

## Difficult Cases: Communist Morality, Gender and Embodiment in Thaw Cinema

The paper explores cinematic sensibility in Larisa Shepitko's *Wings* and Dinara Asanova's *Rudol'fio* within the broader context of the Thaw cinema and Communist morality. Both films became 'gender trouble' for the audience and censors, and were considered controversial by their contemporaries. The aim of the paper is to explore how women filmmakers used the aesthetic pluralism of the Thaw to embed a critique of the standards of Communist morality. The paper begins with analyzing Communist morality and its reconfigurations during the Thaw. It claims that Shepitko and Asanova revealed non-normative experiences of womanhood and girlhood as complex, yet legitimate. Drawing on recent theories of 'haptic' in cinema, special attention is paid to the aesthetic strategies used by the filmmakers to encourage an embodied connection between the spectator and the film. The foregrounding of this connection can lead us to a better understanding of the interrelation between the aesthetics of the film, the politics of emotions and gender/sexual norms in the Soviet society.

Keywords: Asanova; Shepitko; Communist morality; gender; sexuality; haptic

### Introduction

This article will revisit Thaw cinema<sup>1</sup> and point to several ways in which we can analyze Soviet society, using contemporary feminist methodologies and gender/queer theories. First of all, it will turn to the notion of Communist morality. This notion encompasses the discursive shift that happened during the Thaw, with regard to the political regulation of gender and sexuality. Secondly, the article will touch upon the cinematic shift away from socialist realism in the mid-1950-1960s. Finally, it will provide an analysis of two case studies – *Kryl'ia* (*Wings*, 1966) by Larisa Shepitko and *Rudol'fio* (1969) by Dinara Asanova. I will argue that both directors problematized the existing norms and categories of Soviet womanhood/girlhood. They did so by turning to characters and plots that reflected gender variation existing in Soviet society, yet were

in the spotlight of the public debates of the time and were considered non-normative ‘difficult cases’ by official discourse.

For the analysis I chose the relatively new theoretical base that pays attention to the haptic expression and perception of a film, and which was developed by feminist art and film scholars: Vivian Sobchack (1992; 2004), who first emphasized spectatorship as an embodied experience, and Laura Marks (2000; 2002), who developed the theory of haptic visuality in cinema; as well as Jennifer Barker (2009) who wrote on cinematic tactility. Emma Widdis (2005; 2012) was among the first scholars to successfully apply haptic theories to Soviet material. In her work on early Soviet cinema Widdis argued that sensation and embodied experience occupied a central place in the construction and remaking of the Soviet subject. In her later work Widdis (2017) traces two competing tendencies that structured early Soviet culture – emancipation of the senses and control of the senses. This article will emphasize the role of sensory cinematic experiences in the representation and production of the Soviet subject as gendered and sexual.

Several terms, relevant to contemporary theories of hapticity and embodiment,<sup>2</sup> will be used in this article: haptic visuality, kinaesthetics and proprioception. In haptic visuality eyes are provoked by particular cinematic strategies into functioning as organs of touch: not perceiving the objects in the frame as distinct forms, but rather grasping them or sliding over the surface of the screen (Marks 2000). Jennifer Barker (2009, 37) emphasizes that the haptic includes tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive modes of touch. Kinaesthetics relates to the movement of the body, and proprioception relates to the position of the body in space; both the kinaesthetics and proprioception of film engage the entire body to function and react as an organ of touch. Anne Rutherford (2003) reconceptualises embodied vision as ‘an inherently tactile, and thereby

simultaneously affective process'. While this article will not engage fully with the contemporary debate on affect and emotion,<sup>3</sup> it nevertheless recognizes spectatorship as an affective embodied experience and suggests that the spectator's identification often occurs beyond the narrative of the film and through sensory affective/emotional connection.

I suggest that the analysis of what I term haptic aesthetics<sup>4</sup> in *Wings* and *Rudolf'fio* allows us to explore how women filmmakers used sensory cinematic experience in a strategic way for creating an embodied and emotional connection between a film and its audience. While this strategy was often effective, it also made the films 'difficult cases' for Soviet censorship and normative audiences. The reactions to *Wings* and *Rudolf'fio* show them to be litmus tests indicative of broader shifts in Soviet society.

### **Communist morality, (*pere*)vospitanie and gender during the 1950-1960s**

Although Thaw gender and sexual order continued to be etacratie (determined by state policy), the 1950-1960s were a period of their reshaping (and of anxieties accompanying the changes). Stalinist gender politics were characterized by repressive legal measures aimed at strengthening official marriages and the implementation of compulsory motherhood (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003), which included the banning of abortions and complicating divorce procedure. Sexual politics were marked by the criminalization of male homosexuality. During the war the shortage of human and material resources led to the mass mobilization of women in the army and industry – yet women still had to carry the double burden of a 'working mother' role. After the war the demographic balance changed greatly: women significantly outnumbered men, many of them were widows or single mothers (Ilic, Reid, and Attwood 2004). As Stalinist gender politics returned to its traditionalist mainstream, women were pushed

out of the well-paid professions where they had been working during the war (Ilic, Reid, and Attwood 2004).

Khrushchev's government condemned Stalinist repressions and turned instead to the ideological apparatus as a means of regulating Soviet citizenship. Great emphasis was put on (self-)monitoring and the participation of the collective in the *vospitanie*<sup>5</sup> (moral education) and *perevospitanie* (moral re-education) of the individual. Voluntary brigades (*druzhiny*) patrolled the streets, while civic organizations, party cells and comrades' courts were involved in regulating Soviet citizens' behavior in the workplace or at home (see, e.g., Fitzpatrick [2008]; Zhidkova [2008]). The central moral tenets of the 'proper' Soviet identity of the Thaw were finally formulated in *The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism* (*Moral'nyi kodeks stroitel'ia kommunizma*), adopted by the XXII Communist Party Congress in 1961. The code included such principles as 'a high sense of public duty', 'moral purity', 'modesty', an 'uncompromising attitude to parasitism' and 'mutual respect in the family and concern for the upbringing of children' (Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuza 1961, 121). In the words of Chuikina (2002, 111),

Communist morality justified the need for the state control over private life by the search for political enemies, whose true faces could be seen in corruption in *byt*, including non-Soviet behavior in love.

In rhetorical opposition to the 'corrupted West', family, reproduction and 'good' (controlled and monogamous) heterosexuality were considered to be the building blocks of Communist morality.<sup>6</sup> It is unsurprising, therefore, that the criminalization of male homosexuality and prostitution continued to exist during the Thaw; female homosexuality was regarded as a perversion and treated by psychiatrists (see Healey [2008] on this topic). Various other forms of non-normative gender and sexual behavior

(for instance, nonconforming appearance, adultery or debauchery) could equally fall under a definition of ‘anti-social behaviour’ or parasitism. If publicly identified, practitioners were to be punished and transformed into ‘proper’ Soviet citizens.

One of the significant traits of the Thaw’s shift in gender politics was the reinvigoration of the ‘woman question’. The XX Party Congress addressed the problems of women’s political participation and their everyday lives. Many Stalinist initiatives were abolished: abortion was legalized in 1955; divorce procedures were simplified in 1968, and the children of unmarried parents were given legal recognition. However, as stated by Susan Reid, ‘in this, as in other regards, the Khrushchev regime’s policies and rhetoric were inconsistent, contradictory, and paternalistic’ (1999, 284). The official discourse of the Thaw proclaimed the heteronormative alignment of biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles. Pro-natalist state politics pushed forward the ideology of maternity as natural woman’s destiny (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2003, 315). Blaming Stalinist politics for the ‘masculinization’ of Soviet women (Pushkareva 2012), the official rhetoric of the Thaw now insisted on the complementarity of genders (active male and passive female) and reaffirmed femininity. Women were encouraged to (re)educate themselves as to proper gender roles (appearance, manners, courtship, relationships), and didactic advice was inculcated through public discussions and mass media (Field 2007).

### **Cinematic Thaw: between the private and political**

While ideological campaigns were creating an image of homogeneous Soviet society following the norms of Communist morality, Thaw society was often struggling over where to draw the imaginary line between moral and immoral. The role of art (and cinema in particular) in this struggle was crucial. From the 1950s on, state support for Soviet cinema created favorable conditions for directors. The ‘softer’ ideological

climate and a certain weakening of censorship allowed young directors to move away from the strict limits of socialist realism to less confined and more experimental works. The cinema of the Thaw became variously experimental, poetical, tragi-comic and grotesque (Chernyshova 2006). Accordingly, cinema's stylistics shifted from strict subservience to the public demands of socialist realism and explored the ebb and flow of complex, more private emotions in the Thaw.

The broader cinematic context of the Thaw was distinguished by several key factors. First of all, the 'return to Leninist norms' proclaimed at the XX Communist Party Congress was accompanied by the rehabilitation of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s. The attention to *faktura* (texture, material) emphasized by avant-garde artists became important for the cinematic aesthetics of the 1960s. Sergei Yutkevich, who (among other famous avant-garde directors) taught in VGIK during the Thaw, understood by good *faktura* 'authentic materials (architecture, furniture, objects, costume) and the combination of construction/lighting/camerawork that would convey those materials in their full affective power' (Widdis, 2017). Secondly, the films of the European 'new waves' which were screened at film festivals in the 1950s and 60s, not only became a 'breath of freedom' for Soviet viewers (Frumkina 2009), but also had a great influence on Soviet filmmakers in terms of their aesthetics (Shemiakin 1996). Finally, the sensibility of Thaw cinema was greatly influenced by a broader discussion on *iskrennost'* (sincerity) in literature and cinema which argued for discarding formal clichés and introducing the themes and conflicts of everyday life (Pomerantsev 1953; Nekrasov 1959).

As in Thaw literature, in cinema 'relationships between sexes become a symbol of life's complexity' (Litovskaia and Sozina 2004, 287). However, while literature actively ventured beyond the boundary of the normative (for instance, openly exploring

the theme of adultery), the cinema of the Thaw was more confined and controlled by the state. As Khrushchev believed that films are easier to understand than books (Cohen 1974, 4), cinema continued its function of education of the masses, providing them with role models and approved patterns of behaviour. Therefore, before a film was released, it had to go through numerous committees and stages of censorship, ensuring that its message and form would fulfil its role of educating the spectator in conformity with accepted ideological norms, performing the reciprocal tasks of building communism and guiding the spectator's moral development. While undoubtedly more ideologically open than during the Stalinist era, the censorship apparatus often acted without any logic, and only the most persistent and patient directors could succeed in keeping the amount of modifications to a minimum (Mitta 2002; Grebnev 2002).

### **‘Woman’s question’: Larisa Shepitko’s *Wings***

Male and female directors of the Thaw would famously engage in varying degrees of struggle with the Soviet censor. But female directors faced far greater challenges in all of Thaw cinema's institutional contexts, where their very existence as female directors constituted a challenge to the moral Soviet order which their films were expected to normalize<sup>7</sup>, and thereby construct. Although the pioneering examples of Ol'ga Preobrazhenskaia or Esfir' Shub indicate that women directors were always present in Soviet cinema, political visibility of women in filmmaking was quite marginal. The book *Soviet Film Directors About Cinema* (*Sovetskie kinorezhissery o kino*, Gromov 1986) features two women directors (Larisa Shepitko and Esfir' Shub) out of a total 47, while another edition, *Who Is Who in Soviet Cinema* (*Kto est' kto v sovetskom kino*, Dolmatovskaia and Shilova 1978) features no women directors at all. Maria Vizitei (1993) convincingly described the long tradition of institutional and societal barriers that Soviet women directors had to face: from discrimination during

their VGIK studies to sexist assumptions throughout their career. Remembering her own entrance into filmmaking, Larisa Shepitko (1987, 168) stated:

I belong to the generation that came to cinema at the beginning of the 1960s, when after the XX Congress new names gushed into art, when the countries' studios began to produce not 10-15 films a year, but 120, when VGIK doors opened not only for men, but for women as well. I was sixteen when I got admitted to Dovzhenko's *masterskaia* [workshop]. He would say himself: 'I don't think that they (six girls) would become directors, but in any case, I will try to make them intelligent, educated people'.

Yet, despite such patronizing attitudes to women in filmmaking, the cultural Thaw can be seen as a thaw for women in cinema. The creation of the film *Wings* depended on the collaboration of three talented women. *Wings* was Larisa Shepitko's second film (following *Heat*, which was her diploma project). The script for the film was written by Natal'ia Riazantseva, who later described herself as 'stikhiinaia feministka' (an 'instinctive feminist', Bykov 2007) and who would later work with Kira Muratova. For the actress Maia Bulgakova, the film was to be her first (and only) lead role.

The film tells the story of Nadezhda (Nadia) Petrukhina, a highly decorated war-time pilot, who becomes the head of a technical school after the war. Nadia appears to be living a successful life – she is a principal, a state deputy, and a war hero with her photograph placed in a museum among those of other celebrated heroes. However, she is oddly out of place in post-war society. Memories of the war are both painful and pleasant for the heroine. Nadia loves to fly, and has a deep longing to do so – but has not flown since the war. She is haunted by memories in which she is flying freely through the sky in a plane. But the love of flight is also complex: later in the film we find out that Nadia witnessed the death of her beloved partner, who was also a pilot. In



the final scene she goes to an aviation school and rises to the sky in the plane. We never see if she falls or not.

Nadia is overwhelmingly non-normative throughout the film in her gestures, appearance, rhetoric and actions. She is direct, blunt (*grubovataia*), and describes herself as ‘behaving like a soldier’. She does not strive to conform to Thaw gender conventions of femininity. Nadia is a mother, but her daughter is adopted, and in the conflicts with her adult daughter Nadia does not fit into the stereotype of ‘happy Soviet motherhood’. While she pressures her daughter to get married, Nadia feels uneasy about the societal pressure to get married and live a quiet life ‘for herself’. She still suffers from the effects of demobilization. Accustomed to being in charge during the war, Nadia is seen as too strict for a school principal, and some of her students openly hate her. Nadia also dislikes housework, such as cooking, and considers it mundane. Finally, she drinks beer in a typically men’s café (vodka in the film script) and waltzes with a cafeteria waitress. While contact with men is shown as tragic, annoying or futile, it is the honest communication with a cafeteria waitress – a woman of her generation – that helps Nadia to overcome her war trauma. Certainly, Nadia can be considered a ‘queer’ character, as her behaviour is a dissent against the hegemonic gender and sexual norms of the Thaw.

Shepitko claimed to have based Nadia's character on the life and character of her own mother, changing some details after her mother objected that the plot was too biographical (Romanenko 1990, 30–31). Shepitko’s father left the family with three children when Larisa was very young. The first auto-biographical sketch *Bulka*, which Shepitko wrote for her VGIK entrance exams, reveals the hunger and the hardships that she and her mother endured during and after the war. *Wings* in this regard is less auto-biographical, but almost proto-autoethnographical. It does not merely recount the

narrative of an individual's biographical experiences, but situates those experiences within a broader socio-cultural context, particularly with regard to the stark generational divide between those who had fought in the war, and their children. The director argued (Klimov 1987, 181-182) that her aim was to provide an objective analysis of both generations: that of her of her own, younger generation, and the generation of 'mothers and fathers' and the certain aspects of their complicated fates after the war. She stated:

We tried to analyze the life of Petrukhina from the point of view of the everyday rights of this person. Our heroine tried to live in accordance with her conscience, but at any moment the age set before her new demands and norms. (Klimov 1987, 182)

The notion of 'norms' is perhaps the key to understanding the harsh criticism of the film that would shock Shepitko (Klimov 1987, 181-82). Two lengthy discussions of the film were published in 1966 in the main cinema journal *Iskusstvo kino*. In particular, the heroine's character and behaviour stirred heated debate. One A. Poliantseva, a former pilot, was angered by Nadia's lack of delicacy and gentility. She stated that even during the war all women pilots 'stayed women' in their *byt* and behaviour. Thus, Nadia's character is 'unnatural and totally unacceptable in our socialist society':

Films [...] serve to promote new, communist norms of human relations, to help in the formation of aesthetic tastes and the needs of our youth. The film *Wings* can cause great moral harm to this important cause [...]. ("Kryl'ia" 1966, 16)

Disagreeing with Poliantseva, M. Papava called Nadia's character a 'difficult case' and stated, paradoxically, that the film *was* propaganda for communist ethics:

Only on one condition: if the strict pathos of an artistic study of a 'difficult case', a deviation from the norm, serves as a passionate affirmation of these same norms. ("Kryl'ia" 1966, 16)

In general, reviewers and spectators criticized the character for being ‘hopelessly out of touch with the time’ (Klimov 1987, 254). It is clear that the character’s female masculinity (see Halberstam [1998]) was the main ‘deviation’ that troubled the reviewers.

Analyzing the political potential of transmasculinity in pre-war Soviet culture, Nadia Plungian (2016) emphasizes that the image of a woman pilot was one of the most popular propagandist devices for demonstrating the success of women’s emancipation in the Soviet Union. Plungian claims that, starting from 1932, what she calls ‘masculine representations’ of the Soviet woman (during the 1920s) were slowly replaced by representations of gender difference; yet the mere fact of the existence of such masculine representations in early Soviet culture certainly influenced the actual versions of female masculinity practiced by Soviet women. Changes in society and the new Communist morality discourse orientated at femininity and reproduction transformed post-war female masculinity into ‘gender trouble’. Lilya Kaganovsky (2012, 492) states that ‘late sixties cinema reaffirmed normative sexual difference by giving us image after image of a hardened woman who has lost touch with her “feminine” side’. I will argue that Shepitko’s *Wings* presents a more difficult and complex case that differs from other films of the late sixties: the film offers to the audience a representation of female masculinity as political subjectivity. Contrary to the official norms, female masculinity in *Wings* is not inscribed into the narrative of *perevospitanie* (moral re-education), but rather into a narrative of the recognition of otherness. This recognition takes place when the film makes possible the spectator’s identification with the heroine on an affective level.

*Wings* presents a curious split between its optical and sensory aesthetics that enables film to be read and felt on two contradictory levels. Haptic visuality and the use

of *faktura* in *Wings* encourage the viewer to identify with the character by *feeling* what the character feels. For instance, in the scene on a beach, the camera slides over Nadia's body in a swimsuit while a boy sifts sand on it, which is aimed at creating a pleasant sensation of touch. The spectator both looks at the body and feels the sensations that this body experiences. While throughout the film Nadia is wearing the same dull suit that makes her appearance masculine, the details of her costume (bows, ribbons and thin fabric of the white blouse, as well as thin white scarf that she wears over it) transform close-ups into more haptic, textured images. This is particularly evident in the scenes where Nadia communicates with her friend Pasha. In the script Pasha's (unrequited) romantic feelings towards Nadia are much more evident – he courts her and repeatedly proposes to her (Riazantseva 2007). The film's narrative differs from the script, yet it manages to convey an intimate atmosphere in the scenes of Nadia's and Pasha's conversations. In the scene where Nadia and Pasha spend an evening together in her room, the interior is rich with details (such as the table covered with mugs and saucers). The background is softened by lace curtains on the window – such use of *faktura* encourages the spectator's embodied relation to the film. Rather than a one-dimensional 'hardened' character, Nadia is presented as both 'hard' and 'soft': a character with which one can emphasize.

Instead of providing the basis for full identification with the 'correct' character, the constant ambiguity of the position and the interplay of haptic and optical makes possible the recognition of the *other*: through sensing the *other*, that is, the *other's* existence, vitality, pleasure and pain. Kaganovsky points out (2012, 491) that spectatorial identification with Nadia is difficult, as 'we spent most of the film as if watching her at a distance, and only occasionally seeing the world through her eyes'. Yet, Nadia is often represented in the film through caressing touch: she puts her face

and hands under the pouring rain, touches the wallpaper in Tania's flat and caresses the plane at the end of the film, in which she finally decides to climb. These scenes establish a connection between Nadia's tactility and the spectator's sensory perception. Climbing into the plane is shown as a painful struggle: Nadia constantly slides down the slippery surface, and her grasping the plane's surface encourages the spectator's affective involvement.

On a symbolic level, Nadia becomes an embodied boundary where two different sets of norms meet and collide. The heroine represents the generation of mothers and fathers, who are critically judged by the younger generation in the film. Nadia's rhetoric and actions correspond to the Stalinist ideology of devaluing private life and serving the good of the people. While the official Thaw moral code recognized the primacy of public over private, alternative non-conformist discourses of the younger generation were immersed in the culture of private spaces and feelings. No longer able to exist in the 'past' version of morality, Nadia does not fit into the post-war present, appearing to be alien at a private gathering of her daughter's friends. As such she becomes 'alien' in the terms presented by Sara Ahmed. Ahmed states (2010, 67):

You can be affectively alien because you are affected in the wrong way by the right things. Or you can be affectively alien because you affect others in the wrong way: your proximity gets in the way of other people's enjoyment of the right things, functioning as an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, that disturb the atmosphere.

Nadia's female masculinity 'disturbs the atmosphere' not just in terms of non-normative gender, but also as an unwanted reminder about the gendered experiences of the war and the fates of women war veterans. Ol'ga Nikonova (2005) describes the discrimination and stress frontwomen faced in the traditionalist gender order of now peaceful post-war society. She argues that for a long time women's experiences of the

war were a silenced topic in Soviet discourse. The process of including women in the official war memorial culture started only in the mid-sixties. The multiplicity of reactions to *Wings*, including the reactions of women pilots, reveal that Shepitko managed to raise a disturbing topic of the rights and needs of women veterans, and of the memory of the war, in all its complexity.

The film's script finishes with the heroine being 'normalized' and re-educated: Pasha assures Nadia that she will return to school, and will continue to 'fight' in public life. The film's ending is more open and thus much more provocative. Nadia is rising into the sky in the plane, and the scene ends with a series of landscapes seen from a plane which turns and moves in different directions. Haptic imagery of abstract landscapes repeats throughout the film in the scenes of Nadia remembering being a pilot, and combines with kinaesthetic movement (camera angles), encouraging the sensation of weightlessness. Some reviewers (see, e.g., Woll [2000, 218]) still consider film's ending to symbolize Nadia's death (as an odd, 'failing' character). Shepitko herself was much more optimistic, considering the final flight as a point where Nadia finally recovers from trauma. So does Nadia die at the end of the film or not? Or, rather, can we state any option with certainty despite not *seeing* anything more? It appears that *Wings* does not strive to make a verdict on its character's fate, but rather encourages spectators to 'untrain' both their assumptions and their senses. Yet this powerful effect of a genuinely non-hierarchical relationship with the other – its recognition as 'the same, but different' – is perhaps what troubled the audience and critics.

The film's distribution in 1966 was very limited, it was screened either in villages or in the outskirts of cities (Kushnirov 1968). Then the distribution was stopped, and the film's second premiere took place 10 years later (Klimov 1987, 169). Just like its protagonist, Shepitko's film was defined by its contemporaries as

‘unfeminine’ and ‘the work of a man's hand’ (“Podrobnyi’ Rasgovor” 1966, 28; Turovskaja 1981, 33). And similar to the heroine, the film was perceived as ‘failing’ (“‘Kryl'ia” 1966). Yet Nadia’s presumable ‘failure’ in the eyes of the film’s contemporaries is also an unwanted reminder that

<...> Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (Halberstam 2011, 2–3)

Exploring the sensory possibilities of film, Shepitko makes her commentary on the ‘woman question’ of her time, and reveals the fragile nature of the constructs of heterosexuality, femininity, motherhood, womanhood and Soviet citizenship. While Nadia searches in the film for synonyms to the word 'beginning', the film searches with her and opens up the space for alternative ways of imagining female subjectivity.

### **‘Youth question’: Dinara Asanova’s Rudolfo**

Like that of Shepitko, Asanova’s work was also characterized by ‘masculine’ metaphors (see documentary *Kinorezhysser. Professiia i sud'ba, Dinara Asanova*, Marina Chudina, 2003). Born only four years later than Larisa Shepitko, Dinara Asanova met with her at Kyrgyzfilm studio, working as a crew member for Shepitko's debut film *Heat*. Seeing another woman filmmaker in action has most likely had a positive effect on Asanova, who dreamt of becoming a director from an early age. Also, both Asanova and Shepitko were interested in the relations between different generations. While Shepitko was interested in the generation of mothers and fathers, Asanova explored the younger generation.

Such exploration was very timely. Catriona Kelly (2016, 29) argues that the Thaw made adolescence visible and brought a new perspective on it: it started to be seen as a ‘time of self-exploration and even a modicum of conflict with older

generation'. This shift was accompanied by the anxieties that the youth was slipping out of control and being influenced by corrupted Western values. During the Thaw these anxieties took the form of numerous public discussions. Juvenile delinquency and hooliganism, upbringing and education, morality and maturity were the subject of debate (see, e.g., Fürst [2006]; Healey [2010]; Livschiz [2006]). Ann Livschiz (2006, 117) states:

Anxiety over the state of the minds, hearts and souls of the youngest Soviet citizens was a fairly consistent feature of both public and behind-the-scenes discussions over childhood matters throughout the Soviet era. After all, the future of the Soviet project hinged on the moral purity of the youngest generation.

Soviet cinema about children and adolescents inevitably had to participate in the formation of their 'moral purity' and normalization of existing gender and sexual norms. This normalization was mostly carried out through cinema being a 'mentor' for a younger generation and encouraging the (young) spectator's identification with the (young) main character: 'the screen brings the character extremely close together with the audience' (Begak 1947, 25).

Asanova's approach to childhood and youth differed from the Soviet moralizing discourse of *vospitanie*: she later wrote in her diaries that 'Childhood, youth is not an island, a fragment of life, not a pre-life, but already a life' (Goncharov, n.d.). Thus, Asanova's short film *Rudol'fio* (1969) offers a striking diversion from the normative Soviet coming-of-age narrative. *Rudol'fio* was Asanova's diploma project in VGIK and became the first of many films in which Asanova explored teenagers' lives and characters. In *Rudol'fio*, the life in question is that of Io, a female ninth grade student who falls in love with Rudol'f, an older married man living in a neighbouring building. The short story 'Rudol'fio' by Valentin Rasputin (1965) that served as the basis for a film, is written from Rudol'f's point of view. While Io falls in love with Rudol'f, calls



him every day and clings to him, Rudol'f seems to not respond to her feelings. He is friendly with her, and tries to act as a 'mentor' on Io's mother's request, having a strict conversation with Io about her moral behaviour. The story hints at the romantic and sexual feelings that Rudol'f experiences despite his will, keeping in the background the 'difficult' question of the age of consent.

The film differs greatly from the original story. Catriona Kelly (2016) emphasizes the fact that Asanova set the 'transgressive' story in Riga which was considered more 'western' than Russia. 'Cinematic' Rudol'f, played by Yuri Vizbor, is also much older than his prototype, and his high social status is emphasized in the film: 'Such a man, it was clear, was unlikely to see a schoolgirl's crush as anything more than temporary amusement' (Kelly 2016, 29). The sexual connotations in the story, such as Io commenting on and Rudol'f noticing her physique, are absent from the film. The film's ending also differs from the original. In the original story Rudol'f goes on a date-like walk with Io, but when the girl asks Rudol'f to kiss her, he refuses. Io slaps him and disappears, returning home only the next morning and falling into depression. Another version of *Rudol'fio* filmed by a VGIK student Valentin Kuklev in the same year (1969), features a more dramatic ending – Io commits suicide after Rudol'f's wife shames her at school. In comparison, the ending of Asanova's film is much less heavy-handed. Rudol'f has a 'mentoring' conversation with Io, and after the girl leaves, he looks directly at the audience, smiling: the audience is encouraged to identify with his position as the all-knowing adult who maintains a hierarchical superiority over adolescents. He later comes up to the window to watch Io walk down the street, and rushes to the window again in a moment to see if she is still outside, but observes the empty street instead. The final scenes show Rudol'f walking out of his house on a rainy day, stopping and

thinking about something; and a happy couple walking in a distance. It is clear that the changes were made to emphasize film's mentoring (and moral) role.

Similar to Shepitko's *Wings*, Asanova's *Rudolf'io* is an example of an exploration of non-normative character and female subjectivity. A thin slender girl (antipode of a healthy active Soviet pioneer), Io prefers books and dreams to friends and peers, devalues public duties by skipping school and is outspoken on 'adult' topics such as romance. Moreover, she actively pursues a relationship with a married older man. Acknowledging her 'improper' feelings without any shame while being shamed, Io renders the discourse of *vospitanie* useless: she is not a disobedient child, but a mature person. This behavior vividly contrasts with the widespread negation of adolescent female sexuality in the official rhetoric of the Thaw (Roth-Ey 2004, 89). And while the film encourages the spectators to see the world through 'moralizing' Rudolf's eyes, it also encourages them to feel the world through Io's sensations. Throughout the film Io is represented mainly through touch. She holds Rudolf's hammer, leans on the wall near him, strokes an armchair and bites her fingers while listening to him. Io's constant tactile contact with objects is possibly a metaphor for her still being a child and playing with the objects around her. However, this tactility can also be said to function as a displacement of Io's longing to touch Rudolf. Provoking sensorial memories of touch in the spectator becomes a foundation for the spectator's identification with Io.

The film's temporality also plays a role in the construction of the spectator's identification with Io. After meeting Rudolf on the roof, the girl falls in love with him and dances happily. She waltzes gracefully with an imaginary partner, a sequence which is repeated three times. The triple repetition of the same movement creates a 'loop' in the film's narrative, makes the 'body of the film' present and acknowledged as connected to the body of Io. It appears that this scene is (in the words of Jennifer

Barker, 2009, 152) the film's 'act of breath-taking' - taking a moment to unite the spectator's sensations and feelings with Io's infatuation. The temporal dimension is accompanied by the movement of the camera, as it repeatedly zooms onto Io's happy face, drawing the spectator into the scene.

Repeating such 'loops', the film activates the spectator's attention through creating affective ruptures in the narrative of the film. Another 'loop' scene takes place when Io communicates her feelings to Rudol'f for the first time and learns that her love for him is not reciprocated. Io's slow descending of the stairs is repeated twice – echoing with its rhythmical editing the descending of desperate Cleo in *Cleo from 5 to 7* by Agnes Varda (1962). This scene echoes the earlier sequence and contributes to the film's unique flow. It is important that Rudol'f does not witness either of these scenes: the embodied relationship (established between the spectator and the film through the flow and ruptures of temporality) serves to provide the identification not with Rudol'f (and his attitude to Io), but with Io and the inner world of her personal feelings.

Although the genre of the film was defined as a 'lyrical comedy', the reception of *Rudol'fio* by the reviewing committee of Lenfil'm was devoid of any humour. As stated in the documentary about Asanova, *I Love You All Very Much (Ochen' vas vsekh liubliu*, Igor' Alimpiev, 1987), the film was criticized for 'no coherent authorial perspective in regard to the depicted events' which 'prevented the author from showing an ironic attitude to what happened to the heroine'. The committee's reaction is not surprising. Io and Rudol'f's relationship could not be portrayed without a distancing irony – because of Rudol'f's marriage and the age difference (cross-generational sex was always placed on the 'outer limits' of 'good sexuality', see Rubin [1984]). The film had to be remade in order to emphasize the impossibility of any mutual feeling between the characters. For example, the scene of Io and Rudol'f walking by the sea had to be

withdrawn from the film. The high key of the cinematography and soft focus make it almost two-dimensional, encouraging haptic perception: lack of visual depth requires the eye to travel on the surface of an image rather than move 'into' the image (Marks 2004). Rudolf refuses to kiss Io, saying only the closest people can kiss on the lips. 'But what about me?' ['A ia?'] - asks Io. The camera moves to an extreme close up of her face. This close up could serve as the culmination of the film – the unusual framing leaves only Io's staring eyes in the frame, while most of the frame is taken up by her hair, which merges with the background because of the camera's soft focus.

Quoting the scenic board committee in *I Love You All Very Much*, Alimpiev states that the scene of the walk by the sea had to be deleted at the request of the committee as 'contrary to the moral message of the film'. However, even the significant re-editing of the film that was undertaken by Asanova did not help: the film was banned from distribution and Asanova could not get a position as a film director for five years after graduation. It appears that the transgressive character and the embodied, haptic aesthetics of *Rudolf'fio* played a crucial role in its being banned: Asanova managed to move away from clichés, reflecting on female subjectivity and girlhood as complex and troubling. The censoring of Asanova's *Rudolf'fio* proves that in order for its 'queer' relationship to be viewed as impossible and improper (in the framework of Soviet moral education), a necessary ironic distance had to be established between spectator and the heroine who transgresses the boundaries of 'proper' child and female behaviour by being active in courtship and striving to engage in a cross-generational relationship with a married man. However, the intensity of feelings, created by the film's aesthetics, made possible the spectator's identification with Io. The didactic normalizing dimension and education of the senses, so necessary for moral education of the Soviet teenagers and adults, was inevitably lost.

## Conclusion

The Thaw period, with its inherited discourse of Stalinism and the new discourse of de-Stalinization, deserves special attention because of its unique historical position. The transition from 'Stalinist' norms to the 'Communist morality' in official ideology produced a complex field that Soviet cinema both revealed and engaged with. Both *Wings* and *Rudolf* represent the shifting boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' gender and sexual roles in Thaw Soviet society: more acceptance for single motherhood, adultery, unmarried partnerships; yet less acceptance and silencing of the topics of female masculinity, gendered war experiences and adolescent female sexuality. With the strive to sincerity in the study of Soviet society, Shepitko and Asanova chose heroines and plots that did not fit the Thaw normative standards, yet involved representation of actual female political subjectivities. Moreover, director's cinematic strategies, such as the use of haptic aesthetics, did not conform to the narratives of *vospitanie* or *perevospitanie* and worked at the level of spectator identification to de-centre the subject and subvert gender and sexual norms. Through destabilizing the audience's sensorial experience, the films allowed for intensive affects and for the 'untraining' of the senses instead of 'educating' them: difficult cases indeed.

This article was an attempt to theorize how haptic aesthetics can work in cinema on the levels of visibility, kinaesthetics/proprioception and temporality. The immersion of the Thaw cinema into the realm of the senses and its rediscovery of private emotions provides a rich ground for further exploration of the topic. However, such theorization will be incomplete without discussion on the interrelation between cinematic aesthetics and the Soviet politics of emotions (this article, informed by feminist intersectional approaches, strived to move such a discussion forward). In this regard, attention to women in filmmaking (as well as the representatives of other marginalized groups) will

be highly productive, as it can provide us with the new ways of theorizing Soviet spectatorship and Soviet citizenship.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to mention that although the official period of Khrushchev's governance lies within the years 1953-1964, the cinematic Thaw is believed to extend well beyond the Khrushchev era (Chernyshova, 2006; Condee, 2000). I believe that the films chosen for analysis encompass conceptual and stylistic changes that cinema experienced during the rise of the 'cultural Thaw'.
- <sup>2</sup> For contrasting interpretations of tactility and haptic in film studies, see Antonia Lant (1995) and Noel Burch (1990). For the conceptualization of 'tactility', used in parallel to 'haptic', see the works of Jennifer Barker (2009) and Hamid Naficy (2001).
- <sup>3</sup> For an overview of the contemporary debate on affect see Clare Hemmings (2005). For various interpretations of affect see Brian Massumi (2002), Eve Sedgwick (2003); Sara Ahmed (2004; 2010); see also *The Affect Theory Reader* (Gregg and Seigworth 2010). For recent approaches to affect in cinema see Issue 10 of *The Cine-Files* journal (2016), <http://www.thecine-files.com/>
- <sup>4</sup> In 'haptic aesthetics' 'aesthetic' denotes 'a set of principles underlying the work of particular artist or artist movement' (Pearsall 2001); however, the term is also used close to the meaning of original Greek words: haptikos – 'able to touch or to grasp', and aisthētikos — 'relating to perception by the senses', from aisthēta 'perceptible things', from aisthēsthai 'perceive' (Pearsall 2001). The affective component of 'aesthetics' is also expressed in aisthēma - 'emotion-feeling'. The importance of the primary meaning of the term 'aesthetics' was emphasized by Susan Buck-Morss (1992), see also Jennifer Fisher (1997).
- <sup>5</sup> Deborah Field (2007, 18) suggests that *vospitanie* is a complex term that encompasses 'education, upbringing, and the molding of personality and values'.
- <sup>6</sup> Even as late as 1968, the book *O Sem'e i Brake* (*On Family and Marriage*) with the chapter 'Byt – ne chastnoe delo' ('Byt Is Not a Private Business') echoed Stalinist slogans describing the influence of bourgeois propaganda on young people who 'do not have strong convictions [...], are immature politically and morally unsustainable' (Trutnev and Khodakov, 1968).
- <sup>7</sup> I follow Foucault's understanding of normalization as an ensemble of techniques of power that defines 'a range of degrees of normality indicating membership of a homogeneous

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social body but also playing a part in classification, hierarchization and the distribution of rank' (1977, 184).