as we have seen, it was often the biological father who pressured his pregnant partner to have an abortion. Here, however, Zosia’s boyfriend Gosha plays no part in her decision and the figure who attempts to exercise authority over Zosia is her mother, Ella. As she takes Zosia to the clinic, Ella complains that she is tired of explaining why abortion is the best option, reminding Zosia of the wonderful opportunities her future holds. As Olga Klimova observes, Ella’s authority is, however, undermined from the outset: she is conducting an affair, which leaves her indifferent to her daughter – she is unaware of Gosha’s presence when he and Zosia consummate their relationship (the presumed moment of conception).⁵⁰ By comparison, Zosia is shown to be a “mature young woman with the ‘proper’ moral values.”⁵¹ Klimova argues that through this battle between parent and child, Liubimov attempts, within the confines of censorship, to express dissatisfaction with the state, suggesting that in the film “abortion functions as a metaphor of the ‘corrective’ politics, which authoritative (parental) figures use to adjust citizens’ (teenagers’) behavior and actions.”⁵²

The failings of this apparent authority figure are fundamentally important. The argument that Ella represents the authority of the state is undermined, however, by the fact that her advocacy for an abortion directly contradicts contemporary anti-abortion policy, articulated in the clinic sequence. Thus Ella’s advice is simply another example of her flawed authority. The film’s theme of generational conflict therefore appears to function to encourage teenagers and young women – the film’s intended audience – to have the confidence to ignore “bad” advice, even when proffered by parental authority figures, and instead to make the ideologically “correct” decision of continuing with the pregnancy.

The tendency toward plotlines in which women reject abortion continued throughout the Brezhnevite period. In Vladimir Men’shov’s academy award-winning *Moscow Doesn’t Believe in Tears* [*Moskva slezam ne verit*, 1980], set initially in 1958, Katerina falls pregnant after Rodion forces himself on her. When she breaks the news to him, the pregnancy is already advanced: Katerina recounts that she attempted to get a termination, but it was too late. Rodion refuses to take responsibility for the pregnancy and, in an outburst that demonstrates the film-makers’ understanding of the thematic tradition within which they are working, he explicitly alludes to the gendered treatment of the themes of pregnancy and abortion. Accusing Katerina of attempting to cast him in the role “of a negative hero” [*otritsatel’nogo geroia*], he says that he feels like a character in a play with a familiar plotline: “She’s expecting a baby, but he doesn’t want it. He’s a scoundrel [*podlets*] and she’s saintly [*sviataia*].” (Figure 8). It is revealing that the word that Rodion here uses ironically – “scoundrel” – is the word used to condemn the reluctant fathers in both Room’s *Bed and Sofa* and Ordynskii’s *A Person Is Born*. Rodion also refers ironically to the political myth of

⁴⁹ Randall, “Abortion,” 21.

⁵⁰ Klimova, “Soviet Youth Films,” 138.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 145.

motherhood as a sacred [sviatoe] undertaking, as Putin would do, “without any irony,” almost forty years later.

INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE

There is no further discussion of this issue. Katerina has the baby (Figure 9). The action then jumps to 1979, and, as in Stalinist films, Katerina is rewarded for continuing with her pregnancy, achieving both professional success (becoming a factory director) and, eventually, personal success (happiness in a romantic relationship). For Ariel Noffke, the fact that none of the film’s three female protagonists undergoes an abortion makes its representation of their lives unrealistic.⁵³ While the absence of abortion might not convey the social reality of the time, however, it does reflect the contemporary pro-natalist ideological reality of both periods in which the film’s action is set.

INSERT FIGURE 9 HERE

As Sue Bridger demonstrates, during the late 1970s and early 1980s the Stalinist theme of the “mother-heroine” was resurrected, becoming the focus of sustained propaganda campaigns that sought to reverse demographic decline.⁵⁴ Iurii Egorov’s *One Day Twenty Years Later* [Odnazhdy dvadtsat´ let spustia, 1981] reflects this ideological imperative, featuring a “mother-heroine” with ten children. Nadezhda (whose name means “hope”) cheerfully lectures guests on what France can do to reverse its shrinking population. Though the film acknowledges that she faces difficulties, they do not subdue her desire for more children. When her husband suggests that they do not have to continue a pregnancy that is causing her upset, Nadezhda cannot comprehend his meaning. When she finally does, she finds the idea that she might have an abortion so laughable that it cheers her up. The film’s final shot lionizes her “mother-heroine” status, implicitly valuing it above those of her classmates, who have various careers (such as architect, academic, actress, Navy officer), by locating Nadezhda and her family in the center of the group.

Viacheslav Nikiforov’s *Fruza* [1981], set in the post-war 1940s, also valorizes a woman’s decision to keep her baby in difficult circumstances and, as a television film, would have conveyed this message to large audiences. Fruza falls pregnant after beginning a relationship with a married man. Her older fellow worker, Drozdova, advises her not to have the child, correctly predicting that Fruza will be ostracized when people learn about her pregnancy, but Fruza rejects her counsel. As she breast-feeds her baby in hospital, she fantasizes that her colleagues will welcome the new-born and congratulate her. However, despite a kindly nurse’s prediction that “Everything will be OK,” only Drozdova visits Fruza. In the film’s final sequence, Drozdova urges Fruza to enter their workplace, but Fruza hesitates and remains outside, alone. It seems initially that she is scared, but it soon becomes clear that the intention is programmatic, for Fruza turns to face the camera, which begins to track in on her until she is framed in medium close-up. Throughout the track-in, Fruza, holding her baby tightly, meets the gaze of the camera, breaking the fourth wall (Figure 10). This powerful moment of direct address sends a clear message to the viewer: Motherhood has conferred on Fruza new strength and self-belief. She made the right choice. Everything *is* OK.

FIGURE 10 HERE

⁵³ Noffke, “Abortion Culture,” 29.

⁵⁴ Bridger, “Heroine Mothers,” 105, 107.

Conclusion

The films discussed in this chapter were made over a period of almost 60 years during which the Soviet Union saw three leaders and three significant changes in state policy on the status of abortion: legalization in 1920, banning in 1936 and re-legalization in 1955. There are, nonetheless, similarities in their treatment of abortion. Most films, with the exception of Askol'dov's *The Commissar*, make it clear that choosing motherhood over abortion eventually ensures the success and happiness of the pregnant woman, and sometimes, by extension, that of the Motherland/nation as a whole. Protagonists – male and female – who promote or choose motherhood are “rewarded,” whether with personal happiness, social inclusion, or success in other areas of their Soviet lives. Conversely, those who promote, desire, or undergo abortion are invariably “punished,” whether with personal unhappiness, social exclusion or failure. By neglecting to promote motherhood, they have stepped outside socio-ideological doctrine and are held to account for this transgression.

On the surface level of plot, therefore, Soviet cinema's representation of abortion does appear to reflect the extra-diegetic bio-political authority of the Soviet state, as embodied in abortion legislation and policy. That is not to say, however, that the films act as blunt instruments of state authority. While some do represent abortion in ways that recall the methods of state campaigns against it – consider the scaremongering poster and the rhetoric of the nurse in *A School Waltz* and Natal'ia's death-bed scene in *And Quiet Flows the Don*, for example – many use abortion for much broader purposes, as a device through which to explore social questions about changing gender and generational roles and relations and, in the case of *The Commissar*, to reassess a key moment of Soviet history.

Thus, despite the broad similarities apparent in the films' approaches to abortion as an element of plot, there are also significant differences in the treatment of the theme across the period. While Stalinist films show motherhood as a non-negotiable duty and abortion as an unutterable, un-Soviet error, films made in other Soviet periods represent the decision to reject abortion in more personal terms, as a statement of female autonomy and a rejection of the “traditional authority” invested in husbands/boyfriends and parents/older “mentor” figures. Films such as *Bed and Sofa* and *A Person is Born*, for example, thus demonstrate an interest in the female perspective that Stalinist films lack. In this way, they challenge the prevailing socio-ideological stances on abortion. After all, the legalization of abortion was not motivated by a belief in the right of women to choose either in 1920 or in 1955. In depicting female protagonists who actively assert this right, the makers of these two films are perhaps suggesting that it should have been.

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