Croatian Presidential Elections 2019-2020
Election Analysis

Katarina Peović
Assistant Professor, University of Rijeka
kpvukovic@ffri.hr

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(1), 1-10

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.1.1
Croatian Presidential Elections
2019-2020

Katarina Peović*

Keywords: presidential elections, anti-corruption, poverty

Winning of the “lesser evil”
Presidential elections held in Croatia on 22 December 2019 (first round) were the seventh presidential elections since Croatian independence in 1991. The presidential elections ended on 5 January 2020 in the second round with Zoran Milanović as the winner with a relative majority of 52.66% of the vote. Milanović defeated the conservative incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who received 47.34% of the vote. This was a disappointment for her party, the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, HDZ), especially because of the upcoming intra-party and parliamentary elections.

Milanović, a member of the main center-left political party in Croatia, the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske, or SDP), and who had previously served as Prime Minister of Croatia (2011-2016), become the 5th president of Croatia. Western media acclaimed social democrat Zoran Milanović’s election victory as a victory for the “left”.¹ However, it is more likely a win for the “new extreme center” in Croatia, keeping in mind that during his premiership he “…implemented neoliberal reform of labor law severely slashing workers’ rights, introduced a controversial bankruptcy settlement law, and led a final phase of large-scale privatization of public infrastructure and resources”.² This analysis will show why Milanović’s victory must be seen primarily as a consequence of fear on the part of Croatian civil society, who chose the “lesser evil” in order to defend itself from the growing and radicalizing right.

In the first round of the elections held on 22 December 2019, there were 11 candidates for president. I was one of them, representing the Worker’s Front and Socialist Labor Party of Croatia. I was officially nominated by the left-wing party the Worker’s Front on 18 December 2018 and officially started the campaign on 21 January 2019. The campaign was focused on elaborating and promoting both the idea of radical change in the Croatian economy, and politics approaching democratic socialism of 21st century. I came in eighth place, with 1.14% of the vote and total of 21,387 total votes in the first round of elections.

¹ Katarina Peović is Assistant Professor at Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Cultural Studies in Rijeka. She holds a BA and masters degree in Comparative literature and MA and PhD of Faculty of Philosophy Zagreb. She is a member of leftist political party Worker’s Front. She participated at the city council in Zagreb and was a candidate for the 2019 Croatian Presidential Election.


Zoran Milanović finished the first round in first place, with a relative majority of 29.55% of the vote, followed by incumbent president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who received 26.55% of the vote. It was close call for the liberal and left when Miroslav Škoro, a right-wing candidate, finished the first round with 24.55% of the vote. Milanović won with lowest number of votes received by any candidate to date—1,034,170 votes—and with serious doubts that he would have won these elections if Škoro had been his opponent in the second round. Škoro, on the other hand, received the highest percentage of votes for a candidate who did not advance to the run-off, and the highest number of votes as third-place candidate since the 2000 elections. Miroslav Škoro, a famous Croatian pop-folk musician and right-wing politician, was favored by election polls until after the final TV debate. Many people in Croatia felt that as presidential candidate, Miroslav Škoro presented a serious threat for democracy in Croatia. Škoro proposed changes to the Constitution that would give the president greater authority than Franjo Tuđman had in his now-defunct semi-presidential system. The semi-presidential system was overthrown in 2000 when Croatia switched to a parliamentary system. Miroslav Škoro relativized the history of the so-called Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna država Hrvatska, NDH). As an independent candidate, he was supported by right-wing parties (HSK, Hrast, Most, Green List) and famous public right-wingers, including some members of the HDZ (Stevo Culej). Election polls predicted that Miroslav Škoro would win in the second round with either Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović or Zoran Milanović as his opponents.

Before the debate, Škoro had more than 23% in the election polls, but after the debate he came in with only 18.0%. In the actual elections Škoro received 24.45% of all votes, close to Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Zoran Milanović. Škoro’s failure to enter the second round was partially the result of the political attack from the left. However, the irony is that the danger of Škoro winning the elections was the major reason for the relative poor results of the authentic left (including myself). Many voters choose Zoran Milanović in the first round as a “lesser evil,” only to make sure that Miroslav Škoro would be eliminated from the second round; before then, polls had predicted poorer results for Milanović.

Political analysts all agree that one of the major reasons for Miroslav Škoro’s decline as a result of the debate was his unwillingness to clearly answer my question on the statement he gave earlier that day - that he as president would pardon Tomislav Merčep. Merčep is a war criminal sentenced to five-and-half years in jail for war crimes against civilians in Pakračka poljana in central Croatia in 1991. Merčep is held responsible for the killing of 43 civilians. His division “Merčepović” was famous for its cruelty and severe torture of victims, including the killing of 12-year-old Aleksandra Zec and her family. Škoro’s confusion and clear uneasiness while answering the questions about why he

---

1 Duka, Zdenko. 2019. Oпасни захтеви. Љирине промјене Устава Хрватску су врстају уз бош Турако и Азербайджану. 
4 Bago, Mislav. 2019. Posljednje istraživanje uoči izborne šutnje: Milanović i Grabar-Kitarović vode mrtvu trku, 
stated that he, as president, would pardon Merčep definitely played a role in the negative general public perception of him. He said that his willingness to pardon Merčep was “a humanitarian question” because Merčep is old and in bad health. The answer was not very well received among his voters. The media commented that Škoro was “knocked out”, his performance looked like the “breakdown”, that he was “demasculinized”. After the debate, the final polls before elections showed that Miroslav Škoro fell drastically while Zoran Milanović, for the first time, overtook Grabar-Kitarović. The polls themselves probably had an influence on the final result.

Other candidates
Besides these three candidates and myself, there where seven other candidates. Former judge Mislav Kolakušić, now a member of the European Parliament, came in fourth place (5.87%) with fewer votes than the election polls predicted (around 7%). He presented himself as anti-establishment independent candidate focusing on anti-corruption and reduction of the public sector. He promised to lay off 700,000 people in the public sector. He did not manage to win more than the 600,000 votes that he himself proposed as a minimum number of votes for his participation in the next parliamentary elections. Comedian Dario Juričan, an independent candidate, came in fifth place (4.61%), which was a great surprise. Juričan limited his campaign to anti-corruption satire with only one person at the center of that satire—Zagreb’s mayor Milan Bandić, who is suspected in several corruption cases. Juričan’s satirical performance resembles the famous Slovenian performance “Three Janšas”. He also tried to legally change his name into “Milan Bandić,” but he did not manage to do it during the campaign.

Dalija Orešković came in sixth place with 2.90% of the vote. The former chair of the Conflicts of Interest Committee of the Croatian Parliament (2013-2018) was also running on an anti-corruption campaign. Right-wing populist anti-establishment candidate Ivan Pernar, a member of the Croatian Parliament nominated by the party that is named after him (Party of Ivan Pernar), came in seventh place with 2.31% of the vote. Dejan Kovač, a candidate of the Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLS) received 0.95% of the vote, coming in ninth place. Anto Đapić, an extreme right-wing candidate, received 0.21%, and Nedjeljko Babić, a candidate of a small regional party (HSSČKS), received 0.16% of the vote.

---

13 In 2007, three Slovenian performance artists changed their names and surnames to Janez Janša, the Slovenian Prime Minister and right-wing politician. They filmed a documentary about the name change and participated in the Slovenian national elections.
The anti-corruption myth

If we were to identify a theme in the 2019 presidential elections—it would be one of anti-corruption. The focus on anti-corruption reveals the many similarities and overall consensus of the candidates. However, the consensus that corruption is a major problem of Croatia points out how all of the candidates remain within the similar political and economic framework. From right-wing candidates Mislav Kolakušić, Ivan Pernar, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, and Miroslav Škoro, to left-wing Dalija Orešković and Dario Juričan, and to center Dejan Kovač and Zoran Milanović, all candidates claimed more or less the same thing: if Croatian politicians have enough strength to eliminate corruption, everything will be better.

Corruption is usually addressed in two ways. First, there is the standard narrative of aspirants for power who see corruption as a problem of greedy, immoral individuals who came to power in order to gain personal benefits. This moral understanding proposes a simple recipe for dealing with the problem of corruption. It is enough that people on election day wisely choose non-corrupt individuals who will then, because of their higher moral ground, change things radically. Corrupt politicians should be overthrown and replaced with new and morally superior ones.

In the latest Croatian elections, candidates for president directly stated or indirectly implied that they themselves present more appropriate persons for the presidential role exactly because of this morality. Zoran Milanović accused Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović of being a morally corrupt person, surrounded by corrupt individuals (from Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić, to her political advisers from HDZ), on the other hand, he saw himself as a morally superior future president who would choose non-corrupt associates and politicians that could serve high state positions, such as the President of the Supreme Court or Director of Security and Intelligence. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović did provide solid grounds for accusations of corruption. Not only had she pardoned defendants convicted of economic crimes related to donors in her previous presidential campaign, but she also sang for Milan Bandić at his birthday party, where she stated that she would “bring Bandić cookies in jail,” if he were imprisoned.14 Nevertheless, Zoran Milanović himself can also be described as a corrupt politician. As premier he defended corrupt members of his party, including the same Milan Badić (then a member of the Social Democratic Party, SDP). Milanović, at the time president of SDP, supported Bandić’s candidacy for Zagreb city major in 2009. Milanović also defended other corrupt party members such as Marina Lovrić Merzel (former MP of the county of Sisak, convicted of bribery and money laundering) and Željko Sabo (sentenced for bribery), as well as a corrupt member of another party - Andro Vlahušić from the Croatian People’s Party (Hrvatska narodna stranka, HNS). Vlahušić was sentenced for bribery. Milanović also appointed Tomislav Saucha as a head of the Prime Minister's Office, who was later charged in an affair involving faked travel orders.

---

Other candidates who did not have any form of political power had more credibility while advocating against corruption. However, their campaigning against corruption implies the same logic of moral disqualification and simplifies the problem and its resolution. Politicians who stand against corruption and derive their credibility only from the fact that they have not previously participated in any form of politics can prove different the moment they step into the shoes of their predecessors.

Dario Juričan was among those that claimed that they were different. His anti-corruption campaign focused only to one person - Zagreb city major Milan Bandić. Juričan’s satirical motto was “corruption for all, not only for them/few.” Political commentators noted his “Zagreb-centralism,” a perspective common to the urban population that does not see beyond the capital city of Croatia, and also his problematic individualization of the guilt—a reduction of the problem to the mentality and character of one person. After his campaign, Juričan made a few comments demonstrating his total incompetence on the issue (he said that corruption is demonstrated by the high non-commercial prices of tram tickets).

Miroslav Škoro described himself as “a man of the people,” trying to distinguish himself from corrupt politicians. In his announcement of candidacy, Škoro said that Croatia is governed by two parties with “trading partners,” that political “elites have completely alienated themselves from the people,” and that “hundreds of thousands of Croatian daughters and sons” are contributing to the prosperity of other countries with their work because they have no chance in Croatia without being a member of one the ruling parties, HDZ or SDP. However, Miroslav Škoro himself gained all of his wealth and power precisely as a member of HDZ, and even today he prospers because of his lucrative contracts with the state.

Such an approach is obviously a simplified populist attempt to win the hearts of people who have little trust in politicians and politics. The second approach, however, is subtler. It starts from the premise that we should not seek the causes for the corruption only in the problematic psychological profile or morality of a politician, but in the formal, procedural, normative opportunities for the corruption—non-transparent procedures, inadequate legal framework, non-existence of systems of control, etc.

Dalija Orešković’s platform fits into this category. She also pledges a moral component, seeing herself as morally superior to present politicians. But, she is also a person with experience, and program that proposes concrete legal measures for solving the problem of corruption: the “Plan for Croatia.” She presented a draft of the proposal of the strategy for suppression of corruption that includes measures such as fiscal transparency, access to information, use of anti-corruption laws, etc.

---

of information technologies, participation of citizens in the formation of public politics, the formation of an office for the suppression of corruption, and systematic analyses of corruption risks, among other things.

Mislav Kolakušić, a typical right-wing populist, also (to some extent) transcended the narrative of the addressing corrupt individuals with technocratic solutions. He also claimed that he was capable of “solving things” in a legal manner. He ran a strict anti-corruption campaign, claiming that Croatian laws are written for narrow group of people, such as in the case of the specially written law for the company Agrokor (a company that almost went bankrupt until the government stepped in with a law that settled the crisis). Kolakušić founded a non-governmental organization called “Anti-corruption” with the goal of “creating a movement of determined, professional, and responsible people with a final aim to transform the Republic of Croatia into a land that respects justice and fairness”. This second approach seems more objective because as it strives to abstract the personal aspect of corruption, it reduces moralization and individualization. However, it still is a simplification that excludes the wider socio-economic basis for corruption.

**Corruption and poverty**

Corruption presents itself as a serious problem of Croatia today. Croatia is ranked as the most corrupt country in Eastern Europe. However, anti-corruption politics do not address elite power and inequality as the source of systemic corruption. If, hypothetically, corruption practices vanished and meritocratic procedures were established, there is no guarantee that majority of people would prosper and benefit. Corruption in the form of clientelist employment, for example, would not disappear, since the gap between the demand for relatively secure and well-paid work and its social offer in the capitalistic semi-periphery would not be abolished. On the contrary, the gap would even widen with layoff of the workers in the public sector, which every anti-corruption politician promises to do.

Corruption is not only a matter of morals, nor it is an outcome of inadequate legal procedures. Corruption comes form economic underdevelopment, the economically unfavorable position of the domestic economy in the global division of work, a low overall level of employment, huge social inequalities, and a relatively low degree of satisfaction of the basic needs of the population. Corruption tends to thrive amid a culture of impunity and a low degree of

---

23 Corruption is perceived from the point of view of the “index of perception of corruption,” data issued by Transparency International (Transparency International, 2019). Perception of corruption is nevertheless a subjective category. Distrust in the legal system is related to high trust in EU institutions and the idealization of the Western European countries that are not without corruption scandals. Let us only remember that the ex-president of the European commission Jean-Claude Junker was caught in scandal when he was a prime minister of the Luxembourg. Junker favored private companies (around 300 companies including Amazon, Apple, and Pepsi) by lowering taxes.
Corruption emerges from the poverty that limits the possibilities for having a job and steady payment that can satisfy basic human needs such as living space, healthy food, healthcare, and education.

Toxic cynicism is typical for systemic corruption and will in any case make it easier for a public official to justify corrupt exchanges. Illicit transactions become expressions of “friendship” and “solidarity” rather than self-interest (Fogel). Anti-corruption politics, unfortunately, often delegitimize the struggle of the masses as a vehicle for meaningful change. Anti-corruption focuses on moral and technocratic framework and dismisses radical change—profound changes within the political and economic framework—as Utopian.

29 years since the beginning of the transition from socialism to capitalism, Croatia finds itself at the forefront of Europe. The country has been to a great extent deindustrialized, with high numbers of unemployed people and even more at risk of losing their jobs. Croatia has seen a huge emigration of its working population. About 300,000 people have emigrated, around 14% of the population, compared to the EU average of 3.8%. Since the beginning of the 2007/08 crisis, every 11th working position has been lost.

Atypical contracts (3 month contracts) make up 6.9% of the contracts in Croatia, while the European average is 2.3%. France has the second-highest average, with 4.8% of employment based on temporary or atypical contracts. At the beginning of the crisis in Croatia, only 12.3% of workers were temporarily employed—today, that number has doubled. 22.2% of Croatian workers work in precarious job positions.

The Croatian economy is uncritically integrated in global markets, and current politics are deepening the dependence on international economic, financial, and political centers; i.e. the state is reducing the degree of freedom of management of the conditions of social and economic development. Croatia is consistently loosing control of strategic companies, and ruling parties lack systematic industrial policies or plans for stopping deindustrialization (currently, Croatia is loosing its shipbuilding industry, one of its last export industries). Current politics lack a plan for putting an end to the trade deficit (and consequently, to rise of external debt).

Increased corruption is related to poor socio-economic indicators. However, mainstream anti-corruption politics do not address the problem of the economic system itself, but only peripheral outcomes of that system—symptoms of economic issues. The majority of the opposition candidates remained within the already established framework of capitalist methods of production; more specifically, those of capitalism on the periphery of Europe. The presidential campaign remained more or less within the given political and economic framework, and did not address the socio-economic problems that lead to corruption.

Fogel, Against “Anti-Corruption”.
Current policy offers more or less the same recipe—more neoliberal reforms, austerity policies, curtailment of social and workers' rights—that is responsible for the deepening of the social gap between rich and poor and between the majority, whose living standards have declined over the last 29 years, and the few rich who are constantly increasing their wealth. There are 260 multimillionaires in Croatia with assets of 170 billion HRK (kunas), while the annual Croatian GDP is around 130 billion.

The president will be the best friend of the premier

Zoran Milanović is perhaps the first candidate to enter a presidential campaign without a published program. He focused solely on his personality, using the slogan “president with character.” The second round was an opportunity for him and his opponent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović to present programs and clarify their political standpoints—at least at the three public TV debates. Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović’s campaign with the slogan “real Croatia,” counted on right and conservative voices, advocating unity and patriotism with numerous references to the war of the 1990’s. Zoran Milanović, on the other hand, campaigned as a “character” with a liberal worldview: he used the slogan “normal Croatia,” promoting equality for all citizens. During his campaign, Milanović stated that “the wars are over,” standing firm against nationalism and intolerance.

Human rights, as invoked by Milanović, are economic rights—the right to have healthy food, housing, publicly available and free education, and healthcare. They are, however, endangered by the neoliberal measures that Zoran Milanović and his government have implemented in Croatian society during his mandate as prime minister from 2011 to 2016. During the campaign, Milanović stated that today there are no more workers, and that a substitute for “worker” is “citizen,” claiming thus that he will fight for citizens. Of course, precarious and “flexible” work, “zero working contracts” and work without syndicate protection are the current reality of those who work and try to earn a living. Working conditions have changed for the worse and have brought about a different definition of work—more unstable work in unstable conditions. Social democracy should not simply abandon these disfranchised and disempowered people: the more than half of the total number of pensioners that live in poverty, the 14% working people that have migrated, the young people that cannot afford to live in Croatia working several jobs at a time, those on tenuous working contracts, and those working without contracts at all. Social democracy in Croatia, led by Milanović’s Social Democratic party the SDP, contributed to these conditions in the first mandate, when SDP’s Ivica Račan led government from 2000 to 2003, and even more so in the second mandate, that of Zoran Milanović.

Milanović will take office on 18 February 2020, during Croatia’s EU presidency. Current Prime Minister Andrej Plenković has been destabilized by Grabar-Kitarović’s defeat. The presidential elections in Croatia did not bring many changes in regard to the material conditions of the majority. The popular thesis is that the presidential function is meaningless, and that Milanović is simply good enough in accordance with his own “program”: he promises nothing more than to be “normal.” However, the president has real, formal powers - he is

27 Pre-election rally at Zagreb’s Tvornica at 9 November 2019.
Katarina Peović

1. The president-in-chief of the armed forces, he is foreign policy co-creator, and he appoints the prime minister, among others. But even more importantly, the president is a symbolic figure that should support the impoverished by criticizing dangerous and ineffective austerity measures and “reforms” that only serve the rich.28 During his campaign, one of the few real statements that Zoran Milanović made about his standpoint on the premier of current government in Croatia, Andrej Plenković, is that he will be his friend.29 As such, the disfranchised majority cannot expect much better.

Bibliography

28 Recent tax reform introduced the a reduction in the tax rate for those with the salary higher than 17.500 HKN. Only 3,1% of working people fits this category.


Protests against the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro. A Challenge to the “Đukanović-System”?
Event Analysis

Fynn-Morten Heckert
Student Assistant, University of Graz
fynnmortenheckert@gmx.de

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(1), 11-24
DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.1.2
Protests against the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro. A Challenge to the “Đukanović-System”?

Fynn-Morten Heckert

Keywords: Montenegro, church-protests, social movements, litije, nation-building

Introduction

On 27 December 2019 the parliament of Montenegro passed a new Law on Religious Freedom. This law replaces an older law regarding the same topic from 1977. There is a broad consensus that the old law is outdated and needs to be revised. However, the new one is (among other aspects) mainly criticized for its articles 62-64, which refer to the ownership of holy assets. It declares that all religious sites and land currently possessed by religious communities and built from common funds of the citizens before 1918 on the territory of present-day Montenegro, shall pass into the ownership of the Montenegrin state, if religious communities cannot give evidence that they were the legal owners of the assets within one year from the promulgation of the Law.¹

This legal norm is highly contested by the oppositional pro-Serbian Democratic Front (DF), the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), and its supporters, who claim that this law would take away holy places from the SOC and would be discriminatory against the Serbs in Montenegro, which manifests in regular demonstrations, blockades, and even threats of bloodshed in Montenegro if the law is implemented.² There was also an incident inside the parliament where MPs of the DF rushed to the parliament speaker and stated that they would be ready to die for their church. After this, police intervened and arrested 18 MPs of the DF.³ Additionally, the opposition leader Andrija Mandić stated that the government would have to “count on the worst,” if the parliament would adopt that law and that he would “invite all [his] war friends from 1991 to 1999.”⁴ Although after some violent conflicts with injuries on both sides, peaceful walks

---

⁴ Kajošević, Montenegro Opposition MPs Charged Over Chaos in Parliament
Protests against the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro.
A Challenge to the “Đukanović-System”?

and protests were announced and organized by the SOC, the situation is tense and reaches international importance as well.

The protests spread also to Serbia, where hooligans of the football club Red Star Belgrade protested in front of the Montenegrin embassy and burned the Montenegrin flag. This was accompanied by nationalist claims stating “Montenegro and Serbia – it is one family,” and “We don’t give away holy places” (as seen on a popular twitter account of the Red Star Ultras: Delije Sever [@delije_net]).

The new Law on Religious Freedom as a matter of “national survival”
The Montenegrin government has reacted by defining the aforementioned incidents as a threat to independence. Prime Minister Duško Marković stated: “Montenegro again faces the challenge of defending its independence and freedom. We will preserve our Montenegro in spite of the hatred engulfed by the same actors inside and outside its borders.” Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić has not yet explicitly supported the Serb protesters, but has emphasized the “unity of the [Serb] people” and has made further remarks about national survival of Serbs in Montenegro. This makes clear that both sides judge the Law to be a matter of national interest and even national survival that has the capacity to further polarize Montenegrin society along ethnic lines. This rhetoric makes it difficult for both sides to find a decent solution, which is manifested by the topos of the attackers of the Montenegrin state; from the “inside” and the “outside” as Marković has stated, as well as the threats of “bloodshed” pronounced by Mandić, the leader of the DF-fraction in parliament. In fact, until the recent measures to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19 in Montenegro were taken, the protests were taking place least twice per week in several municipalities, such as Podgorica, Nikšić, Budva, and many more, and were regularly attended by thousands of protesters. But even though the SOC declared a halt to the protests until the pandemic is over, the topic stays relevant for the time after, when the protests will be organized again.

About this analysis
How is it possible that the law on the Religious freedom, which includes the secularization of religious assets whose ownership by religious communities cannot be surely proven, could develop into an issue of “national survival” and consequently attract such a huge numbers of protesters? This analysis aims at contributing to the answer to this question by providing a critical assessment of the protests by analyzing the opposing constructions of the events the

---

6 Kajošević / Živanović, Montenegro Religion Law Protests Spread Around Serbia.
9 Kajošević / Živanović, Montenegro Religion Law Protests Spread Around Serbia.
Montenegrin daily newspapers *Pobjeda* and *Dan*.\(^{11}\) The analysis includes articles during the timeframe from 15 December 2019, shortly before the law was passed, until 25 February 2020, when the research had to come to end in order to finalize the essay. This was circa three weeks before the suspension of the protests due to COVID-19 was announced on 13 March 2020.

Here, the focus of the analysis lies in the identifications of the “self” and the “other” in the respective media. This is helpful for understanding how the lawmakers and respectively, opponents of the law, could be credibly (and thus successfully) antagonized in public discourse, which is in line with the polarization in society. Furthermore, this event analysis aims to give insight into how the protests may change the relationship between the identity concepts of “Serbhood,” “Montenegrinness,” and the Montenegrin state. In order to dig deeper into the developments connected with the church protests (*litije*), the findings of the newspaper analysis will be reflected upon against the backdrop of the Montenegrin nation- and state-building process, as well as in the light of the characteristics of the long-term rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska Partija Socialista, DPS*), which has been in office since even before Montenegrin independence in 2006 and thus crucially shaped the social and political system in the country. But before the results of the newspaper analysis are presented, I will give a short introduction to the history of the state- and nation-building of Montenegro, starting after WWII.

**Brief overview: Nation- and State-Building in Montenegro since 1946**

A short time after Montenegro was given the status of a constituent republic of Socialist Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1946, the identification rate of the population as Montenegrins was the highest: in the census of 1948, 90.68% of the population declared themselves as Montenegrins. By contrast, in 2011, only 44.98% identified as Montenegrins.\(^{12}\) A brief historical overview of the Montenegrin state- and nation-building will help to understand this phenomenon. In the decades after the creation of the Socialist Republic of Montenegro in 1946 when the republican institutions were consolidated, the number of people who identified as Montenegrins continuously dropped. The most significant decrease occurred in 1997/1998, when Montenegro under the leadership of Milo Đukanović broke with Milošević’s Serbia and the republic became a *de facto* independent state. At the same time, the number of people who identified as Serbs increased as much as the number of people who identified as Montenegrins decreased.\(^{13}\) This coincides with the growing strength of the discourse about Montenegrin independence, starting in the 1990s. In 1992, when the SFRY was drifting apart, the majority of the Montenegrin population (95.4%) still preferred to remain within the union with Serbia, and even in 2006 in the referendum over formal independence only 55.5% (the threshold was 55%) voted for

---

\(^{11}\) While *Pobjeda* (founded 1944) is considered as a newspaper, which reports in favor of the government, *Dan* (founded 1999) is classified as a newspaper, which strongly criticizes the government and frames events in a supportive way for the oppositional forces (see: Spaić, Aneta. 2017. Media Law in Montenegro. West Sussex: Kluwer Law International, par. 45-46).


\(^{13}\) Bieber / Jenne, Situational Nationalism, 434.
Protests against the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro. 
A Challenge to the “Đukanović-System”? 

This has to do with diverging constructions of Montenegro and “Montenegrinness.” For one part of the Orthodox population, “Montenegrinness” is a territorial sub-category of an overarching Serb national identification; thus, a union with Serbia was an option in which the identifications as Serb and as Montenegrin were not in opposition. Others imagine “Montenegrinness” as a national category and Montenegro as a national territory that is totally independent from Serbia. The national imagination in this variant focuses more on historic Montenegrin institutions before 1918, when Montenegro became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and territorial notions (such as landscape), than on cultural notions such as the unity of all speakers of the “Serb” language and of Orthodox faith, which transcend territorial notions. During the time of the SFRY, both constructions of Montenegro and “Montenegrinness” were not conflicting, since Serbs and Montenegrs shared one federal state. In this way, people who also felt nationally affiliated with the Serbian nation could officially declare themselves as Montenegrs without getting involved into “moral conflicts.” Until then, it was no contradiction to be a Montenegrin, to speak Serbian, and to support the SOC. 
This changed when the discourse about Montenegrin independence became more dominant. This led to a situation in which identifying as “Montenegrin” implied also having a positive attitude towards Montenegrin independence, while identifying as “Serb” implied the support for remaining in a Serb-Montenegrin political union. The following decrease in people who identified as Montenegrs also endangered the Montenegrin elite’s project of building a sovereign Montenegrin state. It became necessary to count on the support of minorities such as Albanians and Bosniaks in order to gain sufficient support for the independence. By promising a civil state in which minority groups could also participate instead of pushing a concept of ethno-nationalist “Montenegrinness,” independence could be achieved in 2006 with a scarce majority of 55.5%. Indeed, even after setting up the de jure civic Montenegrin state, ethnicized practices continued to exist, which have had consequences in the relationship between Serbs and Montenegrs and their relation towards the Montenegrin state. Those consequences are also manifested in the recent conflict about the new law on religious freedom in Montenegro.

Newspaper Analysis of Pobjeda and Dan
During the newspaper analysis it was obvious that Dan gives significantly more space to church officials and their statements regarding the litije than Pobjeda does. Among the statements of different members of the SOC-clergy, metropolit of Montenegro Amfilohije Radović and his statements play a dominant role in the reports. The president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, also gives statements regarding the Law. In Pobjeda, on the other hand, much attention is given to Montenegrin politicians and intellectuals whose comments especially emphasize criticism of the protests.

---

15 Bieber / Winterhagen, Erst der Staat, dann die Nation, 4-5. 
16 Bieber / Winterhagen, Erst der Staat, dann die Nation, 6. 
17 Bieber / Winterhagen, Erst der Staat, dann die Nation, 10. 
18 Bieber / Winterhagen, Erst der Staat, dann die Nation, 6. 
19 Bieber / Winterhagen, Erst der Staat, dann die Nation, 10-11.


Analysis of Dan

The protesting parties, mainly consisting of SOC clergy, believers, and politicians of the conservative/right-wing oppositional coalition Democratic Front (Demokratski Front, DF) that ideologically favors mostly the state-union of Serbia and Montenegro,\textsuperscript{20} perceive the recently passed Law on Religious Freedom as a “general crime,” mainly due to the fear that the government may confiscate the holy assets still maintained and used by the SOC. In the following passage, in which Dan quotes Amfilohije, the characterization of the Law by the opposing side becomes especially clear:

> “Such a dangerous, malicious and maliciously prepared law does not deserve to be discussed and debated in the Montenegrin assembly until it has the approval of all traditional churches and religious communities in Montenegro, in accordance with the opinion of the Venice Commission and with the highest international standards.”\textsuperscript{21}

Here, besides the alleged evil intention of the government to deprive the SOC of their holy assets, the government is also accused of neglecting democratic principles and standards of international legislation. In the article, the insufficient stakeholder-participation is mentioned in particular as violating democratic legislation. The Law is constructed as a potential precedent case for similar legislations in Kosovo as well, which could also legally take away the Serbian-Orthodox holy assets there.\textsuperscript{22} The holy assets in Montenegro and Kosovo and their ownership by the SOC are connected here with the Serbian people as a whole. Their alleged confiscation is furthermore constructed as a threat to the survival of the Serbian nation; this becomes clear in the statement of Vučić, that it would be his duty to “show concern for the survival of the Serbian people and the Church.”\textsuperscript{23} This connection of the Serbian national identity and the SOC is to be understood in the light of the nation-building process of the Serbian nation, in which religious and national affiliation are deeply intertwined.\textsuperscript{24} The Serbian demands in Kosovo are particularly important to view in the context of the leading role of the SOC in “defending the Serb national identity in Kosovo” during the Kosovo conflict,\textsuperscript{25} in which it became clear that religious and national identity in Serb nationalism cannot be isolated. Thus Vučić’s statement that the ownership of Orthodox assets by the SOC is connected to the survival of the Serbian nation reproduces this kind of national affiliation also for Serbs in Montenegro. This allows also the discursive construction of the Montenegrin

\textsuperscript{20} Consisting of the parties: Nova Srpska Demokratija (NOVA), Demokratska Srpska Stranka (DSS), Demokratska narodna partija (DNP) and Pokret za promjene (Pzp). The ideological stance of SDF, DSS and DNP can be considered as favoring the Serbian and Montenegrin political union.


\textsuperscript{22} “…[a] precedent was made in Montenegro when this unfortunate law was passed, which is actually against the law and a blow to the legal order, in order to make the same model of Hashim Thaci and Ramush Hardinaj, abducted Serbian churches in Kosovo and Metohija”, Dan. 2020. Litijama gradimo bolju Crnu Goru, 24. February 2020 (accessed: 25. February 2020).


government not only as anti-Orthodox, but also as anti-national, while the nation here is imagined as Orthodox and Serb. This anti-national characterization of the law becomes clear when Amfilohije describes the legislation as “Marxist-Stalinist” because the Communist period of Yugoslavia is seen as anti-Serbian in nationalist discourses due to the fact that it (allegedly unjustly) took away Serbian rule over Montenegro, Kosovo, and Vojvodina.

Besides that, the possibility to claim the law not only as anti-Serb, but also as anti-national can be understood in context of the Serb nationalist discourse about Montenegro as the “Serbian Sparta,” in which Orthodoxy (and thus Serbhood) could survive even in times of Ottoman rule over the Balkans. Here, “Montenegrin” is constructed as a territorial sub-category of the overarching Serb national identity. This discourse allows the equation of the Montenegrin and the Serbian nation and further implies the construction of the territory of Montenegro as Orthodox, which according to those discourses again equals Serb, and therefore “allows” Amfilohije to speak in the name of the “nation” and not only on behalf of those who identify as Serbs. That fact that Amfilohije indeed refers those discourses can be seen here:

“This people is organically bound because it knows that Kosovo is our forever hearth, both of Serbia and Montenegro and of all our people, […]”

Here he refers to Kosovo as the cradle of the Serbian nation, which is an integral part of Serb nationalism. The supposed importance of the Kosovo myth for Montenegrin identity reveals that Montenegro in Amfilohije’s view, who is (as it seems) the highest moral authority for the current litij due to his high presence in the Dan-discourse, is entirely embedded in the Serb nationalist framework. This can be inferred, because the Montenegrin nationalist discourse, which considers Montenegrin identity as independent from the Serbian one, focuses predominantly on the continuity of historic state-institutions instead of cultural notions, which is reflected in the current de jure civic notion of the Montenegrin state-conception. Besides that, the particular landscape of Montenegro characterized by its mountains, also provides fixed points of identification, which also coincides with the stress on the institutional continuity of the Montenegrin state thus far: that the identity of “Montenegrinhood” is more constructed around territorial notions than around religious notions. According

---

32 See e.g. Bieber, Nationalist Mobilization and Stories of Serb Suffering.
33 Bieber / Winterhagen, Erst der Staat, dann die Nation, 4.
35 Gutmeyr, Die montenegrinische Nationsbildung, 76-77.
to those notions, the level of entrenchment of Montenegrinness in the Serbian framework is considered a Serbian hegemonic aspiration. In conclusion, the “general crime,” which the government is accused of by the protesters is taking away the holy assets, which “rightfully” would belong to the SOC and thus threatens the existence of the Serb nation in Montenegro. As showed before, the implied equivalence of Serb and Montenegrin identity also discursively enables the claim that the Law would not be only anti-Serb, but also anti-national in a universal sense. Besides that, the Law would be anti-democratic because the SOC would have not been sufficiently included in the legislative process. Also, the notion of being “anti-national” implies that the Law is against the universal people, implying as well that the government does not respect the will of its people. This is the circumstance the protesters want to overcome.

While the government and the MPs who voted in favor of the Law are constructed as “anti-national,” the protesters construct themselves as the nation:

“If this worldly power is national, then let the voice of the people be heard. The voice the people are raising against the law of the murderers, the anti-national law, against the law of the ungodly, which must be rejected.”

As visible in this quotation, the government is not only perceived as anti-national but is also portrayed as “murderers” and “ungodly.” These attributions are also to be found in the further course of the article:

“In the darkness of ignorance, superstition, fear, vanity, lust, you and yours will see the endless source of brotherly love and the call to the community of love. Let’s be human, because there is nothing better in this world. […] Concord will defeat the devil.”

While the government is constructed as the devil and the governmental situation is described as dark, vain, lusty, etc., the protests are constructed in opposition as a project of love, brotherhood, and community. The protests call for practicing “humanity” as well, which is juxtaposed in opposition to the attributions of lust, vanity, etc. As a project that aims to achieve the exact opposite of this “dark state,” humanity is exclusively attributed to them, while those who were passing the law are excluded from the notion of humanity. The protests are furthermore constructed as devoted to the faith and the church. Besides that, the DF as supporters of the protests construct the protest as a protest for peace and fraternal coexistence in Montenegro by claiming only the withdrawal of this Law could preserve peace, stability, and coexistence in the country. Another significant topos of the litije is that they claim to be apolitical:

“These litije are a blessed gift […] that transcends all party, political and ideological interests. All national, foreign and other feelings and characteristics should be carried by everyone in their heart, and on these litije an icon from his home and a candle in his heart and in his hands. Only such litije make us all

36 Bieber / Winterhagen, Erst der Staat, dann die Nation, 4.
37 Dan, Što su litije brojni, svetinje su sigurnije.
38 Dan, Što su litije brojni, svetinje su sigurnije.
39 Dan, Što su litije brojni, svetinje su sigurnije.
40 Dan, Zakon ne zaslužuje da se o njemu diskutuje u Skupštini.
better, ennoble us and give us hope that Montenegro will be better and that goodness and dignity will overcome evil, injustice and primitivism […]”.

This claim is paradox, because the litije are, as shown before, essentially political since they are trying to change the Montenegrin legislation. The emphasis on the pure religious struggle seems rather akin to a strategy to highlight a “greater cause” (i.e. here the religious over the political) of the litije and/or a strategy to present itself as less harmful to the government, and thus to prevent repression. In fact, the recourse to the nation is a constant reference point in the identity of the litije. Only the controversy about nationhood—in a world in which nationalism is the dominant dogma subdividing the world into territories, what consequently implies a debate over statehood—has the capability to explain the protests that also occurred in Belgrade, which led to an attempt to burn the flag of the Montenegrin embassy (as a sign of the Montenegrin nation-state) as mentioned in the introduction.

Analysis of Pobjeda
The hegemonic fraction, as I will call the supporters of the Law in state/government and society, react to the litije by portraying it as an issue of national security. The Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović (DPS) stated in Pobjeda regarding the litije:

“Montenegro’s opponents do not stand still. They live in the belief that Montenegro will disappear sooner or later […]. [T]his debate is not about the law or about property. This is a debate about the state.”

Here it is visible that the Montenegrin president describes the protests as a threat to the independence of Montenegro. Other officials also describe the litije in a similar way, for example, the Montenegrin Prime Minister Duško Marković (DPS):

“The Litije have shown that they are not religious but political and that they are aimed at changing the government and threatening the sovereignty of Montenegro.”

Furthermore, the protesters are accused of pursuing greater Serbian interests in Montenegro, and seeking to establish a de facto ethnic Serbian state on Montenegrin territory, as seen in Đukanović’s claim that their greater-Serbian nationalism would only protect the interest of one nation:

“Large-scale nationalism that tries to make decisions instead of Montenegrin institutions... That nationalism protects the rights of citizens of one nationality

44 “Political protests, hidden behind lithiums, such as the many times political narratives hidden behind religious mantles, aim to protect the Greater Serbian interests in Montenegro (Aleksandra Vuković (DPS), Member of Parliament), Pobjeda, 2020. Vuković: Nema kompromisa sa negatorima Crne Gore, 27. January 2020 (accessed: 25. February 2020).
In contrast to the alleged goals of the protesters, the DPS constructs itself as the protectors not only of Montenegrin independence, but also as the guards of a civic, democratic, and multiethnic Montenegro, which guarantees full rights to all religious and national groups:

“There is nothing in the fight for religious liberties, because they are guaranteed to all, especially to the faithful of the SOC in Montenegro.”

The project of building a civic, democratic, and multiethnic Montenegro is presented by Đukanović as the direct opposite of the goals that are pursued by the Ŀitiće:

“That is why we are confronted with multiple strikes, inside and out, through the open association of the church with nationalistic extra-systemic activities aimed at the collapse of the legal order and the negation of the civic and multiethnic character of the Montenegrin state, which would ultimately mean a return to the medieval system in which the church was above state and citizens[...].”

Here, the Ŀitiće appear as anarchic, extra-systemic activities, which are, due to their focus on the goals of the clergy, constructed as medieval, which allows Đukanović to present his project of Montenegro as modern and future-oriented. These notions become even more visible when the president presents the Law as a means to achieve such a project, which intensifies the construction of the opponents of the Law as opponents to the whole hegemonic project:

“By adopting the Law on Freedom of Religion, Montenegro confirmed that it is a civil state, multi-ethnic democracy and a society that wants to be an integral part of contemporary European civilization through reforms and modernization.”

Not only do political officials express these ideas, but also intellectuals as well; their comments are also published in Pobjeda. For example, Andrei Nikolaidis states that if the protesters’ goals were achieved, Montenegro’s situation would be the same as the situation of Iran after the Islamic Revolution. The Oslo-based scholar Gorana Ognjenović also sees the goals of the SOC similarly by calling them “colonialist” and constructing them as in contrast to the European legislation of religious freedom.

---

50 “After the separation of Montenegro from Serbia in 2006, they probably thought that domination was continuing and that colonialism would continue to pass under the negis of freedom of religion legislation in Europe”; Pobjeda. 2020. Srpsko pravoslavije svedeno je na politički instrument markiranja teritorija, 17. February 2020 (accessed: 27. February 2020).
In contrast to the *litije*, the government and intellectuals in Pobjeda construct Montenegro not as an ethnic Serb and Orthodox state, but as an entirely independent state based on an inclusive, civic understanding of nation-state, which guarantees equal rights to all citizens regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation, which is embedded in the realm of modern European civilization. This goes in line with the Montenegrin identity construction, which is based on territoriality and continuity of state-institutions as briefly presented before, rather than on a religiously defined national culture, which the DPS has tried to establish since the 2000’s. This supra-ethnic construction of Montenegro allows the government now in its rhetoric to denounce the claims of the protesters as essentially greater-Serbian endeavors that threaten the Montenegrin state, since Serbs are just like everyone else subject to religious and cultural freedom.

However, some cultural notions of exclusive “Montenegrinness” were also introduced after 2004, like the creation of the Montenegrin language (as something distinct from the Serbian language) as the official language in Montenegro according to the constitution. Although the other languages are also considered as languages-in-use, attempts for the universalization of the Montenegrin (i.e. making it hegemonic) becomes clear in the renaming of the school subject “Serbian language” to “Montenegrin language” in 2010, which undermines the credibility of the cultural and ethnic neutrality of the Montenegrin state. According to Matica Crnogorska, in 2010, 38.2% referred to their mother tongue as “Montenegrin,” while 41.6% referred to it as “Serbian.” Besides that, the project of cultural equality is undermined by the general impression that the open identification as “Montenegrin” contributes significantly to better chances of achieving higher career goals. This could be a reason why people who identify as Serbs are alienated from the project of Montenegro that the government promotes. The Serbian rhetoric of the *litije* has the capacity to attract the people who feel/experience that ethnicity indeed matters in the current Montenegro, despite the claims that it does not.

Besides this, the government characterizes itself as democratic and claims to possess competent institutions. It has to be mentioned in this context that the democratic practice in Montenegro has severe shortcomings. Besides the fact that the DPS (successor party of the League of Communists) has ruled continuously since the fall of communism, its rule can be identified as “an authoritarian and oligarchic system with the formal institutions of liberal democracy in order to maintain its dominance in the three arenas of political competition.” In its role as successor party of the Montenegrin League of Communists, the DPS could also preserve its dominance in executive institutions.

---

after the fall of communism, and could control their liberalization. Therefore the electoral process is also distorted by practices such as vote-buying; ballot secrecy is not fully guaranteed as well, due to the small number of inhabitants (i.e. missing anonymity) and a sociopolitical atmosphere in which personal and familial networks have higher importance in the distribution of power as formalized state structures and procedures of recruitment. In this way, although liberal democratic institutions were set up, a clear division of state and party could not be maintained. Besides that, people who are affiliated with the DPS enjoy impunity in many cases. This all leads not only to a general distrust in the government, but as well in the state of Montenegro. Furthermore, Sartori characterizes the strategy of the DPS to stay in power as ethnicized because it constructs the Serb opposition as anti-Montenegrin and as a threat to Montenegro, while it itself uses strategies that aim to present itself as a Montenegrin party and thus attractive to people who identify as Montenegrins. By securitizing the opposition as Serb and anti-Montenegrin, it also contributes to the alienation of people who identify as Serb from the Montenegrin state, which is at the same time constructed as ethnically neutral.

In conclusion, the Law’s initiators and supporters characterize the protests as anti-Montenegrin, Serb nationalist, anti-European, antidemocratic, medieval, and as a threat to the Montenegrin state, while it constructs itself as democratic, European, and ethnically neutral. However, the credibility of such a construction is undermined by still highly-ethnicized political practices and a questionable democratic system, which, due to the unclear differentiation of party and state, leads not only to lack of trust in the government, but also in the state as a whole. The construction of state and government as ethnically unbiased also discredits the claims of the protesters as being anti-democratic and is a threat to the whole civic state project, further alienating the protesters from the state; this is because in their construction, it is them who fight for democracy and against the anti-democratic hegemonic formation.

Conclusion
The litije can be considered as a challenge to the established power system of Montenegro because they are indeed in direct opposition to the project of the Montenegrin state as it was constructed by the DPS. By connecting the claims of the withdrawal of the Law with fundamental questions of state- and nationhood, it becomes clear that the protests are directed against the DPS’ project of Montenegro.

While the government and its supporters construct Montenegro as a civic, supranational state and focuses on the continuity of historic, independent Montenegrin institutions, the leaders of the litije construct Montenegro in terms of religion and ethnicity and imply that the Montenegrin identity is a territorial variant of

---

58 Sartori, Challenging Political Dominance in Montenegro, 42
59 Sartori, Challenging Political Dominance in Montenegro, 35
60 Sartori, Challenging Political Dominance in Montenegro, 42
62 Sartori, Challenging Political Dominance in Montenegro, 35-36.
63 Sartori, Challenging Political Dominance in Montenegro, 36,41.
64 Sartori, Challenging Political Dominance in Montenegro, 41.
Protests against the Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro.
A Challenge to the “Đukanović-System”?

Serb identity, defined by South-Slavic orthodoxy. Those two constructions are reflected in the framing strategies of Dan and Pobjeda: while in Dan the government is in particular depicted as the “general crime,” i.e. anti-Serb and anti-democratic (by ignoring “the nation”), in Pobjeda the litije are constructed as criminals who want to overthrow the Montenegrin state and who are anti-democratic as well. More moderate positions between these poles are hardly found in the newspaper discourse, and contributes to the polarization of society.

Although it is unlikely that all the participants of the litije want to overthrow the Montenegrin state and even the project of a civic state, the self-construction of the litije in opposition to the government (constructed as undemocratic) may attract people because it represents a widespread discourse regarding the state due to its questionable democratic practices. Furthermore, they may attract people by antagonizing the government as anti-Serbian, because the construction of the Montenegrin state by the DPS mainly occurred in differentiation from the Serbian state and the Serbian nation. Therefore, the opposition is constantly branded as Serb and a threat to Montenegro, which also delegitimizes claims not related to nation, such as the criticism of corruption. Besides that, the open declaration of “Montenegrin” identity is connected with economic privileges, which also undermines the credibility of the rhetoric of a supra-ethnic Montenegrin state that guarantees equality to everyone. This may increase the credibility of the litije’s antagonization of the government and further alienate people who identify as Serbs from the Montenegrin state.

In addition, the litije—due to their exclusive Serb Orthodox character—will probably not attract a large amount of people who are affiliated with (for example) the competing Montenegrin Orthodox Church, or other citizens like ethnic Bosniaks or Albanians. Due to the self-identification of the litije through defining itself as the nation (i.e. Orthodox and Serb), people of other faiths and ethnicities are not represented in their project. In this way their project can be indeed identified as ethnic-exclusive (and further, more ethnocratic than democratic) and will contribute to further polarization of Montenegrin society along ethnic lines.

The combination of the protest against the Law with fundamental questions of nation- and statehood in which the character of the Montenegrin politics and state is constructed as anti-Serbian, plus a government that denounces the protesters as anti-Montenegrin, enables the construction of the Law as an issue of national survival and has the capacity to polarize the society further among ethnic lines. Due to the still ethnicized and undemocratic practices that are performed by the government, their construction of the state as ethnically neutral and providing equality for everyone lacks credibility. This contributes to the successful mobilization against the Law and thus provides support for greater Serbian goals, which are likely to be pursued by the SOC and have a dominant position in the litije, as embodied by metropolit Amfilohije.

Questions of further interest that could not be answered in this paper include explorations of the actual motivations of the people who participate in the litije, whose voices are not dominant in the media discourse. Do they largely pursue the goals of the litije, or do they attend primarily in order to protest against the anti-democratic and clientelist practices of the DPS-system? It would also be
interesting to analyze the perception of the *litije* by non-Orthodox people in Montenegro. Such an ethnographic study would deepen the understanding of the political situation in Montenegro and could provide insight that might help to create ideas to depolarize Montenegrin society.

**Bibliography**


Introduction - Visual Representations of Femininities and Masculinities

Introduction

Karl Kaser
Professor for Southeast European History, University of Graz
karl.kaser@uni-graz.at
https://seeha50.uni-graz.at/en/

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(2), 1-11

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.2.1
Introduction - Visual Representations of Femininities and Masculinities
Karl Kaser

Introduction
In the digital age, visual representations have become more meaningful than ever before in history. The Internet, countless portals, blogs, social network sites, digital television and movie images, and illustrated newspapers and magazines – they all contribute to picturizing our everyday and perhaps also not so everyday lives. From a historical point of view the creation of user-generated content on the Internet constitutes an important turning point in the relationship between the human being and the creation, consumption, and distribution of images.

The novelty of digital visual communication compared to its conventional analogous predecessors is its increasing impact on the social construction of reality in at least four ways. First, it opens the practice of visual communication to large parts of the population and blurs the distinction between producer, distributor, and consumer of visual objects. Second, it enhances the productive capacity of visual technology beyond reality itself, into the hyper-real e.g. enabling the production of images that transcend the human perspective. Third, it creates a logic for the representation of reality that enhances the social value of visual communication in the sense that a message must be visual if it has to be relevant at all.¹ Fourth, it enables and accelerates the circulation of images across material and immaterial obstacles such as borders, cultures, language, status, and gender to more conventional forms of communication.²

These components have impacted the visual construction of femininities and masculinities massively. In the digital age, pictures not only come to the people, but everybody is able to create images of her- and himself and to distribute them in abundance within one’s social network sites and beyond. We could call this phenomenon post-modern, hyper-modern, or digital visual culture, howsoever; it constitutes not only a target of mass consumption but has become an integrated whole of creation, distribution, and consumption. Never before in history did

² Stocchetti, Images, 2-5.
individuals independent from class affiliation, education, color, and gender have more agency in processes of the social and cultural construction of social realities and utopias such as femininities and masculinities, including recently sexual self-commodification.

Researchers argue that this online sexual self-commodification on social network sites is explicitly tied to a visual cyber culture, which has become common to the contemporary postfeminist media context. Third-wave feminism’s emphasis on bodily self-expression, on the desirability of women’s freedom to express themselves sexually, as “sex-objects” if they like, and the ability to choose a highly sexualized lifestyle, embraces the neoliberal focus on the idea that the self must be continually constructed and transformed. In short, these kinds of emerging new femininities in the digital age seemingly situates so-called third-wave feminism in a quite different context compared to the “second wave” in the second half of the twentieth century.3

Mentioned impacts of digitalization on emerging new femininities and new masculinities and related visual cultures are, as it looks, more characteristic for North America and Northwest Europe than for other world regions such as Southeastern Europe to which the Balkans and South Caucasus belong. Analogous economic, cultural, and social frameworks hardly exist elsewhere in the world and specifically not at the opposite Southeastern pole of the European continent. Although the inclusion of the Southeast in processes of digitalization has been time-delayed, it was included quite comprehensively; women and men are still recognizably differently situated – culturally, politically, and economically – and have comparatively unequal access to material and cultural resources, different and unequal opportunities regarding the provision and consumption of material goods, and different and unequal access to political and economic decisions. If we put post-socialist retraditionalism aside, one of the reasons is that in socialism, independent feminist movements, and herewith second-wave feminism, never existed; instead, there were party-dependent women’s organizations, which were instantly abolished when socialist party dictatorship ceased. The negative socialist heritage of women’s organizations is one of the reasons women’s movements and feminism have never received significant social support in post-socialist countries and women’s issues have been marginalized as far as possible.

The visual representations of femininities and masculinities during socialism were characterized by asexual women and traditional male functions such as granting protection, earning a living, and fighting for a better life. However, at the center of official concern was female sexual behavior. The typical socialist woman was depicted without any playfulness and sexuality. Only motherly love in moderate quantities was tolerated. Women actively mastered male skills, acquired education, and took part in public life, lacking any fashion sense and appearing utterly asexual. Beauty and desire were proclaimed indecent and harmful. As a result of this puritan-like ethic, the nude body disappeared from paintings, décolletage from TV, and love scenes from movies. Eroticism among married couples was replaced by the glorification of the woman-mother and a

socialist cult of maternity. Images of women were extremely didactic and performed ideological functions. Women have mastered control over the “parasitic” needs of leisure and aesthetics, the decadent trend of self-indulgence through fashion and beauty, and instead have focused narrowly on functional, production-driven activities. The socialist party manufactured and controlled a certain idea of femininity that had nothing to do with women’s self-expression and everything to do with the party line of gender equality.4

The breakdown of the socialist system did not encourage the establishment of a liberal climate towards sexual expression everywhere immediately. Independently from the question how and how fast political and economic transition set in and progressed, firstly, gender roles and gender relations did not change overnight and, secondly, the visual presentation of femininities and masculinities in the rapidly emerging non-socialist media changed much faster, and in some countries comparatively abruptly. A field of tension emerged between an intensified conservative gender ideology in realia and the visual representation of hypersexualized women in utopia. However, what did visual media suggest implementing instead of puritanical socialist morals? What all these journals had in common was the fact that they almost exclusively disseminated images of Western women. The fetishized bodies of western supermodels were meant to counteract previous socialist discourses on the quality of women.5

Probably typical for the wild 1990s was a more local, non-western masculinity type that has become synonymous with power and money through its association with bulletproof jeeps, dark sunglasses, and thick gold chains around the neck. He was the one who provided money for the home and education of the children and mastered the social and domestic space.6

Whereas ideals of Western femininities were disseminated by journals and magazines fast and seemingly without any reluctance immediately after the resignation of socialism, the visualization of post-socialist masculinities seemed to be rooted initially much more in local cultural contexts; but examples emerged conversely as well. Because of these contradictions, among the volume editors the idea emerged to organize a workshop funded by the EU project “Knowledge Exchange and Academic Cultures in the Humanities: Europe and the Black Sea Region, late 18th-21st Centuries (KEAC-BSR)”7, a consortium that is directed and managed by the two workshop conveners. The EU project emphasizes, among other things, gender dimensions of knowledge and cultural exchange in a global perspective – at end of the 20th or beginning of the 21st century – and critically questions seemingly one-dimensional west-east transfers without looking consciously at amalgamation processes of the global, the western, and the local,

---

5 Nicolaescu, Mădălina. 1995. The Representation of Female Bodies in Romanian Journals for Women. Canadian Women’s Studies 16(1), 32-34.
7 https://blacksearegion.eu/
as well as the exploration of emerging, new, and fascinating interactions of local and Western, and more generally of global femininities and masculinities.

The workshop under the title of this special issue had been scheduled to take place at the University of Graz, March 12-13. When we fixed the date almost one year in advance, we could not anticipate that the novel coronavirus would spread and block public and academic activities throughout Europe. Two days before the scheduled opening speeches, the University of Graz announced a complete lockdown, as did other universities and countries during these days. Under the auspices of an unpredictable end of the crisis, we decided to compile this special issue instead of postponing the workshop for an indefinite period.

One of the research and teaching foci of the Institute of History, with whom we are affiliated, is gender history. Among our motivations mentioned before, it was our ambition to contribute to this focus and to enlarge its perspective by emphasising the social construction of femininities and masculinities with visual case studies from the Balkans and the South Caucasus. Gender studies and the study of femininities and masculinities are neither two separate fields, nor are they identical because gender research, among other things, usually focuses on historical and contemporary aspects, whereas the study of visual constructions of femininities and masculinities potentially also includes empirical materials on utopian perspectives – manhood and womanhood not as they are in reality but as they are supposed to be as ideal configurations, such as is displayed in advertisements, for instance.

Quite analogous to the term “gender,” the terms “masculinities” and “femininities” refer to the numerous ways in which manhood and womanhood are socially constructed within historical, social, and cultural contexts. They are results of socially, historically, and culturally determined behaviors and are formed under complex social influences during one’s lifetime. As only a small part of gender role differentiation is biologically determined,8 the stability of gender role patterns is almost entirely a matter of socialization. Socialization refers to how both girls and boys learn their places and roles in society.9 Since role norms are social facts, social processes can change them. This happens whenever the agents of socialization – family, school, work, or mass media – transmit new expectations.10 Probably the most frequently cited passages in the research history of femininities and masculinities are found in the final section of chapter 8 of the Australian sociologist’s Raewyn Connell’s 1987 book, “Gender and Power.”11 In six pages, Connell introduces the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” and its relation to “nonhegemonic masculinities” and “emphasized femininity.” The subsequent canonization of her concept of hegemonic masculinity, however, also evoked serious criticism12 – partly due to the fact that it was not fully elaborated

---

10 Connell, Masculinities, 21-8.
in the few pages, and partly due to how gender scholars deployed it in historically decontextualized ways.\textsuperscript{13} In her later writings,\textsuperscript{14} she found opportunities to defend and to elaborate more on her concept.

One of the most fruitful refinements of her concept, relevant also to this study, was instead of postulating of a global hegemonic masculinity only, her concession of geographical differentiation of hegemonic masculinities because, in her own words, “we must understand that regional and local constructions of hegemonic masculinity are shaped by the articulation of [...] gender systems with global processes.” Consequently, she suggests analyzing empirically existing hegemonic masculinities at three levels: the local, the regional, and the global. The same would apply to femininities. “Global institutions pressure regional and local gender orders; while regional gender orders provide cultural materials adopted or reworked in global arenas and provide models of masculinity that may be important in local gender dynamics.”\textsuperscript{15}

Meanwhile, considerable research has been conducted on the social constructions of femininities and masculinities in various world regions, especially in the previous two decades. As images play an increasingly large role, increasing efforts have been made to define visual rhetoric. Today, the social sciences are increasingly focusing on visual objects and examining the relationship between visual images and persuasion and how images act rhetorically on the viewer in an increasingly visual society.\textsuperscript{16}

On the Balkans and South Caucasus, transnational and intermedia studies on the visual construction of femininities and masculinities scarcely exist. There is no research that attempts to cover both the Balkans and the South Caucasus. Therefore, I risk in my contribution the venture to tackle the two mentioned regions. This has not been my first attempt to include the two regions in my research in a comparative perspective, but the most challenging one. My study (“Visual Representations of Femininities and Masculinities – The Balkans and South Caucasus in Digital Age”) attempts to shed some fresh light on the stalled debate on the remarkable regression in gender equality in the region in the first two decades of post-socialism and in post-Kemalism. In doing so, I believe that discussing gender relations, femininities and masculinities, or both in the digital era is no longer complete without including the wide and thriving field of digital visuality.

One of few exceptions of transnational research on the Balkans constitutes a volume with a Southeast European perspective edited by Nirman Bamburač-

\textsuperscript{14} See specially Connell and Messerschmidt, \textit{Masculinity}.
\textsuperscript{15} Connell and Messerschmidt, \textit{Masculinity}, 849-51.
Moranjak, Tarik Jusić, and Adla Isanović from 2006. The volume explores the stereotypical representation of women in print media and also contains contributions on visual representations, such as the article by Isanović on gender representation in some of the leading daily newspapers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia. More rare exceptions are Elza Ibroscheva’s studies, which are outstanding because of her critical feminist focus on the staging of sexualised femininities in advertisements in post-socialist Bulgaria. In the Bulgarian media researcher’s monography, she extends her Bulgarian observations to the surrounding Balkan countries and to Eastern Europe alternately. In her research designated for our volume (“From Socialist Amazons to Bodies on Full Display: Gender Stereotypes in Bulgarian advertising during socialism and the post-socialist transition”) she aims to explore the current trends of “sexing” the look of women in Bulgarian and Eastern European advertising in an attempt to analyze the gender identity transformation that has taken place in the years of the post-communist transition. Her essay is important because with her media and cultural studies approach she addresses an area that has been largely overlooked in academic research.

Whereas Bulgaria and Turkey are relatively well studied regarding the visual representation of femininities and masculinities, the South Caucasus remains an almost empty field in this regard. One of the reasons for this lack of research is that this kind of study, and more broadly gender studies as such, did not exist in the socialist period. Therefore, in the initial post-socialist period there was a significant backlog that had to be tackled from scratch; visuality studies had to wait, especially in the South Caucasus. It has been rather difficult to identify potential contributors from the region for contributing to our issue. Thanks to Baku based Zumrud Jalilova Hutton, who was appointed Gender Equality Consultant and teaches courses on gender relations at Baku State University, we have found an excellent author from the region. In her contribution to our issue (“Traditional Gender Roles Enacted by Men and Women in Azerbaijani Cinema”) she suggests understanding Azeri society and its considerable gender problems through the prism of movie and television pictures. Her article provides analyses of scenarios – often disparaging portrayals of women – that contribute to the under-representation of females in positions of leadership and build stereotypical expectations.

20 Ibroscheva, Advertising.
Turkey is the only country in the region with a remarkable film industry – to exemplify, its current soap-opera production provides not only the domestic but the Balkan and Arabic markets with blockbuster movies. Therefore, one of the most central aspects of visual construction of femininities and masculinities in Turkey, which is tackled in our issue by Hasan Gürkan’s contribution, has become its movie business. After two decades of decline, Turkish cinema experienced a revival in the 1990s with some films produced that had real success and managed to seduce new audiences. New film directors emerged with diverse perspectives and styles. In the early 2000s, the new support mechanisms for film production such as purchase by TV stations and deals with sponsors created a visible growth in film production. New quests replaced the concern of finding an audience and new themes were taken into account.

Despite this emerging new cinema culture, film production remained a male domain, and the few female filmmakers working in Turkey (and across the Balkan countries) did not explicitly subscribe to feminist ideas until the early 2000s. Between 2005 and 2013, however, there was a sharp increase both in the number of women directors as well as in the number of films with feminist themes, with 47 women making 45 films reflecting a growing feminist discourse on women’s rights. This is related to the increasing number and strength of women’s organizations during the 2000s, and these directors usually offered subversive strategies of disrupting patriarchal culture. Another factor that positively contributed to the presence of women in the cinema industry were women’s film festivals. While many European countries do not even have one women’s film festival, Turkey has two: Uçan Süpürge (Flying Broom) in Ankara and Filmmor (Purple Film) in Istanbul. These festivals constitute an important platform for the visibility of women, especially those making movies.

Gürkan’s contribution to our issue (“The Status of Women as Subject in the Films of Contemporary Turkish Female Directors”) aims to reveal how female characters are positioned and represented in female directors’ films. The senior researcher at Istanbul Arel University uses four movies (released between 2012 and 2016) to exemplify his thesis that films produced by recent Turkish female directors can in fact be called women’s films since female directors approach women’s problems in Turkey’s patriarchal society quite differently than male directors do.

Another body of research literature deals with Islamic fashion and dress, including veiling, which is not only relevant for Turkey but also for other Balkan countries such as Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria. This thematic field was included in the spring 2020-workshop but, unfortunately, is not represented in our special issue because of the scheduled paper presenter’s time constraints conflicting with a very brief deadline. Generally speaking, Muslim women’s self-definitions as being veiled have been largely neglected.

---

Whilst textual-discursive modes have been at least addressed by research, visual ones have not yet attracted much research attention. Among the many authors paying attention to veiling in Turkey, I would like to mention very few who have worked most consistently on related topics, such as Özlem Sandıkçı and Güliz Ger, professors of marketing and business administration as well as the two geography professors, Banu Gökarıksel and Anna Secor. Magda Crăciun, sociologist at University of Bucharest, emphasizes in her monography the area of conflict between Islamic scholars and the fashion business in the name of religion.

The last central field that should be mentioned here that impacts the visual construction of femininities and masculinities significantly is advertising. This field is represented in this issue by Eirini Tsichla from University of Western Macedonia. The nature of the relationship between gender-related values in society and gender stereotyping in advertising is the focus of a long-standing debate. According to the “mirror” argument, advertising reflects values that already prevail in a cultural context. Therefore, the impact of advertising seems to be insignificant because the men and women featured in advertisements have been typecast to adhere to the dominant concepts of gender roles. Conversely, the “mold” argument postulates that advertising shapes and affects the values and views of the social reality of its target audience. According to this approach, advertising tends to incorporate stereotypes presented by the media into its own concepts of reality to match the promoted images. Ultimately, this process contours individual behaviors in such a way that even the relationships of human beings with themselves, their bodies, and their partners are influenced by advertising.

While Tsichla enriches this issue via a general overview on gender representation in advertising (“The Changing Roles of Gender in Advertising: Past, Present, and Future”), her knowledge is based on empirical research, for instance on Cyprus, (together with Yorgos Zotos), conducted 2011-12 based on consumer magazines. Their survey concluded that females were no longer primarily cast in traditional roles that denote gender clichés like “dependency” and “housewife”; the overwhelming proportion of female models served merely decorative or alluring purposes. The study, moreover, aligned with previous research, which acknowledged some progress in the portrayal of women in print

---

advertisements, which slightly mirrored changes in the type of stereotyping, but not its extent.\textsuperscript{30}

The purposes of Tsichla’s contribution to our issue is to provide an overview of the early and recent pertinent literature, to present methodological considerations to be employed in the investigation of gender portrayals in print advertisements, and to highlight important areas for future research endeavors. She identifies femvertising and dadvertising as new role stereotypes in Western magazines. Femvertising underlines the “sexually powerful” woman who is in control and gets what she wants because she is sexually attractive, as opposed to being sexually objectified to be looked at or consumed for male gratification. Dadvertising, however, is used to describe commodified representations of fatherhood that suggest that the ideal man is an involved parent and emotionally vulnerable partner.

Unfortunately, an ever-increasing field of visual construction of femininities and masculinities, the Internet, with all its social network sites, and all the other presentation opportunities, must be disregarded in this issue. In fact, the Internet has become the most important agent and transmitter of visualizations because it unites all media, including its advertising. Its apparent endlessness has become a problem for scientific research because research corpora have become hard to define and to delineate. Besides that, for the Balkans and South Caucasus no major study on visualization of femininities and masculinities appears on the web via the major search engines. We can only patiently wait for research projects to cover this field and fill a major research gap.

To conclude, this special issue on the visual representation of femininities and masculinities in digital age focuses on the Balkans and South Caucasus – a region that still lacks studies on gender relations, patriarchally structured dominance, women’s systematic subordinance, and, related to and beyond that, studies on the social construction of femininities and masculinities. This special issue of Contemporary Southeastern Europe can cover neither all important construction aspects and mechanisms nor all relevant media. However, this was neither the intention of the aforementioned Spring 2020 workshop nor the purpose of this issue. Rather, the underlying intention is to raise attention to an interdisciplinary field that has not received sufficient recognition by scholars of various disciplines that are involved in the study of Southeastern Europe, such as history, sociology, gender studies, religious studies, media studies, and visual culture studies. We as editors hope that this special issue might inspire some of its readers to consider including analyses of visual construction of femininities and masculinities in their research and thus, like a domino effect, seduce others to continue.

Bibliography

Băban, Adriana. Women’s Sexuality and Reproductive Behavior in Post-Ceaușescu Romania: A Psychological Approach, in Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life After Socialism, edited by Gal,


Kotseva, Maria. 2014. *TV Commercial Representation of Women in Italy and Bulgaria in View of the EU Fight Against Gender Stereotypes*. Quaderni di Donne & Ricerca 33/34. Torino.


Nicolaescu, Mădălina. 1995. The Representation of Female Bodies in Romanian Journals for Women. *Canadian Women’s Studies* 16(1), 32-34.


Zotos, Yorgos, and Eirini Tsichla. 2014. Female Portrayals in Advertising: Past Research, New Directions. *International Journal on Strategic Innovative Marketing* 1, 9-26
Visual Representations of Femininities and Masculinities – The Balkans and South Caucasus in the Digital Age

Research Article

Karl Kaser
Professor for Southeast European History, University of Graz
karl.kaser@uni-graz.at
https://seeha50.uni-graz.at/en/

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(2), 12-27

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.2.2
Visual Representations of Femininities and Masculinities – The Balkans and South Caucasus in the Digital Age

Karl Kaser*

The Balkans and South Caucasia (Eurasia Minor) consists of countries and regions that are considered by representative investigations on the country level as some of the last strongholds of patriarchy compared to the rest of Europe, Russia not included. Astonishingly enough, comparative studies of gender relations in Eurasia Minor are rare. My study attempts to shed some fresh light on the stagnant debate on the remarkable regression in gender equality in the region in the first two decades of post-socialism and in post-Kemalism. In doing so, I believe that discussing gender relations, femininities, and masculinities in the digital era is no longer feasible without including the wide and thriving field of digital visuality. My overall conclusion is that the period of re-traditionalization in the “wild 1990s” and not so wild 2000s was a temporal one and has started to fade out in the 2010s at the latest. The conflicting antagonism of porno-chic and veiling-chic is also in a phase of fading out; this is caused by, among other things, the powerful dynamics digital visuality offers to both camps.1

Keywords: Eurasia Minor, digital age, visual representation, porno-chic, veiling-chic

Introduction

Alarmed by similar studies in Western countries, the UK Home Office released a high-profile report on “The Sexualisation2 of Young People” in Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in 2010. This report stated among many other things that over 80 percent of young people used the Internet daily or weekly. Almost half of children aged 8–17 had a profile in a SNS such as Bebo, Myspace, or Facebook. SNSs allowed children and young people to create online identities. Compared to traditional advertising, the new quality was that girls reported being under increasing pressures to display themselves in their bras and knickers or bikinis online, whereas boys sought to display their bodies in a hyper-

* The author is a full professor of Southeastern European history and anthropology at the University of Graz, Austria, since 1996. His research focuses on historical-anthropological issues and encompasses topics such as the history of family, kinship, and clientelism, gender relations in the Balkans and historical visual cultures of the Balkans. Currently he is working on the monographic book project “Contested Femininities and Masculinities in the Digital Age. Realia and Utopia in the Balkans and South Caucasus”. He has conducted numerous research projects. Currently, he is coordinator of the research and exchange project “Knowledge Exchange and Academic Cultures in the Humanities: Europe and the Black Sea Region, late 18th – 21st Centuries” with twelve participating countries, funded by the European Commission.

1 This paper emerged within the Framework of the KEAC-BSR-project funded by the European Union within the funding scheme Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie RISE (734645).

2 Sexualisation means the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it, mentally, emotionally or physically (Papadopoulos, Linda. 2010. Sexualisation of Young People. Review, 23 [accessed: 1 June 2020]).
masculine way, showing off muscles and posturing as powerful and dominant.\(^3\) Traditional sexualized representations of female and male bodies have turned into sexualized self-representations that signal our arrival in the digital age.

Because of the lack of similar investigations, we cannot pursue this track of self-representation in SNSs in the Balkans and South Caucasus. We can only assume that similar trends to the UK are observable also in our regions, although probably not in the same form and to the same extent. However, the aforementioned investigation from the UK makes definitely clear that we cannot discuss gender relations and the social construction of femininities and masculinities any longer without including their cyber dimensions.

The Balkans and South Caucasus, or Eurasia Minor, constitute a group of 15 countries\(^4\) stretching between the Dinaric Alps and the Caucasian Mountains, bordering the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. They are inhabited by a population of 160 million (2018), which is about the population of Russia. Turkey contributes about half of the population to this figure. 60 percent of the population are Muslims and one third is Christian Orthodox.

Except Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, and Yugoslavia, the regions share a joint history of socialism characterized by the Soviet blueprint. Both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia shared a sudden death and fell apart into their constituent territorial and political units around 1990. Therefore, the 1991 political landscape of Eurasia Minor was quite different to that of 1989. Wars, de-industrialization, economic crises, destabilization, social de-cohesion, massive labor migration, and re-patriarchalization constituted formative characteristics of most of the regions’ countries during the two decades of the 1990s and 2000s. Aside formal democracy, one principle has been acknowledged by almost each of the countries in the 1990s, namely free market economy.

This policy opened the doors for global economic players, for an economy based on information technology, for the arrival of the digital age, and the emergence of digital visuality. Almost no country in the world has been able to withstand the allure of the visual world, which has not only significantly impacted our everyday lives but has also changed our lives as scientists and our scientific cultures, be it in the field of medicine or in the social sciences and humanities. The linguistic turn of the 1970s has lost its comprehensive explanatory power, complemented by the ongoing pictorial or visual turn inaugurated in the 1990s. By the end of the decade most Americans were online,\(^5\) and at the beginning of the 21st century digital technology and the digital “new media” have already penetrated the economy and everyday life in many parts of the world. Meanwhile, the idea that images participate in important ways to the social representation of relevant reality and utopia has gained widespread currency.\(^6\)

---


4 Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Turkey.


The social and cultural construction of femininities and masculinities, their modes of visual presentation, representation, and self-presentation as well as the practices of gender relations, is based on market forces more than ever in history.

The presentation of my paper intends to meet two challenges. The first challenge consists of the fact that I am supposed to cut down and rearrange a recently completed book manuscript of 300 pages\(^7\) to one twentieth of the original amount. The second challenge consists of the fact that Asia Minor comprises countries and regions considered by representative investigations on the country level as some of the last strongholds of patriarchy compared to the rest of Europe, Russia not included. Astonishingly enough, comparative studies of gender relations in the Balkans and South Caucasus are rare. However, this fits to the observation of one of the most prominent feminist historians in the region, Bulgarian Krassimira Daskalova, who soberly concluded that gender studies in Eastern Europe are “far from being success stories.” Compared to the situation in countries of Western Europe, the weaknesses of gender studies and feminist knowledge production in the region are obvious.\(^8\)

My study attempts to shed some fresh light on the stagnant debate on the remarkable regression in gender equality in the Balkans and South Caucasus in the first two decades of post-socialism and in post-Kemalism. This regression is frequently labelled “re-traditionalization,” “re-patriarchalization,” or, as I have called it, “patriarchy after patriarchy.” In doing so, I have decided to depart from the beaten track of gender studies in the region, of which the overwhelming majority are limited to the analysis of textual discourses. I believe that discussing gender relations, femininities, and masculinities in the digital era is no longer feasible without including the wide and thriving field of digital visuality. Considering that we live in a digital age and the visual has become at least as important as the textual in our lives – if not even more important – I have decided to place the visual in the foreground of my investigation, without disregarding existing sociological, demographic, and other feminist research.

The structure of my presentation includes five short chapters. I will start my elaboration with a sketch of the socialist and Kemalist inheritance and will then move on to a chapter dealing with the \textit{realia} of ongoing patriarchy. The third chapter deals theoretically with digital visuality and the construction of femininities and masculinities. The fourth chapter presents the most important institutionalized visual constructors of femininities, namely media, producers, agencies, and transmitters; finally, chapter five presents the \textit{utopia} of porno-chic and veiling-chic. The analytical differentiation of the two layers of an empirical whole, namely \textit{realia} and \textit{utopia}, is central to my research.

1 Socialist and Kemalist Inheritance
Whereas socialism intended to transform a class society into a classless society, Kemalism, named after the founder of the modern Turkish Republic, Mustafa

---

\(^7\) The manuscript is entitled “Contested Femininities and Masculinities in the Digital Age. \textit{Realia} and \textit{Utopia} in the Balkans and South Caucasus.”

Kemal Pasha, intended to transform an Islamic state into a secular state. The aim of both the socialist and the Kemalist Turkish state was the establishment of a society in which religion did not matter any longer and gender relations were freed from religious constraints. At this point, however, similarities end and dissimilarities begin, because the aim of Kemalism was the enforcement of secular western femininities and masculinities, whereas the socialist state promoted the enforcement of ideal puritanical socialist men and women, completely freed of erotic allures and the improper chic of market-driven western femininities and masculinities.

Symptomatically, in Kemalist Turkey modernity was positively linked with, for instance, the western-styled female body. This kind of modernity was increasingly questioned by emerging Islamic media in the 1990s, which claimed actual modernity to be the veiled female body. After decades of suppressing Islamic culture and prioritizing secularism, in countries with prominent Islamic heritages such as Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Turkey the public space has become embattled between re-emerging Islamic femininities and masculinities and the dominating secular ones.

In the socialist hemisphere the notion of fashion was ideologically incompatible with socialist ideals, as it was considered an unwanted remnant of the decadent, bourgeois, capitalist society. Beauty was redefined as something of a radically new socialist type, as the appearance of a class-free society. Any interest of women to show their own physical appearance needed to be rationalized and reflected through the ideological lens of the Communist Party, its concept of gender equality, and femininity. It was carefully guided by “scientific” advice and expert opinions. The paternalistic party controlled women’s bodies and beauty. Most women’s magazines emphasized “physical beauty” rather than “physical attraction” in order to avoid a tendency towards imaginations of sexual desire.9

The combination of beauty and desire was proclaimed indecent and harmful. As a result of this puritan-like ethic, the nude body disappeared from paintings, décolletage from TV, and love scenes from movies. Eroticism among married couples was replaced by the glorification of the woman-mother and a socialist cult of maternity. Images of women were extremely didactic and served ideological functions.10

The collapse of socialism with its rigid sexual morality of the “new man” rooted in state patriarchy gave way to the abolishment of puritanical body concepts and mores overnight, which were considered by the masses as imposed on them, and to the establishment of porno-chic cultures. Simultaneously, however, instead of living according to secular principles, Islamic norms, suppressed in the public of the Republic of Turkey for decades, increasingly began to regain ground – not so much in the village, where they had continued to be strong, but notably in towns and cities and even in the metropolis of Istanbul, where a new culture of veiling

veiling-chic culture – emerged. However, the emergence of veiling-chic andorno-chic cultures cannot be explained straightforward away. We have to consider first the realia of gender relations, then the broader context of digital visuality and eventually the agencies, producers, and transmitters of these new femininities and masculinities.

2 Realia of Patriarchy – Hegemonic Femininities and Masculinities

In the former socialist countries, a painful process of ideological and economic transition from a monopolistic state to multi-party systems and liberal market economy began in 1989-1991, and which is not yet completely concluded in countries such as Armenia or Azerbaijan. Called by feminist literature a patriarchal backlash or re-traditionalization, the return to traditional (pre-socialist) gender relations was considered by many to be progressive. In Turkey an Islamic revival – not only stimulated by the Islamic Revolution in the neighborhood, namely in Shiite Iran (1979) – became visible in the 1980s. Instead of living according to secular principles, Islamic norms that were suppressed in the public of the Republic of Turkey for decades increasingly began to regain ground.

If we put all the data of internationally comparable gender equality indices together, the result is a nuanced but clear picture. We can roughly observe a European Northwest-Southeast incline with lowest gender equality and highest patriarchal sexual morality (for women) in Eurasia Minor. High patriarchal sexual morality means a high degree of control of female sexuality. Orthodox countries are very patriarchal and sexual-morally more conservative compared to Protestant-Lutheran countries in the North; Muslim countries, such as Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Kosovo are even slightly more patriarchal and sexual-morally conservative. Empirical evidence documents that this is a not new phenomenon but deeply rooted in history.

With regard to re-traditionalization of women’s roles in post-socialist transformation, a study about Bosnia and Herzegovina is reflective of the three major religions in the region. In the context of Islam, re-traditionalization was mainly triggered by promoting the idea of complementarity, which privileges men, who are considered objective and capable of expressing fair judgement and making rational decisions. Nevertheless, women are proud of their apparently “natural” caregiving qualities and truly believe that they should act first as mothers and wives, and only then, if necessary or possible, take paid jobs as well. This complementarity approach is the official attitude of the Islamic Community, but it is also shared, however, with the Catholic and Orthodox Christian churches.

---

The Australian sociologist Raewyn W. Connell, who set masculinity studies (and thus indirectly femininity studies) rolling from the late 1980s to the early 1990s\(^\text{13}\) had originally suggested idealized forms of manhood and womanhood, which she called “hegemonic masculinity” and “emphasized” or “hegemonic femininity.”\(^\text{14}\) These idealized forms are influential on the construction of other masculinities and femininities and become hegemonic when they go unnoticed in a culture. Whereas hegemonic masculinity proclaims superiority over other masculinities and women, in analogy, hegemonic femininity is nothing but a culturally idealized form of feminine character. Whatever the character of hegemonic femininity is, it is inferior to hegemonic masculinity.

Within the presuppositions of these theoretical frameworks it is not surprising that in the Balkans and South Caucasus the hegemonic opinion about femininity – of being a woman – is being a (pious) married mother, housekeeper, and submissive wife, whose sexual behavior does not leave any doubts about her chastity. Toughness, violence, emphasized tendencies to suppress wives by force, a latent concept of man’s superiority over women, of being strong and protective, and an inclination to a stern rejection of any form of homosexuality and unprotected sex are important ingredients of a hegemonic masculinity in the region. A general ambiguity between traditional and progressive features is hardly to discover; however, it becomes clear that higher education and urban contexts tend to produce a progressive attitude towards masculinity. Being lesbian is generally not considered a variant of the hegemonic femininity model, whereas the rejection of gays is rigid, significantly more rigid than of that of lesbians. Pre-natal sex selection at the expense of the female fetus in some countries of the region (Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) underlines the dominating patriarchal attitudes in the region.\(^\text{15}\)

The question arises whether this evidence is chiselled in stone or if there is some light at the end of the tunnel. I think there is some light, but conventional methods do not enable us to see it. We need the supportive analysis of visual discourses and an answer to the question of how digital visuality can be theoretically framed to reveal an alternative reading of the construction of femininities and masculinities.


3 Digital Visuality and the Construction of Femininities and Masculinities

The 2000s brought further the developments of the internet, the hallmark of which was user-generated content. This is when Wikipedia and SNSs such as Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok arose, in which individuals have profiles to which they can upload diverse media and connect their profiles with others through “friending.” The novelty of digital visual communication compared to its conventional analogous predecessors impacts the social construction of reality in at least four ways. First, it opens up the practice of visual communication to large parts of the population and blurs the distinction between producer, distributor, and consumer of visual objects. Second, it enhances the productive capacity of visual technology beyond reality itself, into the hyper-real, e.g. enabling the production of images that transcend the human perspective. Third, it creates a logic for the representation of reality that enhances the social value of visual communication in the sense that a message must be visual if it wants to be relevant at all. Fourth, it enables and accelerates the circulation of images across material and immaterial obstacles such as borders, culture, language, status, and gender to more conventional forms of communication.

These four components have impacted and will impact the visual construction of femininities and masculinities. From an historical point of view, the enabling of user-generated content on the internet constitutes one of two important turning points in the relationship between the human being and the creation, consumption, and distribution of images. In the long pre-modern history of this relationship, the consumer had to move to localities where the original images were produced, placed, or stored. The first turning point in this centuries-old relationship was the introduction of the mechanically reproducible analogous image, which began, for instance, in Latin Europe with the distribution of image prints in the late fourteenth century and was concluded with the invention of the photograph and the movie from the early middle to the end of the nineteenth century. The mechanically reproducible picture began to complement the original (artwork) and the method of mass reproduction allowed pictures to be brought to people and not vice versa – people to the pictures. The mechanically reproducible picture stimulated a visual culture of modernity around 1900, which developed into a mass phenomenon and in this way into an increasingly powerful force. Meanwhile, we have passed through the age of modern visual culture and have entered the digital age in which pictures not only come to the people, but everybody is able to create images of her- and himself and to distribute them in abundance within one’s social network and beyond. We could call this phenomenon “post-modern,” “hyper-modern,” or “digital visual culture,” constituting not only mass consumption but the transformation into an integrated whole of creation, distribution, and consumption. Never before in history did individuals independent from class affiliation, education, color, and gender have more agency in processes of the social and cultural construction of femininities and masculinities, of social realities, and of utopias.

18 Stocchetti, Images, 2-5.
Art theoreticians, such as one of the most prominent art scientists in Southeast Europe, Croat Krešimir Purgar, go even further and announce the end of pictorial representation. Accordingly, we are already living in a transitional period from pictorial representation to a virtual reality, into which images would immerse or even disappear. They disappear (1) because we no longer need the substantiality of paper, canvas or any other physical base for the display of pictures and (2) because the notion of representation becomes obsolete based on our possibility to be present in real events that are taking place elsewhere. However, for the purpose of my paper I still speak of visual representations of femininities and masculinities as social constructions. This is because the concrete social and cultural context suggests a procedure that is significantly stronger oriented toward pictorial representation instead of departing from the disappearance of images. Visual media analyst Matteo Stocchetti views the image as simulacrum: a communicative tool used to actually hide rather than show relevant aspects of reality. In other words: “Images are not considered as meaningful objects in and of themselves but as part of the process of negotiating social values. Meaning itself becomes a variable dependent on the outcome of this negotiation. Images do not have but are given meaning.” The epistemological implication lies in shifting our attention from the “meaning” of images to the communicative strategies that inspire the use of images by agents. This points to the necessary inclusion of a previously unimaginable number of agents in processes of social and cultural construction of social realities and utopias such as femininities and masculinities.

4 Media, Producers, Agencies and Transmitters
The social construction of femininities and masculinities is strongly related to the presentation of the self on social network sites but still more powerfully related to their ideal visual representation on TV, in movies, in popular magazines and newspapers, in textbooks, in religious publications, and in all kinds of advertising, among other things. Unfortunately, as already mentioned, the modes of self-presentation cannot be included here because research on this field is still missing in the region.

Even though the old media system in most post-socialist countries was instantly replaced by a market-oriented system, this applies more to the press than the broadcasting media. For the press there were no provisions governing foreign involvement or against concentration of capital, which resulted in an unregulated privatization of the press enterprises. The deregulation of the state broadcasting monopoly in the late 1980s and early 1990s in combination

20 Stocchetti, Images, 3; Stocchetti, Digital Visuality, 38.
21 Stocchetti, Images, 3.
with digitalization have led to a radical transformation of the whole media sector. The main investors in the newly emerging radio, television, and press markets were and are German, Scandinavian and Swiss, but also include US-based and US-owned media groups. While US-based media groups conquered the audio-visual sector, the main investors in television were various European and US media groups. In many countries, the global companies are in partnership with local players in the ownership and control of licences, but the know-how and technological and program modernization, as well as the imports of program bouquets are determined by the foreign partners who provide the financial input.

The extensive liberalization and commercialization of the media market had at least two significant consequences for the creation of new visual utopia, primarily of femininities but ultimately also of masculinities:

(1) The transformation from the socialist economic system into a capitalist free market meant a complete change of gender ideology. Many women desired now to do away with the repressive imposition of the ideologically controlled definition of femininity and to become part of the imagistic fantasy created of the visuals of Western advertising – both visually and discursively.

(2) The commercialization of the media sphere included the wholesale adoption of Western genres and formats, such as reality TV, lifestyle magazines, tabloid newspapers, and a variety of soft and hard-core pornographic products. The privatized and commercially financed media not only overwhelmingly portrayed women in highly sexualized and commodified ways that were unprecedented in socialist times but in addition, emerging media culture often went beyond simply copying Western media trends and took them to new extremes in their local adaptations.

Among the most successful local adaptation genres besides Turkish soap operas was the tremendous commercial success of the popular combination of soft porn and folk music in the 1990s and 2000s with sexualized female stars in the center of performances, called turbo-folk in Serbia and chalga in Bulgaria.

---

25 SBS (Viacom), CME (Estée Lauder), MTG (Kinnevik), RTL (Bertelemann), LARI (Lagardère, HBO (Time Warner), UPC (Liberty Media), as well as the Canal+ group, Murdoch’s News Corp, Endemol and AGB (Peruško and Popović, Media Concentration).
26 Peruško and Popović, Media Concentration, 171-79.
27 Ibrošcheva, Advertising.
30 The origins of this newly composed rock-, pop-, and techno-variant of Serb folk music, played on modern instruments, is in the Yugoslavia of the 1970s but the term turbo-folk came into use only in the 1990s. Infiltrated with nationalist rhetoric, the quality of music and most of its singers was low, their popularity high, especially among the young generation.
31 Also, the idea of chalga is a mixture of various musical styles and traditions. The components of this fusion include Serbian, North Macedonian, Greek, Turkish popular music and various styles of
It should be emphasized that this genre, with its strong roots in indigenous culture, does not constitute a pure xerox of a western pattern. This genre was and still is not only popular in these two countries of origin, but also in most of the other Balkan countries. It popularized a very particular physical appearance of females: excessively large breasts, small waist, blonde hair, pouty lips, and glamorous make-up. Coupled with the magnetic power of the market, where this specific look sells, the formula of turbo folk became an instant success. On the other hand, Islamic media in the hands of emerging powerful Islamic media moguls, especially in Turkey, developed counter to sexualized mainstream media. In contrast to the mainstream press and broadcasting, these newspapers and movies were much more conservative and puritan about the female images, with no tolerance for nudity. Having this in mind, the final section will address the different logics behind a seemingly ever-increasing gap between porno-chic cultures and veiling-chic cultures.

5 Utopia: Porno-chic and Veiling-chic
This concluding section will investigate the aforementioned two emerging tendencies in the visual representation of femininities and masculinities seemingly polarizing into “porno-chic cultures” and “veiling-chic cultures.” I would like to emphasize that these are only exemplary models with a full range of varieties in between. This emerging transformation of Kemalist and socialist mainstream into veiling-chic and porno-chic can be traced back to the late 1980s/early 1990s.

Porno-chic cultures were and partly still are characterized by their not unconditional western orientation in fashion, consumption, body presentation, and sexual ideals after the breakdown of socialism, as the examples of turbo folk and chalga prove. The term porno-chic refers to the tendency arriving from “the West” to visually present and perform body characteristics as much as possible. “Pornified” or “porno-chic” culture describes the ways in which sex as an end in itself has become more visible in contemporary western cultures, emphasized in the digital age by stressing sexuality in SNSs. Whereas “sexualization of culture” or “hyper-sexualization” refers to a wide range of cultural phenomena, “pornification” is a more specific term pointing to the increased visibility of hardcore and softcore pornography, and the blurring of boundaries between the pornographic and the mainstream. This shift of boundaries led to the pornographization of media culture. Contemporary constructions of new femininities no longer depict women as passive sex objects but as active, desiring sexual subjects who seem to participate enthusiastically in practices and forms of self-representation.


Ihrocheva, Advertising, 94-95.

It has to be emphasized that this enthusiasm for “the West” lacks any religious support references, since relevant forces in Orthodoxy have been traditionally rather sceptical of the “harmful” impacts from the non-Orthodox western world. On the contrary, veiling-chic cultures do not have any reason to refer to western models, and Muslim religious forces and activists frequently reject any “advice” from western feminists or human rights activists. The term veiling-chic indicates that veiling has departed as a powerful religious-political statement some thirty ago and has arrived as primarily global fashion business that has lost much of its original meaning.

The core operation of my analytical procedure that reveals utopia consists of a quantitative bibliometric-analysis. The material for this analysis consists of thousands of magazine ads, hundreds of TV ads, visual representations of men and women in more than a dozen daily newspapers, and in more than one hundred textbooks. The full details of this operation cannot be described here. An important reminder is that whereas the level of realia reflects the status quo, the level of utopia reflects wishful thinking, something that is in the air but not yet mainstream.

The most important result of my investigation is the revelation of a remarkable difference between the hegemonic femininity and hegemonic masculinity of realia and those of utopia. Whereas hegemonic masculinity of realia has half a dozen rivals, utopian hegemonic masculinity has no nonhegemonic masculinities as potential rivals; whereas hegemonic femininity of realia has no rival, utopian hegemonic femininity has four nonhegemonic femininities as potential rivals.

Graph 1: Masculinity Type

- lonely-conquering, dominant, authoritative, rational, outdoor oriented
- powerful and family oriented
- pious and bearded
- other
- violent
- (Leer)

---

Graph 1 shows that the masculinity type “lonely-conquering, dominant, authoritative, rational, outdoor oriented” (“Marlboro man”) is clearly hegemonic, whereas the religious type “pious and bearded,” and the secular types “powerful and family oriented” and “violent” play a marginal role and are not even listed as nonhegemonic. Among the four quantitatively prevailing femininity types (graph 2) the two types “housewife and beautiful” and “body displayed” stand out with almost equal “votes.” The main reason why I dare to privilege the type “housewife and beautiful” as hegemonic and downgrading the superwoman “body displayed” as nonhegemonic is that the first addresses primarily married women and the second (as well as the third) unmarried ones. In societies that with some deviances clearly prefer married women as fully integrated, and unmarried ones at a certain age with some suspicion, it is unlikely that the unmarried superwoman type can claim the status of being hegemonic. However, where the two types converge is that they indicate a clear prevalence of traditional secular visualizations of young women.

The third type “strong and beautiful” refers most likely to the neoliberal western new femininities emerging out of discourses of sexual agency that have been seen as central to the development of new femininities as part of a broader shift in which older markers of femininity such as homemaking skills and maternal instincts have been joined by those of image creation, body work, and sexual desire.34

Conclusions
The results of my research are actually much more complex than presented here. (1) My overall conclusion is that the period of re-traditionalization in the “wild 1990s” and not so wild 2000s was a temporal one and has started to fade out in the 2010s at the latest. Of course, this fading-out will never end completely (not

only in the Balkans and South Caucasus but worldwide); realia and utopia of femininities and masculinities seem to reverse from their seemingly one-way street into re-traditionalization to Western-like features by keeping some local/regional peculiarities. This reversal is more obvious on the utopia level than on the realia level, which is lagging behind.

(2) The conflicting antagonism of porno-chic and veiling-chic is also in a phase of fading out, caused by, among other things, the powerful dynamics digital visuality offers to both camps. Porno-chic is disappearing gradually from the street (probably not from the beach) but reappears in the blogosphere – a dynamic that is clearly visible in western countries. Veiling-chic will not disappear from the streets because veiling as fashion has become a global Muslim phenomenon. The blogosphere is here probably less used as a forum of self-presentation but rather as a sphere used by emerging small-scale producers and retailers.

(3) The most challenging task was to investigate the complex interrelation between realia and utopia, between actually practiced gender relations as they emerge from results of primarily sociological and demographical research and the visualized utopian visions of femininities and masculinities reflected in various forms of advertising and other visual drafts for the future. It has become clear that there is not a simple cause-effect relationship between utopia and realia and that the apparent differences between these two layers exist primarily as results of analysis but not in the real world. These local and regional realia-types of femininity and masculinity intersect with four utopian femininities and one hegemonic masculinity that have their origins almost exclusively in the West, which is especially true for the hegemonic masculinity type, the “Marlboro Man,” and the non-hegemonic femininity type “strong and beautiful.” The emergence of this later type constitutes a true surprise because this woman is strong and unmarried, making her life independently of a man’s dominance, protection, and support.

If it is true that media are sensitive to new developments in society, then we can interpret the emergence of the “strong and beautiful” femininity type as a convincing indicator of a gradual change toward rebalanced gender relations. Eventually – keeping in mind that research results are not without contradiction – I dare provokingly to conclude that utopia will sooner become realia than realia will be become a long-lasting utopia.

Bibliography


Frank, Anna. 2016. *Representations of Contemporary Turkey, the Ottoman Empire, Islam, and Gender Through the Phenomenon of Modern Pop Culture the Case of Turkish Soap Operas in the Western Balkans, in Islam in the Balkans: Unexpired Hope. Demolishing Mentality Which Demolishes Bridges*, edited by Kafkasyali, Muhammet S. Ankara: Tika, 43-76.


Visual Representations of Femininities and Masculinities –
The Balkans and South Caucasus in the Digital Age

The Changing Roles of Gender in Advertising: Past, Present, and Future
Research Article

Eirini Tsichla
Assistant Professor, University of Western Macedonia, Greece
etsichla@uowm.gr

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(2), 28-44

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.2.3
The Changing Roles of Gender in Advertising: Past, Present, and Future

Eirini Tsichla*

The purpose of this paper is to navigate the rich academic literature on gender portrayals in advertising, and then to provide an overview on key findings and trends observed throughout the years. For several decades, women in advertising were likely to be depicted in traditional and domestic roles and were excluded from empowering roles and professional settings. Some progress has been acknowledged during the last decades, however, it seems that female role stereotyping is becoming subtler but still remains present. Male depictions have changed as well, moving from mere traditional masculine portrayals to a greater variety of roles, including decorative and family ones. In addition, the paper offers a cultural perspective by summarizing key findings regarding the relationship of gender stereotyping in advertisements and various country gender indices. Popular methodologies employed by content analytic studies in print advertisements are also presented. Finally, the paper accentuates current developments and tendencies regarding gender portrayals in advertising and outlines a research agenda that proposes timely and promising avenues for future studies.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, advertising, gender roles

Introduction

Few domains in advertising have received such abundant academic attention as gender portrayals in advertising. The investigation of gender stereotypes was initiated in the 1960s, propelled by feminist thought and remained timely and relevant due to the evolution of gender roles in society that challenged traditional structures of gender hierarchy and raised ethical considerations about the representation of women in the media. Today, almost 60 years later, social movements like #Me Too and Time’s Up breathe new life into the conversation about women’s’ sexualization and objectification, and the investigation of gender portrayals continues to generate thought-provoking findings. The pervasive and ethically questionable nature of advertising has been repeatedly noted.¹

¹ Eirini Tsichla is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication and Digital Media of the University of Western Macedonia in Greece. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, an MSc in Marketing from the University of Stirling, UK and a Ph.D. in Marketing from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Her research interests lie in the field of advertising, gender and emotion. She has published articles in international peer reviewed journals such as the International Journal of Advertising, the Journal of Marketing Communications, Communication Research Reports and the International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing. Her work has been also presented in international marketing and advertising conferences including the European Marketing Academy Conference (EMAC) and the International Conference on Research in Advertising (ICORIA).

The general consensus is that advertising reflects society in a distorted fashion, calling attention to and exaggerating some aspects of everyday life. Advertisers are often accused of using such distortion in order to push boundaries in creating attention-grabbing advertising messages that have stopping power and generate hype in a cluttered media landscape.²

On the other hand, gender stereotypes are considered popular due to their clarity, conciseness, and ability to get quickly the message across.³ In that sense, stereotypes are regarded by advertisers as general knowledge that prevents distraction, is attractive to audiences, encourages focus on the brand message and simplifies cognitive processes and categorization on consumers’ behalf.⁴ Hence, advertising practitioners rely on simplistic and reductive stereotypes that convey a large amount of information in a succinct fashion.⁵ From a cynical perspective, advertisers continue to use gender stereotypes because they work, otherwise, they either would have stopped using them or would be driven out of business by companies that use more ethical and effective advertisements devoid of stereotypical portrayals.⁶ According to feminist thought, advertising in popular media clearly contributes to gender inequality by promoting sexism and distorted image ideals as valid and acceptable.⁷ Traditional gender roles depicted in advertisements are hierarchical, as men are more often presented in a higher position, whereas women are more often depicted in inferior and passive roles.⁸ Although the role of women in society has begun to shift since the 1960s, numerous studies indicate that female portrayals in advertising have been slow to adjust to their evolving status. Particularly, the depiction of women in professional roles and as voices of authority reports a significant time lag before its depiction in advertising imagery.⁹ Even recently, studies postulate that advertisements do not reflect

³ Pollay, *The Distorted Mirror*, 27
contemporary gender roles,\textsuperscript{10} raising concerns that advertisers rely on stereotypical images that no longer exist.\textsuperscript{11} Recently however, advertising seems to communicate new meanings of gender by constructing images of active, confident, or sexually powerful women and loving fathers, evident in the advertising appeals of “femvertising” and “dadvertising.” To a certain degree, these shifts reflect societal changes regarding the role and depictions of men and women.\textsuperscript{12} A possible reason behind this progress could be the corporate tendency to embrace and effectively communicate practices of brand responsibility or brand advocacy\textsuperscript{13} in order to appear more socially responsible and satisfy the audience, especially the ethically conscious millennial consumers. Taking all the above into consideration, it is evident that gender portrayals in advertising constitute a dynamic research domain that continues to evolve and keeps yielding important insights for both academics and practitioners. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the early and recent pertinent literature, present two coding instruments frequently employed in the investigation of gender portrayals in print advertisements, and highlight important areas for future research endeavors.

**Gender stereotypes**

A stereotype is defined as a group concept that reflects inferior judgment and gives rise to a simple structure, suggesting that stereotypes are predominantly evaluative.\textsuperscript{14} According to Barker,\textsuperscript{15} a stereotype involves the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits. Stereotypes do not necessarily bear negative connotations, though they may lead to oversimplified conceptions and expectations that devalue and restrict potential opportunities of subjects of a social category.\textsuperscript{16} Gender stereotypes are defined as beliefs that certain attributes differentiate women and men.\textsuperscript{17} In that sense, gender stereotypes provide a limited “vocabulary of interaction,” encouraging people to think and speak of women primarily in terms of their


relationship to men, family, or their sexuality. According to Kay Deaux and Laurie Lewis, gender stereotypes have four different and independent components: trait descriptors (e.g., self-assertion, concern for others), physical characteristics (e.g., hair length, body height), role behaviors (e.g., leader, taking care of children), and occupational status (e.g., truck driver, housewife). Every integral part is associated with a masculine and feminine version, which is strongly related to males and females, respectively. Each gender stereotyping component may lead to negative consequences such as body dissatisfaction, feelings of insecurity, reduced self-confidence, and confinement of professional opportunities. These findings raise key concerns, especially considering that women tend to be more sensitive than men to the detail of advertising messages and get more emotionally involved with advertising. In addition, exposure to sexually explicit images of women in ads may induce violence against women and rape myth acceptance. However, Moss-Racusin and Good argue that gender stereotypes impact both genders, creating unrealistic expectations for men as well. Hence, the European Parliament’s resolution on eliminating gender stereotypes in the EU (2013) addresses these concerns, acknowledging the limiting depictions of women in the media and advertising in particular and calling for actions that deconstruct gender stereotypes.

The Mirror versus the Mold argument

The nature of the relationship between gender-related values of society and gender portrayals in advertising is the focus of a long-standing debate. Two opposing arguments have been suggested, namely the “mirror” versus the “mold” argument. The “mirror” argument posits that advertising reflects values that already prevail in the society. As a result, men and women featured in advertisements generally have been typecast to adhere to the dominant concepts regarding gender roles. According to this view, given the multiple interrelated factors in the contemporary socioeconomic and political environment that influence the value system of a society, the impact of advertising seems insignificant. A meta-analysis by Eisend provides empirical support in favor of the “mirror” argument, suggesting that advertising has historically reflected,

---

25 Holbrook, Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall, 96.
26 Eisend, A Meta-Analysis, 436.
rather than challenged, female stereotypes and roles in society, but the characteristics of women’s advertising depictions in advertising tend to lag behind female contemporary roles in society.

On the contrary, according to the “mold” argument, advertising molds and impacts the values of its target audience. Drawing on cultivation theory, media content influences social and psychological attitudes toward men and women. Ultimately, people tend to incorporate gender clichés presented by the media into their own concepts of reality, forming perceptions of themselves and behaving in a consistent manner in order to match the stereotyped images that are omnipresent everywhere.

Taking all the above into consideration, it could be suggested that the truth lies somewhere in a continuum between the “mirror” and the “mold” argument. Since advertising, as a system of visual representation, creates meaning within the “circuit” of culture, it seems that it both reflects and contributes to culture.

Advertising proposes lifestyles and forms of self-presentation that individuals use to define their roles in the society. The majority of ad campaigns invoke gender identity, drawing their imagery primarily from the stereotyped iconography of masculinity and femininity.

The Past: Overview of the Literature

Early studies conducted in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s indicate that stereotypes existed in terms of setting, as females were limited to explicit domestic roles such as happy housewives and mothers, while men were usually depicted outdoors and in professional settings. In addition, women were likely to be portrayed dependent on men’s protection, appear as unintelligent consumers incapable of making important decisions, or were sexually objectified. On the contrary, professional women were notably underrepresented. Even though more recent studies document a decrease in female housewife and dependency roles, a significant increase of decorative roles has been noted, while representations of women in professional settings and career roles are still rare.

In a meta-analysis of studies on gender roles in TV advertisements from...
1971 to 2005 that covered 28 countries, Eisend\textsuperscript{35} found that females were more likely to be depicted in domestic environments, as product users, in dependent roles, as younger than males; they tended to be presented visually (not speaking) and to provide opinions or nonscientific arguments rather than facts. The study concluded that stereotyping persists, particularly for women, despite significant changes in the educational, occupational, and societal status of women. Of all dimensions, occupational status and sexualization represent the components with the highest degree of stereotyping. Other studies suggest that gender stereotyping is decreasing, though this trend could be attributed to the fact that is becoming more subtle.\textsuperscript{36} Furnham and Paltzer\textsuperscript{37} observed a declining trend in gender-role stereotyping in Western countries, but this progress is limited to certain categories like credibility, role, and age.

As far as male portrayals are concerned, evidence from the UK\textsuperscript{38} and Greece\textsuperscript{39} shows that men tend to be portrayed with themes of sex appeal, career orientation, or occupied with activities outside the home. At the same time, the depiction of muscular bodies that propagate the image of a strong male icon is becoming increasingly popular in magazine advertisements.\textsuperscript{40} In that sense, pictures of male bodies have now become objects of display, representing a physical and sexual ideal.\textsuperscript{41} According to Rohlinger,\textsuperscript{42} the “erotic male” is the most prominent portrayal of masculinity in a sample of magazine advertisements drawn from 1987 and 1997. On the other hand, the tendency to portray males as authorities seems to persist,\textsuperscript{43} as several studies indicate that advertising rarely depicts males in domestic settings and family roles.\textsuperscript{44}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Eisend} Eisend, A \textit{Meta-Analysis}, 431.
\end{thebibliography}
A cultural perspective
Over the last few decades, the literature of gender stereotypes in advertising has proliferated to a number of comparative studies of gender roles portrayed in different cultural contexts. Countries’ scores in Hofstede’s Masculinity Index are commonly employed in order to examine whether gender stereotypes are more common in highly masculine rather than feminine countries. The findings were conflicting: To illustrate, Judith Wiles, Charles Wiles, and Anders Tjernlund showed that high-masculinity countries were associated with higher percentages of men’s working roles and a higher percentage of female decorative roles, while other studies produced findings opposite from those predicted by Hofstede’s Masculinity Index, concluding that there are other forces in each country (i.e., self-regulation of advertising) affecting gender stereotyping in advertising. In a similar vein, several researchers used the gender empowerment measure (GEM), a degree of women’s participation in political, economic, and professional activities. Eisend demonstrated that gender-related values in society, as indicated by GEM, precede and influence stereotypical depictions in advertising. However, both the Masculinity Index and GEM seem to have a relatively small predictive value. On the contrary, Matthes, Prieler, and Adam analyzed a sample of advertisements from a total of thirteen Asian, American, and European countries and demonstrated that gender stereotypes in TV advertising were independent of a country’s gender indices such as Hofstede’s Masculinity Index, GLOBE’s Gender Egalitarianism Index, the Gender Equality Index, and the Global Gender Gap index. These findings challenge the belief that stereotypes in advertisements depend on developments related to gender equality and indicate that despite variations in gender-role portrayals across cultures, advertising visuals are perhaps becoming more universal due to global markets and networked publics.

Investigating gender portrayals in print advertisements: The coding schemes
The vast majority of research studies conducted within the realm of gender stereotypes implemented quantitative content analysis in order to detect the specific types of stereotypical portrayals. A useful instrument for the investigation of gender role stereotypes should reflect a variety of men and

---

49 Eisend, A Meta-Analysis, 436.
51 Paek, Nelson and Vilela, Examination of Gender-Role Portrayals in Television Advertising, 203.
women’s roles. A popular coding scheme adopted by numerous studies in the field is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories for male and female stereotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories for female stereotypes</th>
<th>Categories for male stereotypes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women in traditional roles</td>
<td>1. The theme of sex appeal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Dependency</td>
<td>2. Dominant over women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Housewife</td>
<td>3. Authority figure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in decorative roles</td>
<td>4. Family man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Women concerned with physical attractiveness</td>
<td>5. Frustrated male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Women as sex objects</td>
<td>6. Activities and life outside the home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in non-traditional roles</td>
<td>7. Career oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Women in non-traditional activities</td>
<td>8. Nontraditional role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Voice of authority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women portrayed as equal to men</td>
<td>8. Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1979, Goffman suggested an innovative approach for the examination of gender stereotypes called semiotic or frame analysis. Rather than observing the manifest content of an advertisement, his primary focus was directed to more subtle details implied by hands, eyes, knees, facial expressions, head and body postures, relative sizes, body positioning, and head-eye aversion. These cues work at a largely subconscious level to inform culturally bound ideas about gender and are indicative of differences in social power, influence, and authority. Through an analysis of purposefully selected print advertisements, he illustrated that advertising imagery weakens women, as pictures of men reflect confidence, competence, and authority, while women are cast as deferential and childlike. His coding scheme enables the scrutiny of the relationships among men and women shown in advertisements and consists of the following categories: (1) “Relative size” that signals women’s inferiority through the depiction of women as smaller and/or shorter than men, (2) “feminine touch,” a form of ritualistic touch that indicates the female body’s delicacy and preciousness, (3) “function ranking,” which pertains to the tendency of males rather than females to perform the executive role and exercise control of the situation, (4) “ritualization of subordination,” designed to capture the adoption of postures that signal the need for protection and indicate submission and (5) “licensed withdrawal,” which shows women removing themselves psychologically from the situation through images of decontextualization, gaze aversion, and avoidance of action.

Overall, the stream of literature that adopts Goffman’s categories postulates that contemporary advertising still places women in subordinate and dependent positions that signal vulnerability and lower status. Only slight changes have been detected regarding the type of stereotyping across time. For instance,

---

52 See Courtney and Lockeretz, A Woman’s Place, 93; Mitchell and Taylor, Polarizing Trends in Female Portrayal in UK Advertising, 42; Lysonski, Role Portrayals in British Magazine Advertisements, 41; Zotos and Lysonski, Gender Representations, 31; Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, Female Role Stereotypes in Print Advertising, 1417.
there was more body display and licensed withdrawal in magazine advertisements in 1991 compared to 1979. From 1950 to 2000, an increase of men in suggestive poses and women in subordinate poses was recorded, as well as a decrease in men performing the executive role.

Tsichla and Zotos investigated the relationship between explicit stereotypical portrayals and the subtler, implicit stereotyping suggested by Goffman (1979) in an effort to understand whether contemporary egalitarian roles of men and women depicted in advertising images contain subtle cues that signal hierarchical patterns and therefore jeopardize progress in terms of equal representation. The analysis revealed interesting patterns that can be summarized as follows: (1) Women are size subordinated in the majority of “dependency” portrayals and in a large number of “career oriented” and “neutral” displays. (2) The overwhelming majority of females perform the subordinate rather than the executive role when pictured with a male, with the highest frequency observed in the “dependency portrayals.” (3) Feminine touch, ritualization of subordination and licensed withdrawal are typical of women, even in seemingly egalitarian portrayals such as “voice of authority” and “career oriented.” (4) Body display is highly observed in several female roles including “women in non-traditional activities,” “concerned with physical attractiveness,” “housewife,” and “voice of authority.” (5) Ritualization of subordination was more common in male roles such as “family man,” “neutral,” “non-traditional,” and “theme of sex appeal” than “authority figure” and “career oriented” depictions. (6) Body display does not prevail in male portrayals, but out of all the categories it was most frequently identified in “the theme of sex appeal” and “dominant over women” stereotypes.

In that sense, the size subordination of “career oriented” and “neutral” women coupled with the almost exclusive performance of executive roles by males reflects signals of incompetence and association with low-status occupations that devaluate contemporary women’s status and achievements. Moreover, the depiction of women in revealing attire across a variety of roles, from decorative to non-traditional, indicates that through semiotic cues embedded in advertising visuals, traditional patterns of gender hierarchy manage to manifest. As Masée and Rosenblum encapsulate, change is as real as “Career Barbie,” considering that the core identity of the professional woman is still sexually defined and longs for masculine approval.

The future: New roles and emerging trends
Recently, changing trends in gender portrayals have been noticed that seem to renegotiate the role of gender in advertising. These include depictions of


Kang, The Portrayal of Women’s Images in Magazine Advertisements, 990-2.

Mager and Helgeson, Fifty Years of Advertising images, 248.

Tsichla and Zotos, Gender Portrayals Revisited, 992-1000.

Tsichla and Zotos, Gender Portrayals Revisited, 999.


Massé and Rosenblum, Male and Female Created by Them, 142.
empowering, active, confident, and sexually powerful women, figurations of the “new man” and the “new father” as well as androgynous, non-binary gender portrayals that attempt to address the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender consumer (LGBT) segment.

Femvertising, defined as “advertising that challenges traditional female advertising stereotypes” employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls and eliminate gender-based disparities. Even though advertising has used feminist themes before, this is the first time that an advertising appeal attempts to challenge stereotypes created and perpetuated by advertising itself. Other popular themes employed by brands in order to celebrate and empower women include attractiveness and body image concerns, responding to negative “self-talk,” and addressing taboo topics related to women. Numerous advertisements featuring femvertising appeals have gone viral and have proven tremendously successful, leading to more positive attitudes towards these ads than traditional advertising. However, femvertising has faced criticism as well, evolving around the commodification of feminism and gender disparities and the failure to highlight women’s financial, career, or athletic success.

In a study analyzing 200 advertisements drawn from the US and UK editions of upmarket women’s magazines, Kohrs and Gill identified an established visual pattern of female portrayals described as follows:

Rather than appearing small, passive or deferential, women are presented as bold, confident and powerful, with strong and assertive patterns of looking [...] These women are being hailed through a composite of signifiers of assertiveness, boldness and power that together comprise a kind of confident appearing.

The depiction of women as appearing confident involves a direct gaze at the viewer, neutral facial expressions, heads held up high, and confident stances with the body erect that signals superiority and disdain. Interestingly, the study did not find evidence of common subtle cues that denote gender hierarchy suggested by Goffman, like relative size, canting positions, function ranking, and

---

63 Zeisler, Andi. 2016. We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement. New York: Public Affairs.
64 Åkestam, Rosengren and Dahlen, Advertising “like a girl”, 795.
67 Åkestam, Rosengren and Dahlen, Advertising “like a girl”, 802.
70 Kohrs and Gill. Confident Appearing, 14
71 Goffman, Gender Advertisements, 40.
licensed withdrawal. In a similar vein, in a study examining the practitioners’ perspective on female portrayals in advertising, Middleton, Turnbull, and de Oliveira\(^{72}\) described a new role stereotype, the “sexually powerful” woman who is in control and gets what she wants because she is sexually attractive, as opposed to being sexually objectified in order to be looked at or consumed for male gratification.

On the other hand, the term dadvertising is used to describe commodified representations of fatherhood that suggest that “the new ideal masculine man is an involved parent and an emotionally vulnerable partner.”\(^{73}\) Similar to femvertising, dadvertising is suggested to primarily appeal to the female audience and employs themes of gender egalitarianism in service of personal and familial empowerment politics. Hence, men are depicted as being regarded as heroes by their children, devoted fathers, loving husbands, and less often, domestic workers. According to Baxter, Kulczynski, and Ilicic,\(^{74}\) advertising messages featuring fathers as caregivers invoke positive responses regardless of people’s ideological perspectives on gender. In a longitudinal analysis from 2003 and 2005, Fowler and Thomas\(^{75}\) indicated that the role of father in advertising has increased, suggesting an acceptance of men in domestic and childbearing activities.

Even though companies seem to direct considerable attention to the historically ignored lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) audience in an effort to broaden their customer base,\(^{76}\) explicit appeals to gay consumers in mainstream media have been systematically avoided in the fear of alienating heterosexual consumers.\(^{77}\) Hence, advertisers often create covert strategies using encrypted messages that appear innocuous to heterosexual readers, but possibly interpreted as “gay” by bisexual, lesbian, and gay readers.\(^{78}\) Such messages include the use of a single person instead of an opposite sexed couple, the representation of androgynous body parts,\(^{79}\) and the use of partially clothed, muscular men with sexually ambiguous appeal.\(^{80}\) In that sense, a closer look at the increasing images of male objectification and sexualization in advertising suggests that many of these images tend to represent male models with an


\(^{76}\) Zotos and Tsichla, *Female Stereotypes in Print Advertising*, 452.


The Changing Roles of Gender in Advertising: Past, Present, and Future

unspecified sexuality. Such depictions are able to appeal to multiple audiences as they do not bare specific sexual connotations, liberating the viewers to project their desired meanings. Alternatively, advertising targeting the LGBT community was directed to LGBT-specific publications. Only lately, in the light of significant changes in the societal landscape in terms of visibility and acceptance and the acceleration of marriage equality, some LGBT-specific ads appear in mainstream media.

The aforementioned emerging trends highlight the repeated call for the modification of the existing coding schemes that would enable advertising researchers to fully examine contemporary gender stereotypes without the danger of neglecting or oversimplifying their projected meanings. It is surprising that despite the rich literature that has been developed over the years on gender stereotypes, few changes to existing coding schemes have been proposed, such as dropping categories that appear no longer relevant. For instance, several researchers argue that categories proposed by Goffman such as relative size and function ranking seldom appear in modern advertisements. Although existing coding schemes are able to capture sex object portrayals and the display of naked skin, they fall short of differentiating between passive, sexually objectified depictions and sexually powerful, confident, and empowering portrayals of women. Similarly, non-binary gender, trans, and androgynous depictions cannot be captured with the existing coding instruments. An image of a professionally dressed “superwoman” figure arriving home from work and occupying herself with domestic activities, trying to balance home life, work, and family would be oversimplified if considered and coded as a simple housewife. In that sense, future research could work towards this direction and update the existing coding instruments.

In addition, during the last years significant developments have occurred in the media landscape. On one hand, advertising spending in print media has decreased and changed in structure. In Greece for instance, male magazines and magazines with a more general audience nowadays feature only a limited number of advertisements, impeding attempts to draw conclusions about the type of stereotypes diffused to particular audiences. On the other hand, the boundaries between advertising and other media are continuously blurring, making it hard to distinguish between commercial and editorial content in newspapers, magazines, TV shows, and social media posts. This trend presents a new, challenging, and almost unexplored territory for the investigation of gender stereotypes that would surely yield interesting insights.

---

81 Rohlinger, Eroticizing Men, 65.
83 Zotos and Tsichla, *Female Stereotypes in Print Advertising*, 454; Grau and Zotos, *Gender Stereotypes in Advertising*, 768.
Bibliography


From Socialist Amazons to Bodies on Full Display: Gender Stereotypes in Bulgarian Advertising during Socialism and the Post-Socialist Transition

Research Article

Elza Ibroscheva
Assoc. Provost and Prof., Mass Communications, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
eibrosc@siue.edu

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(2), 45-61

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.2.4
From Socialist Amazons to Bodies on Full Display: Gender Stereotypes in Bulgarian Advertising during Socialism and the Post-Socialist Transition

Elza Ibroscheva*

This essay offers a critical analysis of the changing images of women in Bulgarian advertising during socialism and in the process of the post-socialist transition. During socialism, images of women, dressed in white lab coats, wearing construction hats, and lacking any sense of sexuality were on prominent display, created the most visually recognizable and ubiquitous symbols of communism—the frumpy babushka. Today, the babushka is an image of the past as Eastern European women have adopted a new highly sexualized identity. Advertising, which boomed during the transition, has become the primary cultural arena for the social engineering of a new, highly sexualized identity, quickly becoming a “normalized” trend in Eastern Europe with potentially dangerous consequences.

Keywords: advertising, gender, post-socialism, Eastern Europe

Introduction
There is now a commonly circulating anecdote that humorously demonstrates the peculiarities of women’s understanding of sex, and the stereotypes surrounding it, in the East and West during the Cold War. As part of the thawing of the communication between the two ideological rivals, in 1986 a video-link between female audiences from Boston and Leningrad was widely publicized as a great example of soft power at work. During this exchange, women on both sides were encouraged to ask each other questions about their respective way of life. When a member of the American audience asked whether Soviet advertising was too preoccupied with sex like it is in the United States, Lyudmila Ivanova, a member of the audience in Leningrad quickly blurted out in response, “there is no sex in the USSR.” While Mrs. Ivanova meant to say “there was no sex on Soviet television,” her blunt statement was also quite true about advertising.

* Elza Ibroscheva is the Associate Provost and Professor of Mass Communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Originally from Bulgaria, her research interests focus on media developments in Eastern Europe, include media stereotypes, international and political communication, gender representations in the media as well as the role of the media in fueling nationalism. Ibroscheva is the author of Advertising, Sex and Post Socialism: Women, Media and Femininity in the Balkans (Rowman and Littlefield, 2013) and an editor (with Dr. Maria Raicheva-Stover) of the volume Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition (Bloomsbury, 2014).

This anecdote also captured the stark differences between the work, lives, and pressing concerns of women across the span of 50 years and across the metaphorical length of the Berlin Wall. In fact, during the years of ideological division between East and West, the East was frequently envied for the enhanced status of women in the Soviet world. Women from the former Soviet bloc enjoyed rights and privileges that Western women could only dare to imagine. Laws that provided three years of maternity leave, widely available state-sponsored childcare, and secure abortion rights were just key “protectionist” rights established by the socialist states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in their attempts to resolve what they termed the “women's question” in a truly Marxist fashion. To support these ideas, the powerful propaganda machine of the communist state promoted images of women in hard hats, female technicians, and female doctors, images which widely supported the illusion that women in the Communist countries had indeed been liberated and had found the perfect balance between handling a professional career and raising a family, thus becoming the object of envy of Western feminists. This was also the case in the Soviet version of advertising; there, the only goal guiding the promotion of goods and services was not to advance cultural notions or elevate lifestyle, rather, as Elza Ibroscheva pointed out in her study of advertising in Bulgaria, “While American and Western advertising was deemed distasteful and morally corrupt, the Bulgarian version of advertising was meant to cultivate “good taste” and “socialist consumer habits,” which in turn were to guide, properly domesticate, and channel consumers’ desires, therefore, helping to harmonize production and consumption, supply and demand.”

This has been a particularly fascinating trend considering the fact that nowhere else is the cultural identity of gender more contested than in the visuals of advertising. As Katherine Sender pointed out, advertising serves a two-fold function – “to provide role models with whom we can identify and through whom we can aspire to appropriate constructions of ourselves as social beings, and to guide us towards what the marketplace considers to be desirable kinds and quantities of purchasing in an increasingly commodified social environment.” As Jonathan Schroeder and Detlev Zwick pointed out, “advertising representations influence cultural and individual conceptions of identity, and must be understood as the result of changing social and cultural practices.” Therefore, because advertising is one of the major “factories” of visual images and has been seen as reflecting the social and cultural norms of a given society, studying the evolution of portrayals of women in advertising will present a revealing look in how post-communist female identities are being engendered and constructed. In addition, advertising becomes an extremely interesting media arena to study as it only made its first major appearance as a powerful cultural force in Bulgaria after the sweeping economic and social changes following the collapse of

---


communism in Eastern Europe. Prior to that, advertising was seen as unnecessary and unhealthy promotion of commercialism and decadent social values. As a commercially motivated enterprise, advertising was thought to be “a particularly capitalist phenomenon incompatible with socialism,” and therefore, was used scarcely, only in its propaganda function, promoting a very deliberate and engineered view of the Soviet society that had no bearing on the reality of daily life. Arguably, the need for consumption, underlining the very essence of advertising, along with the “queues, Trabants, lacks of bananas, and frumpy women,” led to the collapse of the popular support for the socialist project.

Today, the Eastern European woman is anything but the imagined “babushka” of the communist propaganda. Eastern European women have adapted a new, highly sexual identity—one that allows them to occupy both the position of the consumer, but more importantly, to occupy the position of the “consumed,” widely and readily offering their sexualized body for consumption. This essay aims to explore the current trends of “sexing” the look of women in Bulgarian advertising in an attempt to analyze the gender identity transformation that has taken place in the years of the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe and has fundamentally affected the social, economic, and political positions of women in the former Soviet bloc. This essay is important because it addresses an area of international media and cultural studies, which has been largely overlooked in academic research and which offers a critical dissection of the process of establishing and constructing gender identities in a unique set of social, economic, and cultural conditions as witnessed in the countries of Eastern Europe. While there have been studies discussing the economic conditions and the burden of the social roles and stereotypes of Eastern European women, very few studies have looked at the specific gender sexual stereotypes and sexualized portrayals in advertising.

---

Communism and the Images of Women in Eastern Europe

For the longest time, the status of women in the Soviet bloc presented a unique mix of cultural, political, and social conditions that fascinated western scholars and provided fruitful grounds for feminist studies. Among those scholars, Einhorn, in perhaps the most widely read and cited book on the issue of Eastern European women, writing about the expectations of western feminist scholars for the future development of the women in Eastern Europe, put it succinctly:

“[…] In the short run, at least, women in East Central Europe stand to lose economic [status], social welfare, and reproductive rights. The image of the female tractor driver is out, as is Superwoman wearing hard-hat on a building site.” Here, Einhorn successfully describes the stage in reconstructing and defining the female imagery in mass media in the countries of Eastern Europe.

Tatyana Kotzeva explored the images of women in Bulgaria to conclude that while Bulgarian society was under communist rule, two conflicting images of women were constructed—the socialist Amazon—a woman-android, the mechanical woman, woman heroine of a socialist modernization projects—and woman as mother and caregiver of children. Kotzeva’s investigation reveals a higher degree of convergence in the self-identification strategies pursued by Bulgarian women. Her study demonstrated that despite general abstract approval of gender equality and emancipation, women predominantly identify themselves with motherhood and caring for the family, and women’s perception of self-esteem, sense of dignity, individual emancipation, or unfair treatments get passed over in silence by an overwhelming number of Bulgarian women.

Tatyana Mamonova offers yet another interesting look at the sexual identity and objectification of the Soviet and Eastern European woman. The eroticization of the female body by men has become the patriarchy’s international norm, the author argued, and the opening of the former communist society for this kind of expression of male dominance has allowed sexism to move on to a more blatant, visual form. Beauty contests, Mamonova asserted, are the ultimate testimony to this change. She provided an excellent example to support her argument—the budget for the final contest of Miss Russia was around 1.5 million rubles. The organizers, naturally, were counting on a substantial return. “They planned to use the winners of the show for commercial purposes, which means good money, including hard currency.” Thus, men have transformed the female body into immovable—or movable—property and have objectified it in the most obtrusive and materialistic manner.

Denise Roman also offers a compelling look at the post-communist developments in theories of gender and representation in Eastern Europe. Roman describes the complex and often contradictory myriad of influences that
women in Eastern Europe become exposed to—such as the rise in traditional Orthodoxy, pre-communist village values, and more importantly, “a provocative feminine mystique of Western origins stressing beauty as a paramount goal” (emphasis by the author). These conflicting factors of influence, Roman argues, have led Eastern European women to a rather unexpected turn—the women of post-communism have adopted a new understanding of being feminine and that includes rejection of modernization and all the turmoil that it brings, and with it, rejecting the ideas of Western feminism. “If, for feminists following the Western model, emancipation means autonomy and taking a public job, for the average woman emancipation means dependency and the right to be a housewife, thus return to the private sphere.”

The main argument so far appears to be that the historical circumstances that determine the image and the identity of the Eastern European woman are dramatically different from those that determine the lives and sense of self-worth of women in the West. In this vein, a number of Eastern European gender scholars have argued that the social and cultural identity of Eastern European women is drastically different from that of Western women since feminism is the product of a particular culture, of a particular country, and of a particular social system. Thus, for example, women’s return to domesticity observed during the transition, should not be interpreted as a backlash against feminism and emancipation, but as a response to a regained sense of liberation and personal choice. As Jiřina Šílková, a well-known Czech dissident and a women’s rights advocate, said: “As the enforced false ideology breaks down, many people welcome the freedom to return to traditions once forbidden. Young girls and boys are becoming nuns and monks, women are opting to stay at home. Freedom takes on different forms. This may give the impression that we are returning to patriarchy, but it is more a reaction to our recent past.”

Parallel to their tendency to return to the home, women in Eastern Europe have also found a new sense of empowerment through embracing sexuality as an expression of femininity, which departs from the traditions of patriarchy and Soviet ideology. Here, the work of Mette Svendsen examining the relationship of beauty and aerobics in post-communist Romania is particularly illuminating. In her ethnographic study of how Romanian women construct their identity through the investment in body care and the consumption of Western practices such as that of aerobics exercise, Svendsen explored the presentational status of the body in the post-communist transition. In doing so, the author argues that for Romanian women, and by extension, for other Eastern European women, “beauty operates as a moral imperative, as a defining feature of femininity, as a dream and a necessity. Taken together, these functions make beautification (or body care) an essential field of activity for women.” In her analysis of the changes in gender discourses in the Bulgarian post-communist transition,

---

15 Roman, Gendering Eastern Europe, 56.
16 Roman, Gendering Eastern Europe, 56.
19 Svendsen, The post-communist body, 10.
Krassimira Daskalova\textsuperscript{20} noted a similar trend, closely related to the rapid proliferation of women-oriented magazines. While she acknowledged that most of these publications focused narrowly on tips on style and fashion and preoccupied the attention of their female readers with advertisements for products that improve one’s body image, including medical procedures such as plastic surgery, she also pointed out that “one message conveyed is that beauty is a woman’s most valuable asset, and every woman should try to make herself sexually attractive to men.”\textsuperscript{21} Simultaneously, Daskalova herself recognized that the complexity of the cultural climate of the transition cannot be reduced to a simple count of the number of beauty magazines in wide circulation and the messages they convey, but she also noted that since consumerism (as an ideology rather than an actual practice) is only now openly advertised in Bulgarian society, it is hard to ignore the curious convergence of growing consumer awareness, a heightened interest in beauty as a paramount goal, and the advertising that engenders these ideas.

This has been further demonstrated in the predominance of sexualized images of women in visual media, and specifically, in advertising. In fact, as another well-known Czech social scientist, Jiřína Šmejkalová noted, the asexual nature of the Soviet woman was seen by women in Eastern Europe as just another oppressive social restriction of the communist ideology. To explain the trend of hypersexualization of women in the Eastern European media, Šmejkalová contended:

\begin{quote}
"Shall we call for censorship of pornography in a country whose entire modern history is built on an excessive fight for freedom of expression? Could anyone that at least once opened a fashion journal issue in Prague in the 1970s filled with sex-less figures wrapped in colorless fabric seriously mobilize against abuse of women’s bodies in the fashion industry and advertising?"
\end{quote}

While the literature suggests a variety of important factors influencing the image and character of the Eastern European woman, it seems apparent that her sense of self-identity was suppressed and constrained by the limits of quasi-Marxist feminism and solid Orthodox and Oriental patriarchy. As Dimitrina Petrova\textsuperscript{23} argued, “the everyday life of women was furrowed with ripples of formal equality and emancipation in a seemingly endless patriarchal ocean.” What is even more, the revolution of 1989 left the patriarchal system of power intact, transforming its more superficial manifestations from bad to worse and leaving the post-Soviet woman lost in the search for a meaningful and useful balance of social propensity and adequacy. How this crisis is reflected in the visual representations of advertising defines the focus of this research.

\textsuperscript{21} Daskalova, Women’s Problems, 349.
\textsuperscript{22} Šmejkalová, Jiřina. 1996. On the Road: Smuggling Feminism Across the Post-Iron Curtain. Replika, special issue, 98.
Advertising and the Sexing of Bulgarian Women
Commercial advertising is a fairly new phenomenon in Bulgaria and in most eastern European countries. During the decades of central planning prior to the collapse of communism, the role of advertising in Bulgaria, as in most of the countries of Eastern Europe, was very limited because for the most part, demand significantly exceeded supply. In fact, the Soviet approach to advertising was clearly a result of the ideological incongruity of a planned socialist economy and a consumption-based, capitalist free market. In the large *Soviet Encyclopedia*, for instance, it was stated that advertising in capitalist countries was caused by unrestrained competition; and the conclusion is that “the huge sums spent on advertising in these countries become a burden on the consumer.” In fact, following communist directives, until WWII, advertising was rejected as “bourgeoisie capitalist excrescence which artificially stimulates the economy by forcing people to buy what they don’t need and what they can’t afford.”

Western style advertising was understood only as reflected through the lens of the class struggle and was considered to be one of the major tools enabling the unbridled growth of conspicuous consumption and the very foundation of capitalism. However, non-commercial forms of advertising were widely employed in the Soviet world. Some of these advertisements were concerned with publicizing important cultural events, such as theater performance, radio shows, etc., while others were used to encourage savings in the state banks, the production of more crops, and generally, all economic activities that would benefit the society at large. More importantly, most advertising that was non-political in nature was predominantly oriented towards the woman. In fact, as Susan Reid contended, because women were seen both as the main decision makers in the household and the most active users of goods and consumer products, “construed as both housewives and consumers, women were ascribed the leading role in the production of aesthetics value and social meaning.”

With the transition to democracy and a free market economy, advertising debuted in its purely commercial revenue-driven form on the Bulgarian market, introduced mainly by international companies looking for profit opportunities in newly emerging markets. This, in turn, led to fundamental changes in the advertising landscape. As Elena Millan and Richard Elliot point out, during the formative years of the commercialization of the economy immediately following the opening of the post-Soviet markets, advertising in Bulgaria developed under conditions of general institutional instability and lack of regulations. Bulgarian advertising expenditure has risen from $4.3 million in 1996 to $322 million in 2006, with the latest numbers indicating Bulgaria’s advertising market was worth BGN 415 million ($240.7 million) in 2018. More importantly,
the fundamental shift in the consumer mentality of the socialist citizen, which was intrinsically tied to the penetration of capitalism on the local scene, brought along with advertising very deliberate images of gender, class, and social status, which were seen by the majority of men and women both as a sign of westernization and breaking away from the past. In this sense, advertising became not only a vehicle of commercial success, but also a forum for cultural pedagogy, where new ideas of what it means to be a “modern” woman, what it means to be a successful businessman, and many other new cultural symbols could be learned. This pedagogical aspect of advertising has become particularly gendered and alluring with images of beauty, luxury, and social norms often in direct clash with established cultural traditions of the past. This cultural shift in identity formation, triggered by advertising images and messages and combined with the economic hardships and social pressures of the transition, has resulted in what Donna M. Hughes argues are profound psychological changes in the self-esteem and self-worth of women across the former Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern bloc. Combined with the growing sexualization of Eastern European women, seen by many women as an empowering rejection of the “frumpy babushka” image of the communist part, Eastern European women are certainly caught amidst an identity crisis—between the communist ideals and the capitalist realities, between the exploitive sexuality of today and the asexual aesthetic of the communist past.

Today, the frumpy image of the Soviet woman is nothing more than a remnant of the communist past. The visual space of Bulgarian media, and specifically so, Bulgarian advertising, is populated with sexualized depiction of womanhood. Women’s bodies have indeed become commodified and transformed into valuable currency, which can be used to sell virtually any product. The majority of outdoor advertisements, for example, adorning the road arteries of the country, featured endless array of women’s sexualized bodies, selling anything from latex paint, hunting accessories and weaponry, and of course, alcohol. Staring from the billboards are the confident looks of young Bulgarian women, who daringly display their well-cultivated bodies. It is important to note that the paradox of this heightened sexuality on display stems not only from the collapse of the cultural and moral norms that characterized the post-communist transition, but also from the fact that Bulgarian women, and perhaps, most women in Eastern Europe, found a new form of rebellion against the established, artificial aesthetic norms and stagnant gender roles prescribed by the communist ideology. Women's bodies became a site for contesting the gender norms of the past and for demonstrating new ways of visualizing what self-expression and individuality looked like. And while this rebellious spirit of what some called “the new sexual revolution” might have been a refreshing way to face the challenges of the disintegration of the communist ideology, the new sexual mores of the post-communist transition were quickly politicized and the sexual liberation of women was “highjacked” and used as a visual token of the new anti-authoritarian spirit ready for social change. Examples of this trend early in the transition include political protests accompanied by beauty contests and wet t-shirt competitions while the opening of the first striptease bar in town was

celebrated as important cultural news.

The sexing of women could indeed be seen as a reaction, albeit a fairly drastic one, to the failing sexual politics of the communist past. However, it is also important to note that the market economy emerged at the time when female images turned out to provide a most profitable commodity in the conditions of unbridled capitalism. One obvious example which well demonstrates the profitability of the sexing of Bulgarian media is the fact that newspapers covering the first ever beauty contest in the country sold better than the others. Additionally, borrowing models from the British tabloids, Bulgarian newspapers began publishing erotic photos of girls on the back pages of their print edition, making the sale of papers a profitable business at the dawn of democracy. After 1991, the image of the fashion model and the beauty queen came to reign supreme in the mass media, successfully replacing the politicized woman functionary. The interesting fact is that this change, as Nadezhda Azhgikhina\(^{31}\) points out, occurred very smoothly, “since the consciousness fostered in the totalitarian system, as well as the surreal view of the world previously offered had prepared the audience to accept yet another stereotype, instead of any real heroine of the time.” Beauties in bikinis, their interviews, and press coverage of beauty contests started to appear not only in “lightweight” publications, but also in “respectable” ones and soon enough became the standard for publications with financial viability and business savvy.

The advertising industry was quick to take notice of this opportunity, which was further aided by the opportunities and incentives for western investments in Eastern Europe for companies who saw the profit potential in the newly emerging markets of the former Soviet bloc. Among those western companies, advertising media conglomerates were among the first to take advantage of this profitable proposition, which in turn, triggered an exponential growth of domestic ad and print agencies, needed to meet growing demand for marketing and advertising services. And while the production value of print and outdoor advertisements at the onset of the transition was questionable, ads did not shy away from featuring sexualized females aimed to grab the attention of the eager consumers, selling anything and everything—from air-conditioners, construction materials, and computers—with a sexy twist (Figure 1). The very idea of promoting goods for the sake of consuming out of pleasure and choice, rather than out of necessity and force, posed a novel challenge to Bulgarian advertising companies, which had a lot to learn from their Western counterparts. In this vein, it is important to note that at the initial stages of introducing advertising to the Bulgarian market, there was a general void of creative approaches to promote consumer goods; thus the use of a sexy female model, which dovetailed with the presence of many eager young women who wanted to see their faces on public display, was the simplest, cheapest, and most immediate solution. Coupled with the heavily gendered notion of Western advertising where women’s bodies were seen as tokens for consumption—to be consumed or used to stand for a consumable object—as Ibroscheva\(^{32}\) argued, Bulgarian advertising approached the commercial portrayal of women and women’s roles by stressing


\(^{32}\) Ibroscheva, 2013a. *Advertising, Sex and Post-Socialism,* 156.
individuality rather than collectivity, beauty and sexuality rather than character and substance, and social status rather than professional success, therefore fundamentally transforming women’s aspirations and their ability to imagine their new place in the post-socialist reality.

Figure 1. Advertisement for Bulgarian computer Pravetz.

With the passage of time, however, the production quality in the advertising industry markedly improved; and with it, so grew the level of sexualization of the woman’s body. Today, sexualization of Bulgarian women is common in all forms of advertising and for all consumer needs—a trend that very quickly became accepted as the norm of the advertising business. For example, some of the most popular ads featuring female models are ads for alcoholic beverages and liquor. Frequent billboard ads feature attractive young girls, posing topless, whose essential body parts are covered by succulent pieces of exotic fruit, seductively offering the consumer a shot of vodka or gin. Other advertising campaigns took on an even more daring spin on the theme of risqué sexual adventures and women’s bodies. An advertising campaign for Vodka Xtaz (in
Bulgarian, shortened for Ecstasy) featured both a controversial TV spot and multiple print ads, resembling scenes from Stanley Kubrick's sexually charged drama *Eyes Wide Shut* (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Print ad for Vodka Xtaz: Turn me into a drop of your blood.

Removed from the context of the dramatic dialogue and character development of the original movie, the 30-second TV commercial was nothing more than a highly stylized “sexploitation” of the female body, which promised wild adventures and bloodthirsty temptresses if you chose this vodka brand over others. The ad was indeed so controversial that it triggered one of the first complaints to the Council of Electronic Media from the Trade and Consumer Protection Commission and the Bulgarian Parents Association. According to the Trade Commission, the commercial contained pornographic elements and incited people to violence—a claim that was dismissed by the director of the video Georgi Markov, who argued in a Sofiaecho article from 8 January 2003 that the real problem is the timing of the broadcasts. “If the advertisement were aired during a night show, no one would be shocked,” he said. Taking the focus away from the portrayed sexual violence and exploitation of women featured in the video,
Grisha Ganchev, the owner of the company which produced the vodka, also stated in the same report that the main purpose of any ad is to boost publicity, and whether it is good or bad does not matter when everyone is talking about the brand.

The sexing of the Bulgarian woman took on an even higher degree of commodification when a printing company that offered design and publicity services advertised its own business by sending its customers Christmas cards featuring a young woman posing seductively in black lace lingerie and wishing everyone “Happy Holidays!” (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Christmas Card.

Here, advertising creativity takes on a whole different level—to beat the competition, and perhaps to create a new sense of fascination with the concept of alluring propositions, the Christmas wishes take on a whole new, and very sexy, meaning. Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the degree to which this sexualization has captured the public imagination of Bulgarians is the fact that a campaign initiated by the online publication Vagabond to elect the cultural
symbols that truly represent contemporary Bulgaria includes the following category: “Thousands of stunning babes dressed in clothing that leaves nothing to the imagination—all whilst working as lawyers, doctors and managers. You wouldn’t find that even in Venezuela!”

The result is a commodification of women’s bodies and female sexualities unseen in this scope and scale during the communist regime. This is perhaps best exemplified in a 2013 TV ad for a Bulgarian cheese-like product conspicuously named “bulka” (the Bulgarian word for bride). In the commercial, a young woman, dressed in a tight, low-cut red dress carries around a tray of cheese treats when she is confronted by a male “Romeo,” in the ambiance of the chalga club music. “Julieta” leans forward and drops a cheese cube in between her breast, teasing her male admirer in a highly sexualized way. The ad continues on in a “cheesy,” equally crass dialogue between the two, essentially putting the man in control of getting what he wants—the dairy treat—while reducing the young woman to nothing more than a milk-producing pair of breasts. The tagline at the end of the 30-second commercial reveals the woman’s response to the young man’s inquiry: “It’s not cheese, it’s a delicacy,” playing a pun on both the ingredients of the product (not real cheese) and the nature of her bosoms (as tasty as the real cheese would be). The TV commercial caused a wave of criticism among Bulgarian viewing audiences; however, the discontent and much of the debate surrounding the ad were not about the crass treatment of women, but about the misleading product information. To them, trivializing women as domestic cattle and domestic servers was not the problem—paying for cheese that isn’t real cheese seemed much more problematic.

Conclusions

Gender identities in the countries under post-communist transition are in a state of flux. In the atmosphere of confusion and political disarray which characterized the collapse of the communist system, gender identities were caught in a crisis. This crisis, while clearly serving as a new source of empowered sexuality, is also an indication of the consequences of the penetration of global capitalism in the region. With the growing influx of capital in the media and with multinational corporate investment in advertising, women become the prime target as both models and consumers of goods advertised in a hypersexual fashion. In fact, scholars argue that along the sweeping media reform that opened Eastern Europe to the West, providing millions in market shares and advertising revenues, prostitution and the sex trade can perhaps be defined as the other economic “boom” that has brought Eastern Europe into the global economy.33

“The body is a profitable commodity which satisfies all manner of fantasies in all manner of ways.”34 The marketing of the body, prior to democracy, a hidden and often condemned currency, characteristic of the decadent commercial West, now

easily translates into a legitimate “labor value,” reinvigorating a new sexual revolution now categorized as a “sexploitation.”³⁵

More importantly, this sexploitation is frequently a leading factor, I would argue, in the sweeping trend for young women in Bulgaria to engage in self-objectification. Stemming from the theory of objectification,³⁶ which argues that females are subject to sexual objectification in a variety of cultural contexts, one of which is indeed the media, and as such, are prone to be perceived as bodies or only in their sexual function, comes the idea of self-objectification. According to objectification theory, recurring experiences of sexual objectification may socialize girls and women to view themselves as objects intended for the visual pleasure of men. Consequently, females may internalize an observer’s perspective on their physical self, thereby becoming preoccupied with their physical appearance, a process labeled self-objectification. That is, the individual places greater emphasis on observable attributes of their body (e.g., “How do I look?”), rather than on privileged or non-observable attributes (e.g., “What am I capable of?” or “How do I feel?”).³⁷

The problem of gender stereotypes has been recognized as of particular importance for the EU, and in support of this we can cite the opinion of the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for women and men to the European Commission on “breaking gender stereotypes in the media”:

“In the present context, it is important to address the fact that gender stereotypes not only contribute to the status quo in terms of women’s and men’s roles, but also promote an asymmetrical vision of women and men in society. Furthermore, they are one of the most persistent causes of inequality between women and men in all spheres and at all stages of life, influencing their choices in education, profession, and private life.”³⁸

The problem is compounded further when we consider that eighty-one percent of Bulgarians think that the most important role of a woman is to take care of her home and family—the highest rate in the European Union, according to the 2018 Eurobarometer survey.³⁹ Respondents in Bulgaria were the most likely to stereotype based on gender, followed by those in Hungary and Lithuania, according to the report, clearly demonstrating the lack of nuanced understanding of the complex cultural and social influence of decades of steady media diets that portrayed women’s roles confined to narrowly defined, predictable and ideologically contrived notions of femininity. In the same year, Bulgaria also failed to ratify the Istanbul Convention, condemning violence against women. The homegrown campaign against the ratification of the

Convention led to the creation of an “anti-gender movement” that resulted in attacks on women and on all those providing services to victims of violence. This was partially due to misinterpretation and to the translation into Bulgarian of the term “gender” contained in the Convention, inconsistent with the translation of the same term in other regional and international instruments, including the EU Victim’s Rights Directive. Yet, the campaign also succeeded in creating widespread suspicion towards European norms of intolerance towards discrimination and gender-based violence, pushing the opponents of women’s rights to coin derogatory terms such as “genderism” to describe what is now deemed by the public as outside meddling with Bulgarian’s strong national values, including those defining gender norms, and an attempt to push homosexuality and lesbianism upon Bulgarian society.

These series of anti-women actions signal a particularly dangerous trend in post-communist Bulgaria, and perhaps in the rest of the post-communist societies of the Eastern bloc. Eastern European women are now exposed to a steady diet of exploitative, sexually provocative depictions of women, which in turn feeds a poisonous trend in women’s and girl’s perceptions of their bodies and their sense of self-worth in the absence of alternative role models. This transformation into an over-sexed, hyper-feminine body might produce a feeling of empowerment, a feeling of having set out on the road of a different kind of life, one that will be less strenuous and more Western. Some scholars have linked these trends of “modernizing” gender with the massive transformation of the post-Soviet economy and the aggressive marketing of “beauty” as the utmost desired commodity, noting that pursuing beauty is seen in the East as both empowering and westernizing. However, this sense of empowerment, at minimum, rests on shaky grounds—among other things, it is based on problematic stereotypical and patriarchal definitions of femininity, which often reinforce rather than transform the relations of inequality and repressive gender identity in Eastern Europe. The danger here also lies in the political economy underlying the import of western images of the perfect, sexed-up body, which creates in turn a new type of stereotype of the Eastern European women—sexy, frail, hungry for attention, and waiting to be rescued (or discovered) by a rich, powerful man—producing new masked politics of domination and subordination. Ultimately, the transformative potential for radical change that the end of the communist regime signaled is being replaced by a new consumer tableau of carefully crafted gender stereotypes that do not include re-imagining and challenging the patriarchy, but only adding new stylish accessories to it.

Bibliography


Kotzeva, Maria and Nedda Vidova. 2014. TV Commercial Representation of Women in Italy and Bulgaria in View of the EU Fight Against Gender Stereotypes. Quaderni di Donne & Ricerca 33-34 (accessed: 15 June 2020).


The Status of Women as Subject in the Films of Contemporary Turkish Female Directors

Research Article

Hasan Gürkan
Senior Lecturer, Istanbul Arel University
gur.hasan@gmail.com

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(2), 62-79

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.2.5
The Status of Women as Subject in the Films of Contemporary Turkish Female Directors

Hasan Gürkan

This study focuses on how female characters are represented in the films of contemporary female directors in Turkey. In this study, the films of female directors Yeşim Ustaoğlu, Pelin Esmer, Ahu Özüyörk, and Emine Emel Balcı are examined in the context of women’s cinema and feminist film reading. In this study, the films Tereddüt (“Clair-Obscur,” 2016), Gözetleme Kulesi (“Watchtower,” 2012), Toz Bezi (“Dust Cloth,” 2015), and Nefesim Kesilene Kadar (“Until I Lose My Breath,” 2015) are discussed using sociological film analysis. Unlike mainstream films, the female characters in the narratives of these films do not succeed even when they engage in a struggle for liberation. The female characters are imprisoned in the masculine ideology and find their salvation in relation to being with a man.

Keywords: gender, woman in Turkey, women’s cinema, Turkish women directors

Introduction

With new technology and the formation of industrial societies, the differences between men and women have been identified in new frameworks. In the patriarchal-capitalist system where only the perception of biological differences is presented, it has brought new aspirations to the status of women as subjects and has become an invisible problem in many societies. Moreover, the concept of being a subject and being an individual is historically difficult for everyone. As Turkey has a patriarchal structure, women are compressed into a rigid mold and shaped by following certain roles. When one views the patriarchal society in Turkey, it can be stated that “the obstacle to women’s emancipation is the society.”

This study focuses not only on the place of women and masculine mentality in Turkey, but also discusses women’s struggle against being a subject, and the impact of men in this struggle. In other words, this study analyzes whether women are addicted to men, and if men have become a necessity in women’s emancipation struggle. Moreover, it aims to reveal how female characters are positioned and represented in female directors’ films. The representation of

* Hasan Gürkan holds his Ph.D. from Istanbul University Department of Radio, Television and Cinema. He did his post-doc research in Journalism and Communication Sciences Institute at the University of Vienna. He has written the books Counter Cinema and Journalism Practices. He focuses on counter cinema, Hollywood Cinema, alternative cinema, cinema and representations, cinema and migration, and gender studies.

female characters in the public and private spheres and the positioning of women are analyzed in the following films: Tereddüt ("Clair-Obscur," 2016, dir. Yeşim Ustaoğlu), Gözetleme Kulesi ("Watchtower," 2012, dir. Pelin Esmer), Toz Bezi ("Dust Cloth," 2015, dir. Ahu Öztürk), and Nefesim Kesilene Kadar ("Until I Lose My Breath," 2015, dir. Emine Emel Balcı).\(^2\) Another aim of this study is to explore whether the films directed by female directors in Turkish cinema should be considered as women’s cinema or not, as Claire Johnston\(^3\) urges.

**Gendered world: (fe)male trouble**

According to the Turkish Language Institution, the concept of sex, which emphasizes the innate sexual characteristics of an individual, is defined as the characteristic of creation that gives the individual a distinct role in reproductive work and distinguishes the male from the female. It generally meets certain biological, physiological, and genetic characteristics. Gender, occurring after birth, emphasizes not only the biological structures but also the adoption of gender roles by each sex in accordance with different cultures and societies during the growth of girls and boys. Nancy Chodorow\(^4\) deals with the subject primarily in terms of community psychology; she argues that families’ child-raising traditions lead to sex discrimination. According to her, because of their biological structure, the burden of childcare duties fall on women, and being a mother causes the impression that there are psychological differences between the sexes in children. In early childcare, while mothers raise girls with maternal feelings, emotions are suppressed by the family in boys.\(^5\) Simone de Beauvoir,\(^6\) in her book *The Second Sex*, states that in comparison with men, the cultural construction of gender is defined as “other,” “incomplete,” “passive,” “emotional,” and “weak” in women in patriarchal societies. Since both individual and social relations are determined by these prejudices, even independent women are influenced by these views. According to Simone de Beauvoir, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”\(^7\) According to this proposition, being a woman is not a choice, but a cultural necessity. That is, society imposes the way of being a woman on women over time, and they develop an awareness of the roles that women internalize in socialization either consciously or unconsciously. On the other hand, Güven Özdoğan states that femininity or masculinity does not imply ontological stability, as it is a linguistic positioning. However, the meanings that we attach to names are linked to the agents that have those names.\(^8\)

In the late 19\(^{th}\) century, Freud, who saw women as masochistic, passive, and solely reproduction problems of the bourgeois, stated that “biology is destiny.” In 1974, the British theorist Juliet Mitchell refuted Freud in saying, “biology is

---

\(^2\) In the text, the original Turkish names of the films will be used to avoid confusion.


\(^7\) de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 66.

destiny, but destiny is based on culture, not biology,” opposing the view of psychoanalysis as the legitimation of patriarchal relations.\(^9\)

In this context, although sex seems irreversible in biological terms, the concept of gender has been constructed culturally and is not fixed. Moreover, gender is brought forward to challenge the expression “biology is destiny.” According to Judith Butler,\(^10\) gender should not be understood only as a legal conception of culture, but as an implication of gender. It is also the production mechanism that establishes sex. It cannot be stated that the relation of gender to culture is the same relation of gender and nature. In this case, it is revealed that “culture is destiny” in opposition to the rhetoric that “biology is destiny.”\(^11\)

Especially in the second half of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, the paradigms of almost all disciplines were starting to be questioned using the concept of gender, which was highly discussed. According to Tekeli,\(^12\) every discipline that has gained the quality of being a “science” has a hidden male perspective. The world, history, and society are all interpreted from this perspective; laws are shaped with this perspective. By making women invisible, the patriarchal ideology not only ignores women's contributions to history and society but also by legitimizes women's oppression and exploitation by the existing social order; it ensures that all institutions of the order are accepted as they should be, and contribute to the maintenance of the gender hierarchy. In this context, for women, science functions through institutions and order as ideology rather than true science.

In this historical and social structure, women have been able to gain certain freedoms from male hegemony by entering working life. In many cases, the woman is still often looking out for admiration, love, or religion. However, even in the simplest jobs, the woman makes herself a concrete subject and affirms herself. With her working life, she no longer needs a man to act as a liaison between the universe and the woman, and she thus realizes her power. However, it should not be thought that working alone would completely liberate women. The world, which has long been the property of men, still remains a world of men. Today, women make up a considerable part of the exploited laborers in the capitalist order. Moreover, when a woman working at the factory returns to her home, she has to do “overtime” domestic work, and is unable to escape her duties as a spouse.\(^13\)

Due to the diminishing importance of relative muscular strength thanks to the industrial revolution, women began to work in industrial occupations as laborers. Women's entry into the workforce began to replace men as a supportive labor force to close the gap in labor power as men went to fight in the two world wars. However, it was found appropriate to pay wages far lower than for male

---


\(^13\) de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 89.
For women who were given the right to education, the classes that considered this right as a priority were the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois classes. The overall priority in families, education-wise, was for men. If there was a low-income family, priority was given to the boy; the girl was prepared for tasks such as household chores and accompaniment. The woman had to create trust that was not shown to her at any moment and simultaneously has to prove that she is worthy of it. Overcoming all these difficulties, the progression of women who have completed high qualifications and higher education was slower and more difficult than for men. Additionally, the increase in the number of women in any occupation meant that the prestige of these professions decreased accordingly. Nevertheless, a woman who has survived the economic yoke of the man does not have the same status as the man morally, socially, and spiritually. Society continues to look at and evaluate her from a male perspective.

Emancipation brought economic and legal equality between men and women. Women could choose their profession, however, the physical training in the past and the present cannot provide them with the equipment to compete with a man. Women are often forced to spend all their energy, exhaust their vitality, and wear out their nerves just to reach market value. Many women—including teachers, doctors, engineers, architects, and lawyers—have succeeded in this structure, yet however do not see the same reputation as their male counterparts, nor can they reciprocate their labor.

**Women in Turkey: Some things given to some, some things learned by others; the lesson is trouble**

It is known that in pre-Islamic nomadic Turkish communities, women were not excluded from social life, enjoyed monogamous marriage rules, and were involved in horseback riding, participating in the war and political life. However, with the adoption of slavery in the Byzantine structure of the Ottoman state—which gradually began to deviate from its traditional values after the adoption of Islam—women were removed from social life. Apart from exceptional circumstances, women were not active in administration or social life; instead they used all the learning opportunities of the palace to become slaves who were only responsible for giving birth and raising children. It was not only women who were oppressed and exploited in the Ottoman state. The raia class, which was in constant exploitation in relation to Ottoman property relations, carried the burden of the economy and the army. While there was full male domination in the social sphere, the woman of the raia class were considered “alive, warm goods” and were used in the field during the day and in the household during the night. The reason women could not oppose this upside-down structure was that it was widely accepted that this structure was created by Allah. According to Islamic dogma, women were half-witted and should be kept under control in the management of men, destined to obediently serve their spouses instead of participating in social life, and regarded as equal to gold, silver, and horses, and

---

lower than men. According to Islamic law, two women equaled one man, and
women could never divorce from their husbands by their own will.16

Although women were active in the palace from time to time in the Ottoman
state, talking about women’s rights in the social field was formally encountered
the Tanzimat (Reform) period. The status of women started to be discussed with
the arrival of reformist regulations and the Second Constitutional Monarchy.
Until the reformist period, daughters had the right to pay (often too much
money) use the field when there was no son. However, with the Land Law
enacted in 1856, the right to property was granted to girls through inheritance,
and the “bridal tax” imposed on girls was abolished. It was also in this period
that, for the first time, the female secondary school equivalent was opened in
1858 in Istanbul.

In the debates that began during this period, the western Turkish intellectuals
argued that the main reason for the under development of the Ottomans was
that women were a lower existence, and that it was thanks to the clergy. They
said that constitutionalism meant the implementation of sharia Islamic law, and
that women should not have any education other than religion, should cover
their faces and hair, and their presence in social life with men was met with
heavy criticism. The Second Constitutional Period was a period in which women
begin to gain social visibility. In the following years, with the start of the Balkan
wars, women from the noble sector formed associations with an understanding
of social work, and with the First World War, they started to enter business
world by serving from behind the scenes.17 In 1911, the first high school was
opened for girls, and in 1915, the first university for women.

With the newly established Turkish state, the modernization process was
initiated under the leadership of Atatürk. Reformations were made to create a
western and modern nation-state. At the beginnings of the Turkish Republic,
Mustafa Kemal Atatürk attached importance to women in social and business
life.18 Atatürk wanted to see Turkish women as the most enlightened women in
the world. Although the progressive group within the Assembly claimed that
every Turk had the right to participate in the election of deputies and demanded
that in the 10th Article of the constitution “Turkish citizens” should include
women, the article was changed to “every man is Turkish…” One of the most
important developments in the Republic in 1924 was that women gained the
right to education, a basic right of citizenship. Then in 1926, with the Civil Code,
polygamy was abolished, civil marriage was allowed, divorce was taken out of
male monopoly, and women were granted election rights. Female inheritance
was achieved, inequality between men and women and the equivocation of two
women to every one man in the testimony was abolished.19 Another important
factor in changing the status of women in Turkey in 1930 was right to elect and
be elected in the municipal councils. Women who used this right for the first time
in the 1933 municipal councils had the right to elect and be elected as deputies

17 Tekeli, Bilimlerde Metodolojinin, 38.
in 1934 and the 1935 elections; this right let them enter parliament with 18
deputies out of 383.

Following the first years of the Republic, women gained social and political
rights; however, these rights were granted by the state in a way that descended
from the top, not from the will of women as in many other countries. When
Nakiye Elgün, one of the first women who entered the parliament in 1935, was
asked to comment on the 1927 elections, she replied by revealing passive
acceptance of the situation: “Why aren’t there many women in the parliament?
Because the law is not convenient. Then, this is not the time for us. Our
government has given us all the rights that women deserve; even more.”
Expressing the importance of women’s participation in working life at every
opportunity, Atatürk also endeavored to protect women and young people in
business life. The first regulation on the working life of women was the 1936
labor law.

During Turkish modernization, women were given a westernized and
modernized role, but the limits of this role were drawn by men. The nation-state
project enabled women to maintain their traditional roles in modern forms and
to determine the role patterns that apply to women. Even though women have
the right to education and to elect and to be elected, the patriarchal structure in
the society and the Islamic dogma could not be erased; the social status that
women gained by using these rights remained only to the extent that male
hegemony allows it.

Women’s rights acquired in the Republic became wider after the 1980’s. With the
new civil law adopted in 2001 and the women’s movement, discussions on
differences in education between women and men, social life, the exercise of
political rights, and economic independence enabled Turkish women to become
equally free as individuals and in comparison to modern western women.
Nevertheless, in today’s Turkey, women’s economic and social life—for various
reasons—cannot be as active, complicates the representation of women in the
political sphere, and cannot escape being molded by the hands of patriarchal
structures.

An insight into the history of women in Turkish cinema
Turkish cinema has existed as a masculine space since its inception. Women
have long been positioned as secondary compared to men in cinema, especially
in the intolerant attitudes supported by religion. Female characters are
presented in roles in which male supremacy supports; women are left behind in
the background, even if they are in the leading roles. While women’s
representations have been formed on the basis of a good and bad dichotomy, they
have been sentenced to a male-centered life. Traditional Turkish female
typologies in Turkish cinema include bad women that symbolize loss of
innocence, seduce men, and make all kinds of evil. These depictions of women
are a narrative built by mainstream Turkish cinema. In this paper, since I am
discussing the depiction of women in women’s films as an alternative discourse,
it can be summarized that the history of the depiction of women in Turkish

20 Tekeli, Bilimlerde Metodolojinin, 40-42.
21 Altındal, Türkiye’de Kadın, 45-47.
The Status of Women as Subject in the Films of Contemporary Turkish Female Directors

women’s cinema is as follows: in reaction to the Social Realism that sprouted in Turkish cinema in the 1960’s, it tried to find a self-image that could define both Turkish society and Turkish cinema.

The social realistic approach has increased the visibility of women and has illustrated their problems. The use of eroticism increased in films made with a social realistic approach; the female body is used naked and the sexuality of the woman is not hidden. In these films, the representation of women is as a good mother and a mild-mannered employee in working life, as determined by the patriarchal society; her position in modern society is questioned.

Rural femininity, sexuality of women, and problems of women such as social pressures, being a second wife, and commodity are found in Turkish cinema through social realistic cinema. While mainstream Yeşilçam cinema continues to produce more films, realistic representations provide an important development in terms of questioning the relationship between cinema and women. Even though the representations of women that emerged thanks to the social realistic approach continued to exist in the 1970’s, the period is marked by the family comic strips, arabeque films that continue to use melodrama patterns, and most importantly, sex comedies that overthrow women’s identity.

In terms of the representations of women in the 1980’s, women in Turkish cinema are (partially) liberated, and the modern/traditional duality came to the forefront, replacing than the good/bad duality. Female representation in Turkish cinema, which was largely influenced by American cinema in the 1990’s, returns to traditional gender patterns. While the education of women whose characteristics such as sexuality and obedience are emphasized, their participation in working life is ignored, and new rules such as class, ethnic, and religious distinctions have been put in place of gender roles—all while depicting the drama of individuals lonely in the face of the brutality of urban life. In the 2000’s, power and popularity were exalted in the new social structure, where individuality, the power of money, and showiness come to the fore.

Film and its relation with sociology

There is a strong relationship between film and social structure. For this reason, films bear the traces of the culture of the period in which they were produced. To address this point, film studies help viewers find and interpret social phenomena. As Robert P. Wolensky states, the scope of film studies is to find and interpret sociological implications in films.

Yeşilçam (mostly between the 1960s and 1970s) refers to its most popular era in Turkish film history.


However, Nicholas Demerath argues that films present narrative documents of existing reality. Therefore, although movies are fiction, they still serve as a bridge between the fictional world and the real world. Demerath mentions that films not only depict social conditions but also touch on the personal conditions and sensibilities of the audience. In other words, the fact that a person has a variable identity, such as being female, male, LGBTI, or having ethnic and religious identity, changes the meaning created by the film.

In addition to what I have mentioned above, film is a work of art and the product of creative work. In this sense, interpretation opens up multiple dimensions and involves the interpretation of subjective and objective contexts, but it is also interdisciplinary. Psychoanalysis, feminist theory, ideological analysis, semiotics, and sociological readings all contribute to the interpretation of films.

In this study, the sociological film interpretation method is used. This method allows the comparative analysis of film content in terms of social reference. As a tool, films are watched in terms of their social context and origins. Cognitive attention focuses on the relationship between film content and social reality. What is meant here by social reality is the film’s production conditions, financing, policy, etc., including all the media surrounding the film.

The reasons to include the four women in this paper and their films are as follows:

- These four female directors are the most well known female directors in contemporary Turkish cinema.
- The films of these female directors were made close to each other (2012, 2015, 2015, and 2016) in the post-2010 period.
- Female characters are placed in the center of the narratives of these films (by contrast, there are no female characters in the center of any of Ustaoğlu and Esmer’s films.)
- Based on the definition of women’s cinema in the literature, these films center on the woman and reflect the realities of womanhood in a realistic language.

At this point, the latest films of the four Turkish female directors are discussed with the term “being woman” of the characters in the narratives. To this end,

- The latest films of these female directors are examined.
- These films were selected by grouping them according to their subject (each of these films can be described as a woman’s film).
- Each film post-2010 sheds light on the reality of Turkey.

As a result of the film analysis, inferences are made in order to address the following questions:

---


• Is it male-dominated world? Where are the women?
• Can these women be free without men?
• Does women’s cinema exists in contemporary Turkey?

Findings
Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner state that representations are inherited from the culture in which they are embedded and internalized, and become part of the self.\(^{27}\) This assumption directs us to the idea that the representations, which are located in a culture and become decisive in the formation of the self, are formed by the creators of the culture. Feminist theorists point to men as the creator, transponder, and protector of the culture and the patriarchal system they have constructed, to the extent that the system and the representations that the system imposes reflect the nature of the represented—the threat of the patriarchal existence. They also open the discussion to see if it is configured accordingly by depriving all kinds of resources. Undoubtedly, the representation to which feminist theory primarily draws its attention is that of a woman; they discuss how representations, the creator of which is the patriarchal system, are structured and put into circulation when it comes to women. Cinema, which has had patriarchal dynamics since its existence, is one of the most influential cultural arenas where women’s representations are created and presented by men. For this reason, how women are represented in cinema has become one of the important issues of feminist theory. S. Ruken Öztürk, in her book “Being a Woman in Cinema,”\(^{28}\) suggests that the representation of women is compatible with patriarchal ideology in cinema, which is one of the most influential art branches of our time, and that it is not only the classical narrative cinema that is identified with Hollywood but also art cinema. She proves that we may encounter (perhaps implicitly) this reality in many important works. Art cinema, which is thought to be incompatible with dominant ideology, cannot go beyond the patriarchal ideology.

It is crucial to mention the films’ plots in order to understand the aim of this paper well. The film Tereddüt tells a story about a young female psychiatrist (Şehnaz) from Istanbul starting work in a provincial town, but not far from the city. While she performs her duties on weekdays in the small town, she returns to her house in Istanbul on the weekends. She lives with her husband Cem, who seems flawless from the outside. However, she feels that there is something wrong going on inside. When a young woman (Elmas) is brought to the hospital one day, Şehnaz’s relationship with her opens a completely different door to herself; at the same time, Elmas, who is about to lose her mental balance, starts to unravel the knots in her soul with the help of Şehnaz. Gözetleme Kulesi tells a story about a young woman and a young man. Nihat works as a guard at a fire watchtower that looks over a forest. Seher, on the other hand, works as an assistant on a bus and later as a cook at a restaurant. These two people, who meet each other while running away from others, have to continue their battle together against their feelings of guilt. Toz Bezi deals with the story of two women who try to understand life between different poles of Istanbul and to carve out new ways to live. Nesrin and Hatun, who live in Istanbul, are two close

---


friends who work as cleaning ladies. While Hatun’s only dream is to buy a house in one of the rich neighborhoods she works in, Nesrin, who lives with her little daughter, tries to make sense of why her husband left the house. *Nefesim Kesilene Kadar* deals with the story of Serap, who works in a textile factory. She is obliged to live with her older sister and brother-in-law because she wants to live with her father, who is a long-distance driver. Serap realizes that while saving money to make her dream come true, her father is not as enthusiastic as her.

The key themes of the research questions are argued below:

**A male-dominated world: where are the women?**

Since it is not enough to look at the discourses of power between men and women in order to make sense of the relationships created between the sexes on a social level, it is important to examine how the private sphere and the public sphere are constructed with different economic, political, cultural, and legal principles. To what extent can women build their own autonomous identities in these films?

The film *Tereddiüt* tells a story from a different socio-cultural structure of the patriarchal order in Turkey and discusses the intersection of two different women’s lives. Şehnaz is a woman who stands on her own feet, a psychiatrist, is modern looking, and has a partner with a good social status. A woman who can be considered has characteristics opposite of those that Şehnaz carries is Elmas. Elmas is a religious-looking woman who dropped out of high school and was married to a man in his 30’s; she made a transition to another life within the borders of tradition. Elmas wakes up on the balcony at the end of a stormy night with her husband and her mother-in-law dead. Elmas, who was traumatized by that night, is hospitalized and thus crosses paths with Şehnaz. Şehnaz’s life is also not perfect—she has problems with her husband, and the film proceeds to go over the problems of these two women.

The character that director Ustaoğlu sees as the main problem is Elmas. Ustaoğlu analyzes the effect of Turkey’s overall social structure, including work and family life, on Elmas. Her mother-in-law, who is the defender of the patriarchal structure, constantly urges Elmas to be a “good wife” and a “domestic slave,” who can only do housework. Since she is but a child, who has not yet reached adulthood, has not yet been able to meet the “womanly” standard shaped by the dominant ideology. She smokes secretly on the balcony, has teenage acne, dances while cleaning, and plays around while making the bed. Although these antics of Elmas are tolerated by her husband, the work done by her mother-in-law is not appreciated.

The silent cries of Elmas, pleading “My God, please don’t let him come near” are not met with a response. Even when her husband says, “What is it? Don’t be afraid of me,” sexual intercourse inevitably involves coercion. The husband, who sees his needs as grounds for rape—which is considered legitimate within the marriage structure—demonstrates the brutality of the structure he stands for by saying “throw coal to the stove” and “go and take ablution”. As Monique
Wittig\(^{29}\) put it, the sexual experience of Elmas is not a moment of individual, subjective expression, but a social (patriarchal) institution of violence.

Elmas, who became alienated by the trauma she experienced, realizes during the therapy that she feels responsible for these experiences. She feels the reason why she was sent away from home when she was a child was neither her mother nor father; she attributes the problem to her own stupidity and the sins she has committed. Although she learns that she can be accused of murder and that her age has been forged, yet she cannot tell the truth in court because she has sworn in; although she has learned that revealing this she would gain a great advantage. However, the young girl is so faithful that she cannot protect her interests and talk about her sexuality. Although Elmas did not achieve independence as a result of this disaster, she was freed from imprisonment for a short period of time; however, she has neither an education nor a profession. Her fate will not be of her own agency, and she will either be sent to her family to wait for a new husband, or she will be kept under surveillance by the state for a while and the existing social structure will be reenacted by the state again.

Şehnaz, who does not share the same socio-cultural status as Elmas, is surrounded by a modern patriarchy. Şehnaz has a partner who constantly watches porn, tries to inflict masculine power on the body of his wife, who is an unsatisfactory partner in sexual intercourse. She is a character that has put her own feelings and satisfaction on the back burner and is devoted to the satisfaction of her man; she also doubts that she is deceived. Her husband often goes out of the city and continues to communicate on the Internet during this time. When they are together, they depict a happy, modern life in which the man prepares the meal and sets the table for dinner together. As a result of a good sexual experience Şehnaz has with a doctor who is a colleague of hers, we understand that the relationship between Şehnaz and her husband—although we don’t doubt their love for each other—is not only a good relationship. Responding to the problems of others, Şehnaz understands her unhappiness and imprisonment after the good sexual experience she had with another man. After this affair, when Cem (Şehnaz’s husband) returns from the city, the couple’s problems arise while having a meal. Cem, as an authority figure, realizes that Şehnaz who sees him as a port, will leave him. Şehnaz’s decision reveals the subtle dominance Cem has previously hidden. Despite Şehnaz’s decision to leave, he does not let Şehnaz go and the situation turns into a nightmare when Cem resorts to violence. Cem grasps the woman as if she has shackles on her feet. It prevents Şehnaz from escaping periodically during the night, but when the morning comes, Şehnaz quietly leaves the house. In the final scene of the film, Şehnaz, who goes to unknown with her car, both cries and laughs, and is able to realize at the end that she had happy moments not only because of the other man, but also because of the profession she performed for years.

In the first part of the film, we see a water scene in Şehnaz’s dream. Water appears in the film as a metaphor. Echoes of this can be found throughout the film in reoccurring imagery such as the sea, water, and waves. In the film, grayness and sensuality prevail. The sounds of water and waves as they hit the shore and the rocks can be interpreted as the tears of Şehnaz in the film. We see

that Şehnaz goes to the seashore in one scene and runs away when water comes to her feet. She is drowning in her life trying to be as free-spirited as water.

In another film, *Gözetleme Kulesi*, a silent rebellion, liberation struggle, and efforts to cling to life are demonstrated in the traditional family structure and culture of Anatolia. Seher is a university student studying literature while living with her uncle in Bolu; and she then leaves school and works as a deputy at a local bus company. It is obvious that the director Pelin Esmer tries to create a strong character who will continue her struggles at all costs (Seher, in her role as a bus deputy, is not seen at work, according to the expected role of women in the society). In the first scenes of the film, she is subject to soft harassment by the driver who is positioned higher than her. We understand that she is pregnant when we see her vomiting and the swelling of her navel; she goes to her family’s house when the bus service is canceled. In a conversation with her mother, she says she wants to go home with her four girlfriends and to help her father financially, but her mother, speaking as a bigoted spokesman, says, “What do people say about you? Your uncle has been kind to you, he has shared his food with you, don’t you like this? You should thank him, your uncle is trustworthy.” Although the mother understands the situation, she cannot express it clearly and opens the issue to the father when Seher leaves. The father’s words are almost identical. He defends the notion that her uncle’s house is the safest and most comfortable place to stay as a stray daughter of an unemployed father; the mother relays this and Seher leaves the house quietly. “The personal is political” discourse that emerged as the slogan of second wave feminism can be referenced in regard to the baby and Seher’s uncle. In the film, the audience never sees the uncle. However, the uncle is the reason for the whole situation, although he does not appear. Just like the social norms that are invisible, but guide our lives.

When the cook at the roadhouse leaves the job, a more comfortable job opportunity is created for Seher. Here she hides her pregnancy until the time of birth comes; she leaves her child and puts a necklace around her neck. As she moves towards her new life without a burden on her back, Nihat, the other main character of the film, who caused the death of his wife and child and who works in the forest surveillance business, realizes the situation and says “You are bleeding, you cannot go anywhere,” then leading her to the watchtower. Nihat gets the baby Seher left at the fountain the same night and takes it back to her, convincing her to look after the baby. Seher, who wants to escape from Nihat in the last scene of the film and start a new life, is cut short when a lightning bolt strikes at her feet with a terrible storm accompanying her. Reminiscent of Zeus’ lightning, this scene compels Seher to stay with Nihat and become a family. Even though Seher abandons the child and tries to escape later—saying that the baby is from her uncle—Nihat convinces her to stay and the camera zooms in on Seher and her baby sleeping while Nihat wakes up on a beautiful day and watches them in the final scene of the film. Seher, who wishes to stay outside of all social norms and be independent, is sentenced to be in a family with an Olympian will.

Seher finds a male influence or an advocate of masculine hegemony throughout the film while trying to fight her own struggle. She finds a job thanks to the help of her uncle, she is compared to her brother by her father, and finally she leaves everything and abandons her baby alone. For Seher, who got rid of the pressures
at the end of the film and accepted her life, freedom is limited to taking refuge with a man (Nihat).

Another film, *Toz Bezi*, tells a story about two women who live in one of the remote neighborhoods of Istanbul and work as cleaning ladies. Both are trying to make their own money. When Nesrin advises her husband that he should find a job, he leaves her, and she is left trying to hold on to her life with her child. The other female character, Hatun, works with the dream of owning a house in Moda (one of the luxury districts of Kadıköy, Istanbul) where she goes to clean, and to offer her child a good future. The two women are both the “other” in different ways: they are individuals who distinguish themselves from the rest of the society in certain identities and are separated from others. This “otherness” situation stems primarily from their ethnic origin and being women. When Hatun is compared to the Circassians in one of the houses where she goes to clean, she begins to define herself as Circassian.

Nesrin, who watches over a house with her child in the opening scene of the film, constantly searches for her husband (as we infer) by going to where he works, asking her relatives, and wishing that he return home. When she sees her husband on the street, she goes after him and calls out to him, but the man does not stop and continues on his way. Nesrin slowly understands that her husband will not come back anymore. Rent and all of the child’s care and daily needs are on the shoulders of Nesrin. Seeking an exit from this situation, Nesrin asks for help from a woman who is educated, self-sufficient, and of socio-economically higher class. Her advice to Nesrin is to find a job with insurance. When she mentions the issue of finding a job with insurance to Hatun, she gets the answer “I have insurance.” Nesrin responds, “You will stay around if Şero (Hatun’s husband) brother’s insurance leaves you.” But Hatun seems confident, and even if Hatun says that “what she cooks is eaten and what she stitches is worn,” Hatun starts to look for an insured job as well, with suspicion internally. After she starts looking for such a job, she learns that this situation does not go beyond mere advice—having only graduated primary school, it is difficult to find an insured job.

For these women, who are in the final rings of the capitalist system, the best option for shelter is the shadow of a husband. The idea that a man should be ahead of woman in hard times hits them in the face as an inevitable fact and is accepted by both women. Following this realization, Nesrin thinks that she has been left because she is not a good enough partner and she cannot sufficiently satisfy her husband sexually; this is an example of gender impositions, the unequal status of men and women, and masculine hegemony. However, the situation is similar to the abandonment of the man who cannot fulfill his “masculinity duty.” Nesrin, who does not even have the slightest power to rebel and be liberated, suddenly abandons her child and travels towards the unknown. While she doesn’t have a clue where she will go, she leaves her child with Hatun. She finds herself alienated from all the concepts surrounding her, from her child, her environment, her work, and even herself, and wants to escape quietly.

There is a hierarchical structure between Nesrin and Hatun in the film, which meticulously conveys key women’s issues. Nesrin is a woman who has just migrated to the city and has a lower level of status than Hatun. Because Hatun
has lived in the city for years and is a woman who knows almost all the codes of
the city, she better understands the lifestyles and economic structures of the
people in the houses where she works. In this sense, she also mentors Nesrin.
The dreams of the two women also shape their efforts to hold onto life and the
hierarchy between them. The hierarchy between Nesrin and Hatun and the
women whose houses they clean is important because it reveals the hierarchical
structure between the lower and middle-upper classes. It can be stated that there
is a woman-centered class labor story in the film Toz Bezi.

The last film analyzed, Nefesim Kesilene Kadar, tells the story of Serap, a young
woman working in a textile mill and living with her elder sister and brother-in-
law. She wants to start a new life with her father, who is a long-distance driver,
and to accumulate the money he earns, but her father always delays her career
change with various excuses. Serap hides her money before entering the house
because her brother-in-law and older sister are waiting for money, and when she
enters the house, they look through her bag. Serap, who grew up in the
orphanage, longs for a family; more precisely, a devout father to whom she can
lean on.

Serap works in a neighborhood of Istanbul. She tries to change her destiny and
confronts us as a powerful character, but unfortunately, her struggle remains
but a passive resistance in Turkey and many patriarchal societies. Serap stands
out in passive resistance against Sultan, who is the manager of the factory, using
a “masculine” management style (in capitalist production); she is kept under
surveillance and control by her brother-in-law, father, and many structures of
society.

Serap resists the phenomenon of alienation of women from their own bodies
within capitalist production and imposed by society. Dilber, who is her friend
from work, gives Serap’s body waxing; Serap alternates between being surprised
and liking this experience. Another resistance to social rules is her dressing
style. Her father buys the things that Serap wears. In this situation, Serap
cannot live her life as she wishes with a more intentional attitude; it can be
observed as introversion caused by a lack of belonging. The idea of exiting the
situation that Serap is in and standing on her own feet does not come to her
mind. She thinks that she can only achieve salvation with the help of her father.
Serap’s idea of personally changing something in her life only arises when she
realizes that her father is constantly lying and distracting her. She spends her
money to rent a house and start a new life. She starts to take revenge on the
people around her after she experiences destruction, she sees the man whom she
likes but to whom she never shows herself, and reports Dilber to the foreman,
Sultan. The next crisis is a young man who sees every woman as an opportunity
to have a sexual experience. One day, even though he did not approach Serap,
this man invited Serap into his car while she was walking on the road, and she
got into the car as a result of his insistence. Serap initially declines his offer of
drinking something, but when the man makes a collection along the way, she
sees money in the envelope, changes her mind, and drinks something. The duo
goes into a nook in an underground entertainment place and spends time here.
Taking advantage of the man’s thoughtlessness and the influence of alcohol, she
takes the money from the car parked on the side street, then breaks his glass,
and continues as if she was unaware of anything. Serap then goes to exact her
last great revenge on her father. She considers her father the sole source of her existence and solely responsible for all these experiences. The father claims to take some kind of goods abroad, and comes back two months later. But Serap no longer believes in these lies; she knows that he is smuggling historical artifacts, and makes a denouncement to the police.

A girl under the age of 18 who stayed in the same orphanage as Serap comes to the Serap’s workplace. Serap teaches her the job, and at first does not want to show her acquaintance with her, rejecting her past. Serap also gradually gains self-confidence as a form of revenge. While we didn’t see her laugh throughout the movie, at the end when she teaches the new girl a job, a smile appears on her face as a sign of pride. There is no longer a male figure to hold on to and she has decided to stand on her own feet. But she finds salvation not through woman’s liberation, but by being in charge like Sultan. She has decided to abide by the masculine capitalist order and has gradually begun to accumulate the necessary skills to rise within the system.

**Does women’s cinema exist in contemporary Turkey?**

Hülya Uğur Tanrıöver argues that the issue of difference in cinema and whether the film is a result of the director’s gender or sexual orientation is one of the main concerns of feminist film work. On the other hand, Alison Butler’s definition of women’s cinema is worth discussing. Butler describes women’s cinema as films made by women or interested in women’s issues. Stating that there is no genre or movement in the history of these movies, Butler also says that women’s cinema does not have national borders. She calls them films that do not have aesthetic specificity but discuss cultural traditions and engage in political discussions.

This study, based on the films of contemporary female directors in Turkish cinema, aims to discuss whether the term “women’s cinema” exists (as a counter-cinema) as Johnston mentions. Claire Johnston argues that in mainstream films, women’s life experiences are not conveyed and that there is an ideological reason for their representation in traditional gender roles. Johnston states that representation is not only a mirror of real life but also an ideological indicator.

Johnston states that women are standardized, and she suggests an entertaining cinema that challenges traditions. In mainstream cinema, women appear as an extension of the male gaze discussed by Mulvey and Johnston; she criticizes the role attributed to women in films at this point. Johnston states that despite the emphasis on women in films, women do not exist as women. However, Johnston urges for women’s cinema that uses the film as a political tool and as entertainment. Johnston emphasizes the importance of developing a cinema that opposes and questions the dominant cinema and its male-dominant base. She terms it avant-garde and counter-cinema, which relate to left-wing cinema.

---

When examining the films of these contemporary Turkish women directors, it is of course possible to mention women’s cinema. Especially in the narrative, females are the main characters and their struggle is narrated in a narrative language. Referring to Johnston, the audience is somehow included in the narrative of these films. However, in regard to the struggle of women, these films do not have “amusing” features. They show us only social realistic features. This is because the films included in this study illustrate womanhood in Turkey and women’s quest for freedom in a realistic language. The films show the oppressed (women) in terms of their stories, and by documenting this oppression in a fictional language, the events and places in these films reflect the truth. However, women in these contemporary Turkish women’s films are not portrayed as strong and independent. Since the (patriarchal) society does not allow them to be independent individuals, women in these films are constructed as the “other”; in this sense, the female audience does not want to identify with the women characters in these films. However, as Özdoym stated in his comprehensive study, the change of female representations in the media shows that these categories of representation are not essential; on the contrary, they are produced cyclically and historically. At this point, women’s narratives, which were represented through the masculine gaze from the 1950’s to the 2000’s, have increased with the shift in the masculine position of the camera that came in the 2000’s. In short, female narratives and representations change with the changes the masculine gaze undergoes. The films produced by recent Turkish female directors can in fact be called women’s films.

Conclusion
This study discusses gender inequality and the situation of women in Turkey in four different films. Although there are individual differences among women, it can be stated that society is the biggest obstacle in women’s emancipation. The films analyzed show that every individual in the society is rooted in the dominant culture and patriarchal ideology. Based on these films, it can be said that women are under the control of men in fighting their independence and emancipation. Women remain in the male-dominated system and it is hard to become aware of their own selves. Although women are struggling for their independence, there is male dominance that either melts into the system or absorbs their problems. Women who have achieved economic equality with men also realize that they remain trapped in the circle with men. Women’s awareness on another life and their desire to act for it may return to an unequal demonstration of power, or women accept the existing system somehow. In this context, being an individual woman is only a discourse. The concept of individual freedom should be reconsidered for women who think they have achieved this. The rights—economic and political equations—obtained seem to be bestowed only as part of the quiet share of the patriarchal order. Through these films, it is necessary to understand the desire of female characters to surrender themselves to a free female myth. This can be explained by the necessity of all female characters to achieve subjectivity, that is, to be a class member, to be an individual. Women perceive life differently than men due to the pressure they face in the male

dominance of Turkish culture. For this reason, it is natural for female filmmakers to create different identities and discourses. Female directors approach women’s problems differently than male directors do.

Bibliography
Traditional Gender Roles Enacted by Men and Women in Azerbaijani Cinema

Research Article

Zumrud Jalilova
Educator, Bristol University
jalilova.zumrud@gmail.com

Contemporary Southeastern Europe, 2020, 7(2), 80-96

DOI 10.25364/02.7:2020.2.6
This article aims to demonstrate traditional roles and relationships depicted in Azerbaijani films in order to dismantle and address some of the alarming gender attitudes and mind-sets that continue to have a toxic effect on lives of the nation. Nowadays television, radio, and the Internet are major sources of information, and film is inevitably a very powerful form of extremely popular art. People learn from movies and media more than from any other source of information. Therefore, if we want to understand our society and its gender problems, we have to understand the images and stories that people encounter. This article analyzes scenarios with (often disparaging) portrayals of women that contribute to the under-representation of females in positions of leadership and build stereotypical expectations. Scenarios where roles are enacted by males and females showcase men in traditional masculine stereotypes while women tend to be in purely decorative portrayals or in mother roles, which is the ultimate feminine achievement in Azerbaijan. The article provides comparative analysis of widely watched “classic” movies along with modern-day motion pictures directed by young filmmakers in the attempt to bring positive changes. It is the objective of this article to present films directed in different times that distinctly demonstrate the negative impact of traditional gender roles and its molding effect.

**Keywords:** Traditional gender roles, cinema, media, male gaze, gender stereotypes, honor, women as objects.

**Introduction**

Movies have an increasingly powerful effect on gender beliefs and attitude development in people of all ages because of the conspicuous high rates of its consumption. It is the message and the messenger. Stereotypical images in movies certainly impact our culture, economy, politics, and national discourse, but most of all they shape children’s brains, relationships, and emotions. Along with advertisements, television shows, video games, and social media, films affect people’s minds and behaviours 24/7. Therefore, when it comes to representing gender on screen one should be aware of its damage, as it is a deceptive act that can ruin relationships and the
emotional well-being of people. Telling stories that are similar to those that people experience in real life leads to taught behaviour, subconscious consumption, and memorization of information, attitudes, and reactions–sometimes without questioning them–and subsequently repeating them. In addition, there is more to be explored in the gender-specific content featured in popular culture like music videos, lyrics, and film soundtracks. Biased and sexist media images, videos, and lyrics: all of these together have a profound impact on gender relations, especially in conservative societies where it enables young women and men to act in gender specific roles and ways, which form certain prejudices during their childhood and consequently carry through to adulthood.

Figure 1: Movie poster: A Cloth Peddler, 1945.

Source: Azerbaijan State Translation Center.

Azerbaijan as a patriarchal society

“You cannot be what you cannot see.” We rely on stories, examples, and leaders or, in the most basic form, images to inform us about who we are and what our potential is; without these we are left unaware and unable to be that which we cannot see. Ultimately, people tend to incorporate gender clichés presented in cinema into their own concepts of reality, forming perceptions of themselves and consistently behaving in a manner in that matches stereotyped images that are ubiquitous everywhere. Television remains the main source of information publicly available and accessible in Azerbaijan. People receive and reflect on the information heard and watched on TV. By briefly investigating the ways in which gender roles are enacted on-screen, I hope to dismantle alarming stereotypical imageries and values that continue to define societal gender beliefs, norms, responsibilities, behaviors, and attitudes. Azerbaijani society is defined by ideas of masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice to sustain a sense of nationhood that upholds to a traditional and—in some of the more conservative parts of the country like the south of Azerbaijan—religious lifestyle. In those

2 Dahlén, Micael / Rosengren, Sara and Edith Smit. 2014. Why the Marketer’s View Matters as Much as the Message: Speaking Down to the Consumer Speaks Badly to a Brand’s image. Journal of Advertising Research 54(3), 304-12.
traditional families, men have more influence in all measured decision-making spheres, except in areas with greater female participation, such as taking care of children and the elderly. The society there is crafted with the presumption that mainly men should have the authority to make the decisions and be breadwinners, providing for their families and parents, and women are meant to be wives, mothers, and caretakers. These roles are very gender specific and any type of “misconduct” leads to condemning discussions and conflicts within families and society. News media, reports, and research conducted by international organizations like United Population Fund (UNFPA) frequently show the dire consequences of these gender stereotypes, mentality, and taught behaviors that develop into certain type of interactions and expectations in Azerbaijan, often leading to conflicts, anger issues, sex-selective abortions (son preference), early and child marriages (virginity cult), domestic violence, and honor killings. It is no surprise that Azerbaijan is a very patriarchal society loyal to its gender specific roles for men and women, considering that in the 120-year-old history of Azerbaijani cinema male and female characters have been presented to the public through men’s lenses and predominantly with their participation. This includes male characters mainly depicted as hyper-masculine individuals in the role of protector, provider and decision-maker, and females as secondary characters in the role of victim, mother, and wife. Men are often pictured as dominant, victorious, and in elevated positions, while women are pictured in more helpless, submissive positions. Messages about “feminine” and “masculine” behaviours are embedded in advertising, media, news, educational materials, and so forth.

Looking at a number of movies screened since the 19th century, only a limited number of movies feature female protagonists and demonstrate their individuality, nature, and concerns. For example, only four films—Gilanian Girl, Sevil, Ismat (Ismat is a female name), and Almaz (Almaz is a female name)—depicted the path of women’s spiritual and political development between 1923 and 1931. It is worth mentioning that films like Sevil and Ismat were vessels of Soviet propaganda that aimed to unveil and modernize Eastern women, thus spreading the USSR’s colonial power. Soon after becoming part of the Soviet Union, one of the main themes of Azerbaijani cinema was the emancipation of women and the promotion of their rights. However, soon after gaining its independence, the country became more conservative towards women. If women were previously portrayed as strong and independent individuals without being subjected to patriarchal norms and their particular honor code, later in history they were presented to the public as subordinate wives, daughters, and mothers. Although the male gaze has been dominant in art and subsequently film throughout its whole history, the situation has started changing in the last 30 years, albeit at a very slow pace. Nevertheless, women continue to embody one

---


4 UNFPA and SCFWCA, _Gender equality and gender relations in Azerbaijan_, 12-17.


of these roles: mother/daughter, wife, innocent love interest, slut (a woman nearby that intentionally or due to certain circumstances has to sleep with other men; interestingly, she usually dies in the end), etc. With that said, I aim to bring to attention some of the roles enacted by men and women in media consumed by the Azerbaijani population that continue to shape and influence the relationship in families, as well as the mind-set and gender attitudes in society at large.

**Purity of women and honor of men as vital values**

One of the key aspects a girl should act to defend in Azerbaijan is her purity, which along with certain standards of behavior and appearance, also means her physical privacy. As you can see on Figure 1, early marriages and prioritization of protecting the reputation of girls continue to take place in Azerbaijan and damage the lives of young people. To highlight the peculiar and petrifying wedding culture based on the aforementioned values, it is worth mentioning a 14-year-old Lerik girl who was married in August 2018 to her rapist, reportedly to save her own honor and that of her family. In 2011, UNICEF estimated that about 11 percent of Azerbaijani girls marry before their 18th birthday.

Figure 2: Azerbaijan: Getting Married at 17.

Azerbaijani media continues to protect the mentality that a woman’s body and honor belong to a family (male members) and consequently to the man who will marry her regardless of her age (be it an 18-year-old girl or 40-year-old woman). If a woman leaves the house of her father (ata evi) and starts living in a romantic relationship, or if she is divorced, society would slander and stigmatize her, labelling her a slut (“fahişə” or “qəhbə”) and not accepting her as part of the family and treating her as a member. The word is widely used to describe any type of women who dates a man and dares to choose him as an intimate partner, especially after being divorced. Parents would oppose such an affair of a son or daughter in the described position, as it would be considered to be dishonoring

---


a family and disrupting its reputation. Film writers and directors develop plots that consist of these life narratives devised and presented in the national film industry, where scripts often include different forms of violence either from the parents or from a man. As an example, one of the most famous movies in the country produced in the 1990’s, *Tahmina* directed by Rasim Ojagov, depicts the love affair between Zaur, a man from an affluent family, and Tahmina, a news presenter who is divorced and is doing her best to survive in a conservative society with that social stigma.

Figure 3: Movie scene: Tahmina, 1993.

Source: Azerbaijan State Film Fund.

Figure 4. Movie scene: Tahmina, 1993.

Source: Azerbaijan State Film Fund.

Zaur’s family condemns this romantic relationship and tries to divert him into an arranged marriage with a daughter of a family friend, who they know and
approve. As a result of social pressure, slut-shaming and continuous phone calls from Zaur’s mother to Tahmina accusing her of seducing her son eventually form a crack in their relationship. Zaur marries Firangiz under the societal and family pressure, whereas Tahmina dies from heavy drinking. When the couple returns from the honeymoon, Zaur’s brother-in-law breaks the news to him. Albeit devastated by the news, the final scene of the movie shows him taking out his wife’s grocery list and driving to the market, implying that life goes on and that a woman’s life is not as valued if she does not comply with the societal criteria of “purity.” The “slut” always dies, even if she is as innocent as Tahmina. This is a classical film trope and one of the signifiers of the male gaze in Azerbaijani culture and film industry. Analyzing the plot of the above-described movie, one can highlight the role of the traditional mentality that prevails: one that values honor and women’s purity over everything, even at the cost of their children’s happiness or someone else’s life. Since the 1990’s, the idea of a traditional family model and “purity” of girls has not changed much; on the contrary, the number of suicides keeps growing for the same old reasons: arranged marriages, women’s chastity, and societal pressure. On the other hand, some young filmmakers make attempts and efforts to change the discourse by questioning this notion and revealing some of the multiple complex and contradictory ways in which gender roles and expectations are placed and perceived. This trend is also due to high rates of honor killings, divorces, and instances of domestic violence widespread in the country, which recently have been reported by the media and addressed by activists a lot more. More recent movies like *The Curtain* (*Parda*, 2016) directed by Emil Guliyev and *Second Bullet* (*İkinci Gül*, 2017) address the problems of arranged marriages that girls are forced into against their will (often with violence), slut-shaming, and virginity, and are screened in national, local and international cinemas.

Figure 5. Movie poster: The Second Bullet, 2017.

Source: Natig Rasul
The very interesting plot of *Second Bullet*, directed by Natig Rasul, takes place in a remote village of Azerbaijan. Weddings in the village cause intrigue and excitement as the virginity of a bride and honor of the family are unveiled to the community. In this case, this is done in a very peculiar way. The long-lasting tradition of the village is arranged to inform everyone on the virginity of the bride by loading the gun with two bullets and shooting into the sky on the night of marriage: two shots in the air means she is a virgin, and one means she is not. The latter would cause trouble in a family, disrupting its reputation and respect. In this movie, the bride turns out to be a virgin, but the groom fails to shoot the second bullet because the gun malfunctions. Misinterpretation of this in the village rapidly leads to false allegations on bride’s honor. The bride’s father, hearing one shot, decides to kill his daughter with an axe from his garden. Meanwhile, another interesting scenario is shown in the movie when men condemn a prostitute in the village (who they all presumably see from time to time) but in the end seek help from her, despite belittling and disgracing her. She is the person who offers a solution to them: they get a bullet from her, and rush to load the gun that they left on the terrace. The movie finishes unexpectedly when the bride takes the gun and shoots herself with the same second bullet that they failed to fire in the air. Another interesting detail of the film is that we never see or hear the bride. We see her family, the groom, and the villagers, but not her. The only noise she makes is the sound of the bullet when she decides to commit suicide, serving as her voice and a metaphor for the value of young women in the community. She is heard only when she dies as a victim of violence. The director leaves the audience to think about the actions and reactions, false alerts, and gossip that people impose and spread while not knowing or caring about the different underlying reasons behind things, as well as they way it can influence one’s life in the most dreadful way. The movie raises the question of the virginity cult preserved and controlled by men in Azerbaijani society, which puts pressure on everyone but most importantly on women, who are trapped in the general presumptions and gender norms that limit their life choices and chances.

It is worth mentioning that the public in Azerbaijan actively discuss and gossip about the private lives of people and intervene in their relationships, but avoid speaking up or acting against domestic violence issues. Young feminists who arrange peaceful walkouts face brutality and violence from the police, whereas no measures are taken to stop extremely unethical and sexist talks in the media and on TV Programs that spread hatred and justify violence against women. Additionally, the public condemns and criticizes people who proactively protest, especially with the recent walkouts organized to address the issue of domestic violence.

In this contradictory context, there is a clear cultural message on gender inequality in Azerbaijan, which is “the personal is not political.” Another great example is the movie from 1981 called *A Closed Door* (*Bağlı Qapı*) also known as *A Woman Behind the Green Door* directed by Rustam Ojagov, which reflects the ignorance of society towards the violence against women. It involves a man who

---

just returned home from a mistaken imprisonment and his neighbors. He witnesses violence happening behind the doors of his neighbor and chooses to act. Eventually he gets detained by police for intervening in the family and trying to protect the wife of the abuser. Unexpectedly, all the neighbors come to police station to defend him, as they all understand their mistakes and that he did the right thing to stop the continuous violence against this woman.

Figure 6: Movie scene: A Closed Door, 1981

These aggressive depictions of characters and their roles reflect the lifestyle and traditions blindly followed regardless of dire outcomes. Only few Azerbaijani
movies address the issue of violence against women, arranged marriages, and
virginity in a challenging manner, as it is still valid and highly controlled by the
patriarchy. Virginal obsession and the myth of purity are nothing new, though.
Virginity is historically rooted in establishing paternity and is entrenched in
male ownership. Gendered portrayals of controlled sexuality, monogamy, and
purity in Azerbaijani cinema continue to influence the interactions and behavior
between men and women, and the way this narrative is articulated through
popular culture has not made much progress.
According to Sevda Sultanova’s research, In the Name of God (Bismillah) was
the first movie that discussed the issue of women’s freedom in Azerbaijan back
in 1925. Zeynab, one of the main characters, does not reveal the fact that she
was raped by a mullah, and then her family forces her to marry another man.\textsuperscript{11}
On the wedding night, when her husband learns that Zeynab is not a virgin, he
expels her from his house. Zeynab, while rejected by everybody, is caught by
Musavat (a political organization developed into party, currently an opposition
party in Azerbaijan) soldiers and is forced into servitude on the plantations.
Afterwards she joins her brother Jafar, who is a Bolshevik, in his struggle
against the government.\textsuperscript{12} At the end of the movie, the sexual assault by the
mullah is revealed and he is sentenced to imprisonment, leading to restoration
of women’s rights in cases of rape after the establishment of the Soviet
government.

Figure 8: Movie poster: Bismillah, 1925

\textsuperscript{11} Kazimzade, Aydin. 1997 The Pre-Soviet Era: Celebrating 100 Years in Film, Not 80. Azerbaijan
\textsuperscript{12} Suleymanova, Female Characters.
Women as Objects

Another traditional and linguistic legacy that Azerbaijan continues to sustain and value in the marriage context is the “price” paid for a bride. “Buying a wife” is the way to say a man marries a woman. The word “buy” – “ărva’d almaq” or “mən səni alram” is widely used in the marriage context, which characterizes women as objects and attaches a price tag to them. Objectification is now a well-known notion central to feminist theory. *Ownership* is the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold) and includes the idea of treating a person as an object, which can be seen in well-preserved Azerbaijani traditions. Moreover, if a woman is not “pure” (a virgin) she is considered a damaged good and her life and reputation in the society consequently do not cost much; there is a feeling of an unfair commercial transaction in the eyes of the “buying” family that is openly displayed and used to justify pressure against and opposition to man’s choice of a partner.

The situation described above is very problematic and becomes obvious when experiencing life in the social world. For example, aiming to quantify a woman’s nature following the above-mentioned mentality in patriarchal societies (like ours, according to Catharine MacKinnon) is highly ambiguous and precarious. MacKinnon believes that similar societies tend to believe that women are submissive and object-like (and men are those who objectify women). This means that one might be convinced that women are by their nature submissive and object-like. It should be noted here that following MacKinnon, “men” and “women” refer to gender categories, which are socially (not biologically) defined: one is a woman or a man by virtue of one’s social position. However, the belief that women are naturally submissive and object-like is false, since women have not been made to be like that but rather taught.

One of the most famous and most watched Azerbaijani movies, *A Cloth Peddler (Arshin Mal Alan)*, is based on a comic, romantic operetta written by Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov in 1913 that openly depicts the outdated traditions and restrictions set by the society and aims to ridicule them. The movie is about a young man, Asgar, who is a successful merchant that wishes to marry someone he loves—except tradition does not allow him to choose his own bride. Matchmakers customarily arrange marriages and it is impossible for young men and women to see or glance at each other as the latter are secluded in their homes and never come out unveiled or unaccompanied. Therefore, Asgar wanders from house to house pretending to be a poor peddler who sells fabric in order to meet someone he could fall for and marry. Peddlers were allowed to come in and see women unveiled while they view and choose their fabrics. Eventually, Asgar meets Gülchohre, the beautiful daughter of Sultan bey, who is an impoverished merchant now. Asgar falls in love with her and decides that she is the one he wants to marry. Asgar offers Sultan bey the chance to marry his aunt who is a widow, knowing that he favors her; in exchange, he asks for the father.

---

to approve his union with Gulchohre. Sultan bey, feeling disrespected, kicks him out and shouts outs behind them that he would never approve the union.

*Figure 9: Movie poster: Arshin Mal Alan, 1945.*

Gulchohre too falls in love with Asgar, but knows him as a peddler and not a merchant, and knows her father would not allow her to marry a cloth peddler. Gulchohre is upset when her father informs her about the upcoming wedding with another man offered by a matchmaker. She begs her father not to force her into this marriage but he continues to be rigid. Gulchohre decides to commit suicide to avoid this marriage, but Asgar comes in the last minute and reveals his plan of convincing her father to approve their union with the help of his friend who is the matchmaker. Finding out that he is indeed a wealthy man, and also convinced by the matchmaker whom he respects, the father agrees and the two eventually get married.

The operetta was ahead of its time. The author wanted to illustrate the family drama around marriage rules and expectations that are outdated and damaging. The movie includes dialogues and music that feature the importance of men’s money and occupation and scenarios showing the secondary role of women who cannot oppose or change anything decided by and between men. Gulchohra’s character is an example of thousands of young women, men, boys, and girls forced into arranged marriages across the country.

Another tragic destiny of a woman is depicted in *The Pomegranate Orchard (Nar bağısı)*, a drama directed by Ilgar Najaf in 2017. *The Pomegranate Orchard* features the story of an old man, who lives together with his grandson and daughter-in-law in a decrepit house amidst a huge pomegranate orchard. His son, who has left the family and gone to Russia, returns home again and reopens old wounds by bringing back forgotten bitter memories with his arrival. Despite
that, his family accepts him and tries to build a relationship again. It ends with his son selling the house and leaving again, as he has another family in Russia, and kidnapping the daughter because of his debts. The movie reflects tragic stories and lives of women living in villages and rural areas whose husbands go to Russia to earn money, end up having another family, and sometimes never returning back. This means a woman is left with a child or children and elderly family members to look after. This burden on women also derives from the fact that they are forced to believe in a religious marriage ceremony that is not legally recognized. This is due to a local belief that religious ceremonies with the Quran hold a lot of significance, regardless if an imam (a worship leader of a mosque) is present or not. The use of the Quran in the ceremony appears to give a symbolic value to wedding and make it a legitimate transaction, even though it is not officially registered. As a consequence, this tradition leads to dire consequences for women with children and no source of income like in the case of Sara, the burdened character from The Pomegranate Orchard.

Figure 10: Movie poster: They Whisper but Sometimes the Scream, 2019.

Source: Visionsdureel.com

A different modern-day picture is the movie directed by Lala Aliyeva called They Whisper but Sometimes They Scream. The director elaborates on an idea based on mythology, where a lake is taken as a feminine symbol and a mirror for self-contemplation as well as a chance for revelation. The lake is surrounded by three trees adorned with fabrics woven by women residing in the neighboring Urva village, who come to collect water from the lake and ward off their sorrows by making nature their ally. It shows the life of some women in the village who come to that lake to share their grief, say prayers, and whisper their fears in hope to recover and to find peace and spiritual relief for the troubles they experience. Those troubles are often violence or other abuse in a domestic setting that they would not share or report, but rather tell to the water to keep it safe and secret; hoping that one day, it will absorb their pain. At the conclusion, one can notice a shift in the storytelling approach: the women are not playing secondary or passive roles but rather let their voices and troubles to be heard. It is also crucial to highlight the visions and approaches of modern filmmakers who do not use satiric but rather tragic imageries and scenarios to

17 Wallwork and Ibrahimova, Azerbaijan: Getting Married at 17.
reflect on the gender issues in Azerbaijan and to shake the foundations of these gender beliefs and norms.

Maternal and Paternal Images in the Cinema
One of the most powerful symbols that resonate across religious, nationalist, and popular discourses within the Azerbaijani context is that of motherhood. In addition to the ideology of purity, decorative roles, and compulsory heterosexuality, Azerbaijani cinema and television presents gender through images of sanctity symbolized by mother figures and the respected rigidity symbolized by father figures. The latter are presented in films as rational figures who are often grumpy, serious, and hard to please. A father has to act as a head of the family and provide for it. A mother on the other hand has to be sacrificing and emotional and make sure that everyone is fed. Analyzing parental gender division in Azerbaijani families, one can notice the model where women enact the role of homemaker and peacemaker, and men enact the role of provider and decision-maker.

In those traditional families, men have more influence in all measured decision-making spheres except in child rearing, because it is considered a mother’s job as she is naturally expected to be a caretaker. Motherhood is considered the ultimate sacred role of a woman and her predominant function in society, compared to fatherhood, which is not publicly assessed, measured, or valued as much. This presently results in many dire consequences for all members of society, only benefitting and feeding the ego of old-fashioned people who use the mentality as an excuse to demonstrate their power and control over people’s lives and freedoms. International Women’s Day is also another time to celebrate a “womanhood” in Azerbaijan, highlighting her reproductive function and duty in front of the public and government, harshly neglecting infertile women and men, people with health issues, gays, lesbians, transsexuals, and women past menopause.18

A consequential policy of such division is the parental leave policy. Fathers in Azerbaijan can take only fourteen days of unpaid paternity leave, whereas mothers are privileged to take three years of maternity leave. Consequently, men are taught and expected to be only helpers when they choose to take care of their own child. Presenting it as a privilege and positive discrimination against men, the government sustains the harmful traditions and gender specific roles that hinder the country’s development and encroaches on freedom of choice. This gender blind policy leaves women and men in vulnerable positions, with women often being denied work opportunities and career growth as well as no maternity benefits, and men not experiencing early fatherhood and committing to it.

With both genders experiencing different types of pressure in patriarchal society, they also demonstrate a different type of power within the family. Within Azerbaijani patriarchal and familial context, women have varying degrees of power depending on the relationship role in which they are positioned and if they are a mother to a son or sons. Azerbaijani women are revered and are awarded much power as mothers, in contrast to being wives, where they are positioned as subordinate and subservient. A common phrase such as “I want seven sons and only one daughter, a bride” is an example of social norms related to higher male authority and female obedience that strongly correlate with multiple forms of gender-based violence, including sex-selective abortion.\(^{19}\) The most recent report on this, Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Azerbaijan: Current Trends and Opportunities by the UNFPA, show the results of a survey where male and female respondents were able to provide explanations for those who choose to have a sex-selective abortion. According to respondents, “the girl would be a heavy load to bear for the family” and “the girl cannot stand on her feet freely; she is not independent.” They also mentioned that “every man wants the firstborn to be a boy” and “in some cases daughters grow up to be promiscuous.”\(^{20}\) As a result, both the state and UNFPA reports show an alarming sex ratio of 116–114 boys to 100 girls in 2014–2017.\(^{21}\) The high ratio of male to female births is indicative of sex selection that is biased against female births. Another common phrase, “paradise is under mothers’ feet” (“Cənnət anaların ayaqları altındadır”) indicates the respect people pay to a mother’s role in one’s life, a sort of pressure put on women used to remind them that they can earn and deserve it only by becoming a mother. To better illustrate: women are portrayed as sacrificing and caring mothers. These interpretations confirm that although Azerbaijani cinema portrays women as self-sacrificing, they also figure as “indestructible when it comes to protecting” their children, particularly sons. A movie from 1963, Where is Ahmad? ("Əhməd haradadır?"), includes a scene

\(^{19}\) N.N., Ibrahimova, Sitara. 2013. A Boy is OK, a Girl is NOT. YouTube, 7 July 2013 (accessed: 15 February 2020).
\(^{20}\) UNFPA, Gender Equality and Gender Relations in Azerbaijan, 53-54.
where Ahmad’s (the son’s) mother stands up to her husband and shouts that “Ahmad’s mother is not dead so that you can hit him!” which means she is there to protect him as long as she is alive and would not let anyone hurt him. The movie has an interesting plot; it involves Ahmad and Leyla, a couple who attempt to oppose the old traditions and customs and run away from home to avoid the arranged marriages that their parents offer. Along the way, they meet each other and fall in love, and it turns out that their parents initially planned to arrange the marriage between these very two. The movie demonstrates the power division between husband and wife and illustrates the protest of young people against the pressure and control of the family and society.

In Azerbaijani media, women are portrayed as both supplicants in a male-dominated world and as powerful and deified mother figures. Such paradoxical positioning of the feminine provides one source for the ambivalences and contradictions around Azerbaijani womanhood. Several prominent Azerbaijani films narrate this ambivalence.

Similar interpretations of gender in relation to images of nationhood resonate across other movies. For these narrators, gender becomes an important site for cultural difference. Shame, patience, sexual loyalty, and even deference are presented as signifying the “Azerbaijan-ness” of Azerbaijani women. This difference is marked primarily through the control of sexuality and the construction of the pure/chaste woman. Commercial Azerbaijani cinema has also been a masculine domain, which inevitably promoted the depiction of women as objects instead of subjects. In other words, women were primarily seen as “decorative characters” based on their ability to function as objects of male desire, fantasy, and business.

Conclusions
Azerbaijani media is a crucial site for exploring how gender division and roles are communicatively constituted. While doing my research I came across only two articles that describe women’s roles and issues in the national cinema: Alia Dadashova’s “From a Prostitute to a Stepmother” (Fahişədan əqey anaya qədər), and Sevda Suleymanova’s “Female Characters in Azerbaijani Cinema” (Azərbaycan kinosunda qadın obrazı). This also demonstrates a very low interest of the public in female characters, roles, and their concerns.

In this article, I examined famous movies that have echoed in modern society for years in which women are implicated in discourses of motherhood and virginity and men in discourses of guardianship and authority as head of the family. I attempted to unpack some of the contestations and contradictions inherent in the representations and portrayals of Azerbaijani womanhood and manhood in relation to the maternal-feminine, sexuality, and the ideal-masculine. My involvement with researching cinema, gender, and media in society emerges in relation to both my ambivalent consumption of Azerbaijani media and a conscious, reflective recognition of its centrality in constituting subjectivities in

---

23 Suleymanova, Female Characters in Azerbaijani Cinema.
our community. As the title states, this paper explores how the feminine and masculine are construed as I outline their roles, and uses this framing to convey the multiple layers of rampant sexism and patronage as well as strictly defined hyper-masculinity.

Screening movies and organizing public events on social and political aspects of gender imbalance and issues should raise important questions. However, simply hoping that these movies and images will hold people back from treating girls and women in a barbarian way is not effective on its own without laws and implementation in place. The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan (12 November 1995) prohibits discrimination based on sex and states that “the rights of husband and wife are equal,” and after signing the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Azerbaijan passed a Law on State Guarantees of Equal Rights for Women and Men in 2006. This action set the legal foundation for gender equality. In 2010, Azerbaijan passed a Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence.24 Despite some of the policy and efforts on the legal level, implementation of the laws has been poor, and mechanisms and services are not well developed and effective. Nevertheless, with the active participation and support from the international organizations among others such as the European Union, the United Nations, the German Corporation for International Cooperation, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Asian Development Bank, Azerbaijan is slowly taking steps towards positive changes.

Bibliography
A Cloth Peddler (dir. Boris Svetlov, 1917).
Bismillah (dir. Abbas Mirza Sharifzadeh, 1925).
Gilanian Girl (dir. Leo Moore, 1928).
Ismat (dir. Mikhail Mikayilov, 1934).


Pomegranate Orchard (dir. Ilgar Najaf, 2017).

Second Bullet (dir. Natig Rasul, 2017)


They Whisper but Sometimes They Scream (dir. Lala Aliyeva, 2019).


Where is Ahmad (dir. Adil Isgandarov, 1963).