Women Identity through their clothing in movies in Soviet times

by

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**Abstract**

This study focuses on the post-war Soviet dress as a means of communicating and shaping the female identity of the time, and articulates the topic through a thorough analysis of three films from the era. The choice behind the pictures used in this paper confines around the period of late 1960s to 1990s, and reflects the drastic difference in the fashion styles of women, and is backed by an introduction to the Soviet mandated uniformity prevailing before the mentioned years. After the gradual opening of the gates for the Western culture and traditions, the Soviet state faced an inevitable clash of ideologies that, despite the latter’s efforts of preserving the years of propagated mentality, created a new vision, often bordering with deviation from the accepted state norms and standards.

By a detailed analysis of female clothing in the films *The Diamond Arm* (1968), *Little Vera* (1989) and *Zhenshchin Obizhat ne Rekomenduetsya* (1999), this study tackles the questions of breaking away from the previously imposed shyness and invisibility expressed through attire, and the embracing of a variety of identities allowed by new prospects and relative freedom. Cinema is a known vehicle of working reciprocally with reality: drawing inspiration from its local scene and creating newer and more far-reaching ideals. With this inherent quality of films, the evolution of female identity becomes not only apparent in articulation but also bears its most fundamental source of inspiration.

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**Introduction**

Soviet Union, as much as idealistic in theory, conferred a number of difficulties in terms of self-expression and identity on individuals living under its ideology. By a philosophy so limiting and, in some cases, promising, the Soviet regime came to a successful encrusting of its society with the strong belief of uniformity in every possible outlet for expression. One of such outlets, and, perhaps, the most expressive and basic in its communication, is fashion. After a gradual thaw in the frigid relations with the West, Socialist States entered a new era: one that marked the import of new progressive outlooks, and a variety in the ever-present uniform clothing.

Living in a government-imposed take on monism, it was expectedly hard for Soviet people to integrate new vision that not only introduced never-before-seen ideals but also created grounds for and a relative freedom of choice. With the beginning of Perestroika, a period of embracing liberalization and capitalist elements into the economy and political landscape, the Soviet States welcomed slow reform in almost all of the spheres, and most importantly in that of fashion.

Clothing, being a unit of self-expression and the crafting of an identity, is closely related to politics, as it imitates and reacts to the changes in governmental regimes and their motives. At the onset of socialist propaganda, Soviet people were infused with the idea of equality and conformity that extended from public all the way to their private lives. In this manner, with a strict obedience to uniformity and the glorification of the working class, the only acceptable color of Soviet wardrobe was that of invisibly, except, of course, for the symbolic red element that, in turn, was exclusively reserved to entitled social roles. Things, however, started to gradually take color after the end of the war and a change in the government. A whole new variety of films, fashion magazines and clothes started to find their way from the West, and slowly alter Soviet reality. This was a time that brought forth not only the repressed class differences but also female identity at play.

Assisting in the dissemination of progessive views under the Soviet regime, films played an important role by both taking inspiration from local reality and, based on it, further voicing the prevailing social issues. Soviet cinema from 1930s to 50s was hugely monotonous in terms of clothing, and mostly stressed the story and actors’ physical expressions as means of unraveling the characters. Films of the post-war era, on the other hand, started to gradually integrate the then-unknown variety in costumes for an immediate constructing of a character’s identity.

While fashion is an immediate attribute of politics and social change, cinema acts in a rather bifunctional manner: it influences system-based changes through its audience, as well as uses the very same system and its agents as sources for material to build on. Shedding light on the evolution of clothing in Soviet reality through its representation in films, this paper addresses such issues as the general attitude towards different kinds of attire, the development and the means of expression for female identity, and the emergence of illegal marketplace.

**Literature Review**

Though an abundance of research has been done on the symbiosis of fashion and cinema, the topic does not receive much academic spotlight in reference to the Soviet era. It is nevertheless fortunate that the existing sources on the matter, however numbered, take quite a limpid approach to analyzing fashion as a constituent of identity in soviet socio-politics, and can be translated into the context of films and their two-way influence within society.

In her 2007 *Soviet Fashion through 1950-1960: Politics, Economics, Routine*, Zakharova elaborates on the period of Soviet modernization and the consequences brought to the state as a result of clashing realities with the Western capitalist world. In terms of fashion, as Zakharova points out, the scene was segregated into two broad categories of legal and illegal clothing. The first being the Soviet integration of the western classical fashion done either through the import of specific goods or local production. These legal means of introducing the western market to the Soviet were nevertheless, as Zakharova mentions, prone to the ever-existing censorship that though comparably loose in strictness still worked at maintaining the Soviet ideology of  reduced opulence. The other category present in the state at the time of and after the Khrushchev Thaw, as the paper goes on to unveil, is the illegal fashion, where market was limited to individual dealers of goods, or, ‘speculators’ as they were referred to at the time. This confinement and the simultaneously comparable variety of the available clothing led to a gradual breaking away from the long-established equality of social class to the inevitable search of individuals for the right attire fitting their social, economical and cultural criteria. While the state, as the paper puts it, did its best to preserve the safeguard of Social ideology through a censored imitation of western trends, the illegal market was ever-blooming and caused a potential threat to the government-established standards by drawing inspiration from locally banned international films, and acting as some sort of a wearable protest against the limitations of choice and aesthetic orientation. These individual protests, as Zakharova concludes, were mostly common among the youth and professional minorities, and were prone to mass criticism and hostility, as well as deemed as degrading and threatening to the Soviet mentality (Zakharova, 2007).

Fashion, like the economy, was planned.” In addition, she states that before corresponding to the film and releasing it, the film should meet three mandatory conditions: 1) The film must be shot in Russia or the former Soviet Union and refer to one of the periods. 2) The main characters of the film should be young people, or the main action of the film should take place in the youth environment of the period in which the movie was filmed. 3) The film should be accessible (popularity was measured in the number of viewers for the Soviet and post-Soviet periods and the number of box office fees for the modern period).

The analysis of the recorded practices was carried out on the scheme of decoding the symbol in its functioning environment: symbol - interpretation - reaction - social structure (Semanskaya 1993).

One of the favorite methods of conveying the symbolic sense of Russian cinematography is the pure and naive Russian soul. This method indicates that the appeal of the directors was the image of the blissful, deprived of the ordinary mind, not caring about personal well-being, but awarded the perfect opportunity to see and say what is not given to normal, ordinary, people (starting with the Fool of Andrei Rublev Andrei Tarkovsky). (Romanov, 2011) In his research, he states that body language, in the Soviet movies, uses codes of masculinity and femininity. “Blessed woman asexual, she can not fulfill the mission of mother and wife. However, her specific ugliness allows her to rank this image as a nation-as-women by no means a warrior or the powers that be rich, but the same "squalid" - a fellow mental institution - and an excellent elderly housekeeper. In turn, wisdom, sincerity, insight into the essence of things -- and at the same time the childish vulnerability that lies behind the apparent physicality of an adult male, point out to the boundary of the state of a person who is in social mobility.” (Romanov, 2011, p. 6) The cinematography gives an opportunity always to look back and analyze factors in any period. It still reflects the economic, political, and any other matters. The same refers to fashion and woman roles in USSR. "Fashion and dress more generally have always been of immense importance in films." (Wilson, E. 2010)

**Research Questions**

The central research question of this study is based on the understanding of the gradual West-influenced evolution of a Soviet woman’s identity through fashion as expressed in the films of late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods.

Further expanding on the general question, the paper goes on to branch it into several sub-questions, each dealing with the former’s constituent aspects and contexts. These sub-questions address, first, the socio-political situation leading to a change in the Soviet fashion-scene, and, second, the inner reactions of local women to a then-unknown variety of clothing choices, and the development of their new social roles as a result. The second sub-question is best analyzed through the help of three chosen films from the period.

**Methodology**

In this paper, the discussion of Western influence on the Soviet fashion scene as an identity ice-breaker is made possible through a handful of textual sources and detailed analyses of three films: *The Diamond Arm* (1968), *Little Vera* (1989) and *Zhenshchin Obizhat ne Rekomenduetsya* (1999). The choice behind these three films is based on the criterion of visible depiction of the evolving Soviet fashion scene and its symbiosis with individual identity . While the textual references used in this paper are similar in theme and focus of interest, they all come from a variety of study fields, such as fashion, political, film and feminist studies.

The organization of this study is made easier through the breaking down of the topic into several sections, all acting as supplements for the research question and the concluding paragraph. The sections per se come as subliminal sub-questions assisting the progression of this paper’s argument, and, as emphasized in the research findings, deal with the socio-political context of the chosen period, the correlation of social roles and clothing, and the ways in which women of different clothing styles were perceived by their society.

**Research Findings**

**Socio-Political Context**

The Marxist ideology with some circumscriptions was put in practice with the victory of the October Revolution. For pushing further construction of socialism, the first concern of the USSR was to remodel a character of proletar and “fill” masses with ideology. In the frontline of dissemination of socialist ideas and revolutionised reality stood artists. The art forms which gave an opportunity of quick and direct influence took the role of agitation. Lenin’s famous phrase “You must firmly remember that cinema is the most important thing for us” is based on Lunacharsky’s memoirs about a conversation with Lenin in February 1922, which he set out in a letter to Boltyansky dated January 29, 1925.

The  official recognition of the significance of films continued when the Soviet Union entered into totalitarian regime. In this stage, though with some transformations, the idea of consciously viewing oneself as a part of the collective and favoring the interest of masses over the individual self, still central. The Soviet movies serving as a visualisation of daily life and dictating the ideal socialist reality could not miss the screening of contemporary fashion. Interestingly, in the first four decades of the Soviet Cinema, the clothing seems to be absent. The emerged confusion in perception is conditioned not by the non-existence of attire but of its invisibility. The non-apparent character of fashion, particularly among the women, could be inspected from an angle of its importance in the formation of the movie characters. Clothing had a limited application as a tool for the construction of female characters’ identity reflecting the Soviet reality conditioned by the class ideology and production.

     The breaking point in the history of the Soviet fashion was Nikita Khruschev’s crucial speech on the personality cult in 1956. In his speech, Khrushchev primarily addressed the personal traits of Stalin, leaving aside a political ideology. Khruschev’s approach made clear that the Soviet Union should construct its future path by entirely rejecting the Stalinist system.

 The strictly closed borders between the Soviet Union and the West dissolved by “the turn to the West '' (Gurova 2006, 95) approach of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist party. This new political conception modified the perception and relation of the Soviet Union and the West; the understanding of the West reformulated as “Other” rather than the enemy.

The weakening of the totalitarian regime and the desire of exploring the “Other” lightened the invisibility of the fashion in the territory of Soviet Union. These relatively open borders allowed legal or illegal circulation of different items including clothing. This phenomenon indirectly resulted in the Western ideology dissemination, in a sense of centralizing the individual.

Having the opportunity to choose from a relatively wide range of products naturally brings to creation of the Soviet women identity. A woman starts to perceive herself not only as a part of a faceless collective, but also as an individual.

The production of the films since the 1960s opened possibilities to interpret social perceptions about the women wearing distinguished clothing as this period marks the turning point in the Soviet fashion history, when fashion became one of the fundamental parts of the portrayal of female movie characters.

**The Diamond Arm**

Marking the top lists of Russian cult cinema is *The Diamond Arm*, released in 1969. Directed by Leonid Gaidai, and a comedy by genre, the film is based on a real-life news story about Swiss smugglers who dealt with jewels, and once got caught transporting some in an orthopedic cast. *The Diamond Arm* begins with the introduction of two clearly defined worlds: that of the black market and militia, with the latter getting under its protection an ordinary citizen, Semyon Gorbunkov, the protagonist. With an operation going against the smugglers’ expectations, Gorbunkov mistaken by the Turkish co-conspirators for the real courier, was-to-be Gennadiy ‘Gesha’ Kozodoyev, has a cast full of contraband diamonds placed around his arm. The story then revolves around Soviet police interfering and successfully using Gorbunkov as bait to capture the criminals.

One thing that is particularly striking, in terms of the film mise-en-scene and character development, is the choice in costumes. Since the period of *The Diamond Arm* production was already in sync with the local changes in every constituent sphere of a society, the film largely draws inspiration from the general attitudes towards imported goods and outlooks, and uses them as cues assisting the development of its storyline and the instinctive understanding of characters by the audience. In the given manner, the film’s largely semiotic reliance on costume styles, the country of their production, colors, and the level of their attractiveness, manages, without any contextual analysis, to subliminally create grounds for character development and the conveying of their identity.

The overall attitude referred to above is in some sort the result of clashing ideologies: that of the ever-existing Soviet propaganda and the integration of Western progress, with their natural branching into subscenes such as the black market, which, in turn, also had its share in further contributing to the general opinion and stigma over the various ways of self-expression via clothes. This is especially well portrayed, and, perhaps, a bit exaggerated in presentation, in *The Diamond Arm*.

**Little Vera**

*Little Vera* is a Soviet drama directed by Vasily Pichul that is oftentimes referred to as a coming of age symbol of the Soviet *perestroika* (reform.) Starting right after the premiere of the film at the Cinema House, many left shouting “Shame!” and stoning windows. And all that because of one single intimate scene, shot, however, vividly and expertly with a message - it is already possible, times have changed. The success of this film was the material that Soviet reality supplied: communal apartments, drunkenness and other “everyday life”, restless youth looking for energy out of fights at a disco.

Vera is the main character of the film who represents the youth and the truth of the Soviet reality. In the era of perestroika, the screening of the film arised hope that now when the reality is no more hidden, it would change.

The title of the film, *Little Vera,* has a hidden meaning also, Vera is little because she is the youngest in the family, and her name, which translates as faith in Russian, is small and insignificant in principle in this society, which no longer knows what to believe.

In the first scenes at home, Vera is wearing a blue homewear-nightdress typical for the Soviet people, her mother wears a similar nightdress in peach color. The fact that they wear alike clothes at home presents the lack of choice that the Soviet women had and the influence of the mother on her daughter. She turned on her favorite music, stood in the balcony with big purple sunglasses and ate some sunflower seeds. Her father, who was an alcoholic, entered the balcony and yelled at her, telling her that she dishonored their family. At the same time, her mother found 20 dollars in Vera’s bag, which was illegal in that era. So, the parents started reproving her and it was obvious by her reaction that she was used to it. This means that being an alcoholic was a usual for a middle aged Russian man, but listening to loud music or having a dollar is a huge crime. In the next scene, Vera’s nightdress is cracked assumingly by her father who was extremely angry finding out that her daughter had a dollar.

This cracked nightdress is like a symbol of a ban of the interconnection of Russian and Western youth (See in Appendix \_\_\_.)

Vera in almost all of the left scenes is in the same outfit: red white striped t-shirt, black leather mini skirt, in mesh tights and high heels. And she is not the only one, all of her friends are wearing similar looks. However, even in the nightclubs that they attend, the girls have the same skirts and tights on. This shows that they had a big desire to wear something new and different, to express that they are young and free and have a power to change the plan of the state. Nevertheless, they physically do not have that free choice of clothing in textures, style and colors. They can not afford to choose from a wide diversity. They are still in the vacuum of governmental regime.

One of the following scenes is the most discussed theme of that time. The intimate scene and the nude body of Vera,

The late 1980s became the most developing period of women's perception and identity. The West's influence on this movie and little Vera made a considerable impression on every Soviet citizen and covered all the truth about the Soviet regime.

Little Vera came not only to show the horror of the Soviet regime but also, to change the perception of a woman. She demonstrated the freedom of choice for all the Soviet women that lived in the locked space. That was the choice of clothing, the choice of living, and the choice of working.

Little Vera is an example of that Western influence on youth’s fashion as an expression of their revolutionary mindset. The film openly shows the new and shocking reality which was hidden for a long time by the Soviet government. Gronow, J., & Zhuravlev, S. in their book “Fashion Meets Socialism” refers to Western fashion advertising in the 1980s, when “Little Vera” was filmed. He states “Even though advertising and other types of commercial promotion of brands and specific commodities and services (an important feature of the Western consumer society) was limited in the USSR, news about new goods and services reached the populace quite widely via other channels.”

**То Offend Women is Not Recommended**

The main character of the movie *To Offend Women is not Recommended* (1999)is Vera, who is a school teacher. Her father, who was the owner of a large shipping company, left her when she was a kid. However, being a victim of a car accident, he decides to leave all his business to her daughter. Vera should manage a huge corporation that was really hard in the environment of envy colleagues and many competitors who desire to take the company from the inexperienced and naive woman.

Another female character in this movie is Nastya, one of the employees of the company, who is deeply in love with the substitute of the company’s director. He was also the former classmate of Vera and dramatically in love with her since schooldays.

The movie heavily relies on the attire of Vera and Nastya to communicate their character and construction of their identity. Henceforth, compare-contrasting the costumes of Vera and Nastya is the key method of conveying the figurative function of the clothing in the post-Soviet era.

Vera is a modest and quiet character, and Nastya is bold and open-minded, the sharp differences in their personalities are displayed in their clothing styles.

The texture and shape of the attire of characters are similar, thus, colors and length of the clothes are the prime indicators of presentation of their individuality. Vera, for instance, wears beige and light blue costumes for work and Nastya wears a bright orange blazer and skirt. Furthermore, Nastya’s skirts are short, while Vera wears longer skirts. Unlike *Little Vera’s* character, the post-Soviet community accepts Nastya’s short skirt and does not judge so strictly as it was in the Soviet Union. However, subconsciously they do not take her seriously.

The environment of the company forces employees to follow certain standards of clothing style, although it is not a company’s requirement, but rather a social requirement to wear a businesslike look. However, Nastya finds a way to express her own personality despite the restrictions. Nastya has a sexual relationship with a substitute hoping it will turn into a serious relationship, even though he is just spending his time with her and does not take her seriously. Nastya is also a skilled employee, who struggles to have career growth. All this is a manifestation of her personality and in its turn it is demonstrated in her clothing style. For example, in one of the scenes, she wears a white shirt, at first sight, a standard dress code item for office, but her shirt has a black vertical stripes and is oversized, which shows her antagonism to the accepted norms. (See Appendix\_\_\_\_\_\_\_)

 Vera’s role, in comparison to Nastya, imitates the general character of a perfect woman post - Soviet Russia: kind, intelligent, disciplined, beautiful and infallible. She has a healthy lifestyle, gets an education in the field of natural science which was rare at that time for women. She forgives her father right after knowing about the car accident forgetting his betrayal. This all shows her identity and is expressed in her clothing. All of her clothing items are “invisible,” in a sense that they do not have outstanding features, colors or shapes: they have a strict structure and are in pastel colors. For example, in the same scene where Nastya wore bright orange blazer with a short dress in the same color, Vera was wearing brown blazer with a white

The identities given to these women play a huge role in the movie. The society perceives Vera’s actions and words seriously. Although she obtains enemies because of her position, the community respects her. Nastya, on the contrary, has a not-serious reputation. Nastya seems to have all mental and professional qualities as Vera, but her perception by the society is not serious because she is more open to share her emotions and thoughts which finds its vivid expression in the clothing through, for example, bright colors, shapes and shortness of skirts.

Post-Soviet reality gave its consent to the variety of attire including color and length differences. The fashion market opened relatively new prospects for the style and colors; the wide distribution of  the western fashion patterns resulted in the perception of “norm” but the society was not accustomed yet and subconsciously attributed the former stereotypes to the modern individual. Thus, the individual wearing “visible” clothes was generally accepted by one’s community still countering with negative reactions towards self-expression.

**Conclusion**

After the reform of the Soviet Union, in the 1980s, the borders of the Soviet with the west loosed, and that definitely had its enormous impact on the Soviet women's fashion, therefore, the identity. As these research findings reveal, the cinematography of that period struggled with the crisis concerning the state. Cinemagraphs had restrictions and limitations that made the Soviet movies rather a part of the regime plan, not a creative work.

*Little Vera* is an example of that Western influence on women’s fashion as an expression of their revolutionary mindset. The film openly shows the new and shocking reality which was hidden for a long time by the Soviet government. Gronow, J., & Zhuravlev, S., in their book “*Fashion Meets Socialism*” refers to Western fashion advertising in the 1980s, when *Little Vera* was filmed. He states, “Even though advertising and other types of commercial promotion of brands and specific commodities and services (an important feature of the Western consumer society) were limited in the USSR, news about new goods and services reached the populace quite widely via other channels.”

In other words, the Soviet regime had a huge impact not only on the role of Soviet women in its society, but also on the fashion that was usually not controlled by the government, but by designers. That control of fashion caused the monotype of clothing, but also deprived a Soviet woman of choosing her style and expressing herself through fashion.

The late 1980s was a decade that changed the game. The West influenced both the film industry and women fashion. The first huge evidence of that influence in both was “Little Vera.” The film explored the bad sides of the Soviet regime, propagated a new vulgar style for women, and showed that women should have a choice of freedom.

Nevertheless, Western influence did not last long. In the 1990s, women started to dress more feminine than vulgar. It was not shocking anymore to wear short skirts or semi-transparent shirts. Still, it does not mean that Soviet women continued to wear them commonly. In the 2000s, balance in style continued to be trendy. It showed in the movie, *To Offend Women is Not Recommended.* It demonstrates the women’s style that is trendy until today—classy and strict costumes in the office and comfortable sweaters and cardigans at home.

To sum up, we can conclude that the sociocultural changes that took place in the USSR. For soviet-era films, which were created in the context of strict state ideology, the predominance of the values of activism as the leading lifestyle of Soviet women is characteristic.

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