

## *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

### *Syllabus*

## *Escaping Authoritarianism? Soviet Cinema and Its Legacies (Course online in English joint with FU B - 26916)*

*Last update 20-10-2024*

*HU Credits: 2*

*Degree/Cycle: 2nd degree (Master)*

*Responsible Department: Russian and Slavic Studies*

*Academic year: 0*

*Semester: 2nd Semester*

*Teaching Languages: English*

*Campus: Mt. Scopus*

*Course/Module Coordinator: Prof. Alexander Kulik*

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*Coordinator Office Hours: Mon. 14:30-15:30*

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Teaching Staff:

Prof. Alexander Kulik,  
Prof. Alexander Libman

Course/Module description:

The course taught jointly with Prof. Alexander Libman (Osteuropa-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin) aims to explore Soviet cinema, which, despite stringent state control, produced influential anti-authoritarian films that left a lasting impact on both Soviet and contemporary Russian society, while some of these films (such as those by Eisenstein, Tarkovsky and others) are considered major achievements in world cinematic art. Through critical analysis of fragments from various anti- and non-authoritarian movies of the Soviet era, students will engage in interdisciplinary reflection alongside co-lecturers, drawing from insights in both humanities and social sciences.

Course/Module aims:

Learning outcomes - On successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

Students will be exposed as to interdisciplinary teaching, with two professors showing the differences and the similarities of their disciplines, their methods and their conceptual language, as well as to the study process in the international, Israeli and German, class. They will learn about Eastern European and Russian societies and culture, including the broad topic of cinema and politics and generally society and culture under authoritarianism.

Attendance requirements(%):

Teaching arrangement and method of instruction: Joint class of FU Berlin and HUJI. The course will include an in-person workshop in Berlin for a limited group of students.

Course/Module Content:

Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes frequently try to control all spheres of their societies, including everyday practices, economy and culture. Film-making receives a particular attention of autocracies, from Mussolini's Italy, the Third Reich and Franco's Spain to Putin's Russia. Yet cinema also becomes a place, where artists

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contest the authoritarian dominance, or at least look for ways of escaping from it. The Soviet cinema, which already Lenin described as "the most important art" for the regime, is a particularly strong and influential example of this logic: despite the rigid authoritarian control, it produced impressive examples of more or less openly anti-authoritarian narratives. Soviet cinema deserves particular consideration also because it remains vastly popular in the modern Russia as well, raising the question about how it affects the contemporary Russian society. The favorable depiction of the Soviet Union in the Soviet movies could have contributed to the persistence of the 'good USSR' myth current authoritarian regime in Russia capitalizes upon; yet how is the explicitly non- or anti-authoritarian cinema of the Soviet era perceived in Russia today?

A reasonable discussion of this topic necessarily requires an interdisciplinary perspective; therefore, we propose a course on the non- and anti-authoritarian Soviet films based on explicit dialogue between humanities and social sciences (especially political science). The class will be co-taught by two professor specializing in Russian and East European societies and cultures, but representing different disciplinary perspectives. Because of that, in addition to discussing the main topic of the course (the Soviet cinema), the course will also familiarize students with the possibilities and limits of interdisciplinary dialogue.

At the FU Berlin, the course is offered to the students of the MA Eastern European Studies; at the Hebrew University, it will be offered to the students of the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences. While some familiarity with the Russian language is going to be an asset, the course is designed for students, who do not speak Russian.

Specifically, the course will be organized as follows. We plan to conduct five online sessions of four academic hours each plus one hybrid session in Berlin. The first session is going to be an introductory one. Here, our goal is to provide a general context for the course and to discuss how social sciences and humanities look at the non- and anti-authoritarian cultural practices in an authoritarian regime.

Subsequent four sessions will be devoted to four examples of the anti-authoritarian Soviet cinema. For each of them, we will ask our students to watch a short fragment of a particular movie at home (with subtitles for those who do not speak Russian), as well as to familiarize themselves with the synopsis of the movie. Based on this, the students will formulate questions for the discussion in the seminar session, which they have to submit in advance. In the seminar, we will discuss these questions, as well as watch several other fragments of the movie together. Each session should be devoted to a particular example of anti- and non-authoritarian films of the Soviet era, representing particular form of regime contestation or escapism. Finally, the last online session will be devoted to the contemporary reception of Soviet movies in Russia. Here, we will start with a brief discussion of the "myth of the good USSR" (Gel'man and Obydenkova 2024), illustrating how Soviet films and Soviet nostalgia in general are used to produce narratives supporting the authoritarian regime in contemporary Russia. After that, students will be confronted with the question about how perception of non- and anti-authoritarian movies will fit this line of reasoning.

In addition to these sessions, students will also be asked to independently work

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*within small groups on creating a wiki of anti-authoritarian tropes in the Soviet cinema. We will assign students to groups so that each of them contains both students from the HUJI and the FU. Students will be asked to use primarily the movies we will discuss in class, however, they will also be encouraged to apply any additional material they have access to to compile the wiki. The wiki will be created based on the platform BlackBoards at the FU .*

*The final hybrid session will take place in Berlin, with at least some students from Israel travelling to Germany (and others joining the class online). For this session, we intend to invite three to four modern Russian filmmakers or other artists (focusing in particular on the group of emigre artists located in Germany) to discuss the topics of the class with students. This will serve two main purposes: give students access to how contemporary Russian artists perceive the topics of the course and to reflect on how the link between cinema and state looks in Russia today. This panel will be recorded and made available to a broader audience.*

*Required Reading:*

*The complete list will be provided later.*

*Enzo Traverso, 'Totalitarianism between Theory and History', History and Theory 56(4), 2017, pp. 97-118.*

*Igor Golomshtok, Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People's Republic of China (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), pp. ix-xv, 1-28.*

*Peter Kenez, The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 195-223.*

*Additional Reading Material:*

*Grading Scheme:*

*Essay / Project / Final Assignment / Home Exam / Referat 80 %*

*Active Participation / Team Assignment 20 %*

*Additional information:*