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Dressing Poetics
the costume-image in
Soviet poetic cinema

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as Opponent and Professor Sofia Pantouvaki as Custos.

Introduction

My doctoral thesis is written and presented in the form of a monograph, and can be clas-
sified as a work of cultural criticism and historical investigation. Methodologically it is
presented in the form of a case study, with main themes being costume design for film,
Soviet poetic cinema, Soviet cinema and European modernist cinema of the 1960s and
1980s. In addition to the literature review, other central research materials that I engage
with in my work are extensive filmography of Soviet and European films produced bet-
ween 1930s and 1980s, costume sketches, archival documents such as production notes,
photographs, scripts and storyboards, as well as interviews with costume designers, sur-
viving members of the production teams and historians. The three films that I selected
to be the case studies for my research are *The Colour of Pomegranates* (*Nran Guyne*, dir.
by Sergei Parajanov, costumes by Elena Akhvlediani, Iosif Karalyan, Jasmine Sarabyan,
and Parajanov himself, 1969), *The Plea* (*Verdreba*, dir. by Tengiz Abuladze, costumes
by Tengiz Mirzashvili, 1967) and *The Eve of Ivan Kupalo* (*Vechir na Ivana Kupalo*, dir.
by Yuri Illienko, costumes by Lidiya Baykova, 1968) (Figure 1). In my work, I use these
three films to represent and discuss the agency of costume in the films of Soviet poetic
cinema more broadly. Soviet poetic cinema or Soviet poetic school or simply poetic school,
refers to the work of about 12 Soviet film directors.[1] In addition to Sergei Parajanov, Yuri

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1   There is no consensus among film scholars regarding the clear definition of the terms
     "Soviet poetic cinema", "poetic cinema", or "poetic school". To a large extent this can be
     attributed to the fact that the directors themselves never officially assigned their works to
     any movement or school per se, and the name, "poetic cinema", was coined by film critics
     after the films became available to a wider audience. The definition of the term 'Soviet
     poetic cinema' that I employ in my research follows the one proposed by James Steffen in
     The Cinema of Sergei Parajanov. Steffen 2013.

Figure 1. Still from the film *The Colour of Pomegranates*, dir. by Sergei Parajanov (Soviet Union, 1969). © Armenfilm studio.

Illienko and Tengiz Abuladze these include Leonid Osyka, Artavazd Peleshian, Otar Iosseliani, Bolotbek Shamashiev, Andrei Tarkovsky, Kira Muratova and others. The majority of these directors produced their work between the 1960s and 1980s, the so-called periods of *Thaw* (1953–1967), *Stagnation* (1969–1985) and *Perestroika* (1985–1991) when referring to the history of Soviet cinema. Within the context of world cinema and more specifically European cinema, the films of Soviet poetic cinema belong to what Hungarian film researcher András Kovács terms the *ornamental style of modernism*, that is films that combine modernist and historico-mythical form.[2] This aligns the work of Soviet poetic cinema directors with that of Andrzej Wajda, Miklós Jancsó, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Federico Fellini. What characterizes all of these films is their engagement with folkloric, mythical and historical subject matter, fragmented narrative structures, highly saturated and evocative visual form and *auteristic* approach when it comes to film production.

The reason why I was interested and inspired to engage with the work of Soviet poetic cinema and specifically costume design in their films is three-fold. First, I wished to explore these films from this previously neglected perspective (costume design), as I found costume design in them to be particularly exciting. As I argue throughout my research, the relationship(s) that costumes build with the film spaces of Soviet poetic cinema make costumes one of the defining features of the school and thus a valuable lens through which these films can be analyzed. Secondly, as someone who has always been interested in arthouse, experimental, slow and poetic cinema, I found that my interests were underrepresented in the current discourse on film costume, so I wanted to address these gaps in representations and knowledge by conducting my own research. And lastly,

2   Kovács 2007, 175–192.

I have always been inspired by the transformations that take place when costume is being filmed, and the affective and visual qualities this process creates. For me this transformation is an essential part of a costume designer's job, and I wanted to highlight this in my research. The way I like to talk about costumes, the things that attract me in cinema are not stories per se but how these stories are told: what colors, rhythms and forms are used to tell these stories and what is the so-called syntax of costume in this context, what does it enhance and express.

Therefore, my research is situated at the crossroads between three research fields: costume design, Soviet cinema and Soviet poetic cinema. However, even more so it is situated in my personal experience as a researcher practitioner of Russian background, who holds specific interests when it comes both to costume design and film, and to the things I wish to learn and explore about costume design as a creative practice.

The two research questions that I have formulated when conducting my investigation are as follows:

- What are the defining features that shape the aesthetics and the use of costume in Soviet poetic cinema?
- How does costume in Soviet poetic cinema function, and how does this deviate from the uses of costume in the Soviet cinema of the period more broadly?

With these questions my goal was not only to identify how the costumes looked and operated in these film spaces, but also to explore what made them significant and unusual for the time and context during which these films were made.

In the light of this setting and my overall motivations, I chose what I come to term the *costume-image* as the main lens through which I explore the agency of costumes in the film spaces of Soviet poetic cinema. The term *costume-image* encapsulates the interaction between costume and film as two creative mediums. It is born out of various concepts and ideas that have expressed or touched upon this interrelation in existing scholarship: such as the notion of affect, the idea of mise-en-scène as an energetic process and an event, and the concepts of a film texture. Most notable of these however is the Russian word *obraz* that is widely used in Russian and Soviet scholarship when discussing costume design and filmmaking. In its widest definition *obraz* means image, form, figure, appearance, picture, type, character, design, reflection or likeness. Like other notions I mentioned it encourages consideration of the interrelation of material decisions, narrative and other creative and conceptual frameworks.

Findings

The key features and functions of costumes that I have identified in the films of Soviet poetic cinema can be broken down into three themes: the so-called painterly approach, the notion of "*auteur's* private mythology" and the *costume-image* perspective.

While visual properties (such as color, style or form) of costumes in these films might vary, at the core of the way costume has been developed and applied within Soviet poetic

cinema is what Yuri Illienko aptly termed "painting with costumes".[3] The word "painting" here or a "painterly approach" implies a reciprocation between the medium of painting and the medium of film, specifically when it comes to spatial organization and visual expression. As I show in my research, most of the costume designers and production designers who worked on these films had a background in visual art, where their costume sketches are presented as pieces of modernist art. Rather than technical drawing of garments they express feelings, motions and bursts of colors and volumes that helps to evoke the final film rather than individual garments per se. There is also a holistic approach to the way this painterly approach translates into reciprocation between costume, make-up, hair design and gestures presenting a character as a symbolically charged cohesive visual form rather than an individual. However, perhaps most obviously, this painterly approach is visible in the final images of the films that often evoke various forms of visual arts such as medieval miniatures, collages, orthodox icons, impressionistic paintings or charcoal drawings. Shaped by the modernist principles of subjectivity, reflexivity and abstraction, these films narrate their stories through rhythms, colors and motions, and use costumes to shape allegories and metaphors of their visual poetry. That is compared to the mainstream film production of the time, the three films I discuss, often abandoned the centrality of the plot and causality, and emphasized atmosphere and style instead.

My research shows that an important aspect of the way costumes look and function in the films of Soviet poetic cinema is related to the notion of "*auteur*'s private mythology". In his analysis of the *ornamental style of modernism* András Kovács terms "*auteur*'s private mythology": a unifying force that binds together, via a mythical framework, a diverse number of visual elements and stylistic choices of certain directors.[4] In this respect, he argues, such films tend to possess "a mythos, not merely a plot...a visual and narrative mythology" that is constructed from fragments of cultural history, folklore, fantasy and modernity.[5] As I show in my analysis of the three case study films, ethnic and historic dress were essential elements that constituted the creation of this mythos. At the same time, as I show in my thesis, these costumes act not so much as a truthful or authentic rendition of a specific temporal or national environment but are a part of enclosed cinematic structure that is often stylized and manipulated to suit a given filmmaker's vision of film as a creative medium. In light of this, the films of Soviet poetic cinema present a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which folk traditions in the form of dress, textiles, crafts or pagan rituals, and the idea of "pastness" in general can be de-objectified from ideological doctrine and acquire expressive agency instead. More specifically, these films make the case for viewing ethnic dress through the lens of critical reflection and *auteur*'s subjectivity, rather than simply as a form of circulation of political or ideological themes.

In line with the previous two points, as I argue throughout my thesis, in the films of Soviet poetic cinema costume becomes an expressive instrument whose visual attributes, placement and motions are part of the film texture itself. As Julian Bruno puts it: "Inner

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3   Illienko 1999, 336–337.

4   Kovács 2007.

5   Kovács 2007, 187.

images have a definite textural quality. It is no wonder, then, that they touch us. They are fabrics".[6] Similarly, as I show in detailed scene analysis in my case studies, costumes are instrumental in not only shaping the physical world of these films but in generating the visual forces that affect us as film viewers. In these films the costumes take on the roles of surfaces, spatial contours and "motion forms".[7] As I have shown, this image-focused approach to costume design expands the established functions of costume beyond characterization (by "dressing" an actor) or defining time, place or societal hierarchies. In doing so, they de-prioritized the common concerns of Soviet cinema at the time, to which costume design catered when it came to ideological agenda, causality and genre conventions.

Research outcomes

When it comes to the outcomes of my research, I think it is helpful to think of them in terms of contributions to the following categories: studies on Soviet poetic cinema; studies on costume design for film; and methodology and epistemology of costume design research.

Within the field of Soviet poetic cinema, my work argues for the legitimacy of costume as a critical optic through which these films can be analyzed. As I have shown in this thesis, while a lot has been said about the idiosyncratic styles of these film directors, costume has always hovered on the periphery of these discussions, never taking center stage, as it rightfully deserves. The identities, passions and creative contributions of costume designers and production designers who worked on these films deserve to be acknowledged and celebrated.

In the field of film costume design, my work has consistently aimed to extend existing discussion on costume design in film to include spaces outside of familiar or popular film industries. It has sought to highlight the potential such marginalized spaces hold as means of pushing conversations regarding costume design on film beyond the confines of classic characterization processes or narrative structures. My research has also demonstrated that there is a need to engage with a dramatic and expressive quality of costume design, that takes costume into the sphere of emotions and affects. To view costumes not only from the point of view of verisimilitude and characterization but also as a visual art form, to celebrate the way it interacts with other filmic elements and the transformations that take place during this process. Furthermore, as I show here Soviet poetic cinema can offer important insights on the subject of creative collaboration under the so-called *auteur*-film model, especially when it comes to the agency of a film director as co-designer of costumes.

A major research outcome of my work holds a methodological and epistemological value for the field of costume design. Through my research, I propose *costume-image* both as a method and a concept that can expand the ways we engage with costume in

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6   Bruno 2010, 230.

7   "Motion forms" is a term coined by a film scholar Jordan Schonig, who applies it to the various forms of movement that can be found in cinema. Schonig 2021, 3.

film. As I have argued, *costume-image* offers a way of discussing the unique qualities costumes acquire when filmed, a process of interrelation and transformation that takes place when the sartorial enters the filmed space. As I indicate in my analysis of the films, *costume-images* reveal to us how costume designers do not simply create characters, people, or milieux but are at the very center of shaping our experience of the film on sensorial and meta-narrative levels. In light of this I find that the term also democratizes conventional hierarchies when it comes to the notions of authorship, highlighting the collaborative aspect of filmmaking as a creative process, and the value of interrelation over the individual input.

Future

When it comes to the potential expansion of this research's findings into future critical investigations I see several possibilities. Perhaps most acute of these is the need to address the work of other notable film directors of Soviet poetic cinema, with each one deserving a costume focused perspective on their creative practice. I also see how research on costume design in the films of Soviet poetic cinema could be expanded further through the collaborative input of anthropologists, costume and dress historians, specifically in relation to questions of Soviet national politics and the depiction of ethnic minorities in Soviet films. As the work of Soviet poetic cinema continues to inspire and garner criticism, it remains relevant not only as a cultural but also as a political artefact.

   Furthermore, I see a need for a more detailed archival investigation into Soviet film costume design as both a creative and industrial endeavor. I am confident that our understanding of the history, culture and agency of costume design as a creative pursuit can be broadened through biographical studies and critical investigations into the creative practices of Soviet costume designers. As a prolific industry with a complex ideological context and particular institutional structure, Soviet cinema provides a unique space for exploring costume design for films and the agency of the costume designer as a film industry professional.

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