



History, Power, and Incomplete Epistolarity in Post-Soviet Cinema¹

Seth Graham²

Submitted: 08th September 2019. Approved: 28th October 2019

Abstract. This article examines epistolary enunciation in the recent cinema of former Soviet republics (Russia, Ukraine, and Estonia), and in particular how filmmakers use the letter device in their engagements with their nations' past, present, and future. After discussing the post-Soviet epistolary through the prism of the region's history, with reference to Altman (1982) and Naficy (2001), the article analyses the device in specific films. Recent examples often follow the Soviet-era model of the letter as a medium for contact not only (or primarily) between individuals, but also for more abstract kinds of contact, between distinct realms of human existence and consciousness: East and West, Public and Private, Life and Death/Afterlife, Freedom and Captivity, Science and Superstition, Authenticity and Imposture, History and Contemporaneity. The meanings created via epistolary efforts to bridge such gaps – by the characters and the filmmakers – are central to the post-Soviet cinematic project of national and individual introspection.

Key Words: epistolary film; Russian cinema; Ukrainian cinema; Estonian cinema; Soviet cinema

[es] Historia, poder y epistolaridad incompleta en el cine postsoviético

Resumen. Este artículo examina la enunciación epistolar en el cine reciente de las antiguas repúblicas soviéticas (Rusia, Ucrania y Estonia) y, en particular, cómo los cineastas utilizan el dispositivo de la carta en sus compromisos con el pasado, presente y futuro de sus naciones. Tras abordar el epistolario postsoviético a través del prisma histórico de la región, en relación con los trabajos de Altman (1982) y Naficy (2001), el artículo analiza este dispositivo en películas específicas. Los ejemplos recientes a menudo siguen el modelo de la carta de la era soviética como medio de contacto no solo (o principalmente) entre individuos, sino también para tipos de contacto más abstractos, entre esferas distintas de la existencia y la conciencia humana: Oriente y Occidente, Público y Privado, Vida y Muerte/Más allá, Libertad y Cautiverio, Ciencia y Superstición, Autenticidad e Impostura, Historia y Contemporaneidad. Los significados creados a través de los esfuerzos epistolares para superar esos vacíos –por parte de los personajes y los cineastas– son fundamentales para el proyecto cinematográfico postsoviético de introspección nacional e individual.

Palabras clave: cine epistolar; cine ruso; cine ucraniano; cine estonio; cine soviético

[fr] Histoire, pouvoir et épistolarité incomplète dans le cinéma post-soviétique

Résumé. Cet article examine l'énonciation épistolaire dans le cinéma récent des anciennes républiques soviétiques (Russie, Ukraine et Estonie) et, en particulier, la manière dont les cinéastes utilisent le dis-

¹ I am grateful to Rachel Morley, Phil Cavendish, Uilleam Blacker, and especially Julian Graffy for suggesting several Russian and Soviet epistolary films and literary works of which I was unaware.

² University College London (UK)

E-mail: s.graham@ucl.ac.uk

positif de la lettre dans leurs engagements avec le passé, le présent et le futur de leurs nations. Après avoir abordé l'épistolaire post-soviétique à travers le prisme historique de la région, par rapport aux travaux de Altman (1982) et Naficy (2001), l'article analyse ce dispositif dans des films spécifiques. Les exemples récents suivent souvent le modèle de la lettre de l'ère soviétique en tant que moyen de contact non seulement (ou principalement) entre individus, mais aussi pour des types de contacts plus abstraits, entre des sphères distinctes de l'existence et de la conscience humaines : Est et Ouest, Public et Privé, Vie et Mort/Au-delà, Liberté et Captivité, Science et Superstition, Authenticité et Imposture, Histoire et Contemporanéité. Les significations créées par les efforts épistolaires pour dépasser ces vides – de la part des personnages et des cinéastes – sont au cœur du projet cinématographique post-soviétique d'introspection nationale et individuelle.

Mots clés : cinéma épistolaire ; cinéma russe ; cinéma ukrainien ; cinéma estonien ; cinéma soviétique

Summary. 1. Introduction. Epistolary Dissidence in the Post-Soviet Space. 2. *Forbidden Empire* (2014) by Oleg Stepchenko. 3. *You Won't Leave Me...* (2006) by Alla Surikova. 4. *In the Crosswind* (2014) by Martti Helde. 5. *Mira* (2018) by Denis Shabaev. 6. Conclusion. 7. References.

How to cite this article. Graham, Seth (2019). History, Power, and Incomplete Epistolarity in Post-Soviet Cinema. *Área Abierta. Revista de comunicación audiovisual y publicitaria* 19 (3), 383-399. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/arab.65501>

1. Introduction: Epistolary dissidence in the post-Soviet space

In her influential book *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), Janet Gurkin Altman succinctly defines *epistolarity* as a property of some literary texts in which “the creation of meaning derives from the structures and potential specific to the letter form” (4). That form is most recognizably characterised, in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc as much as elsewhere in the world, by the necessary presence of a second-person addressee in an otherwise first-person text, a perspectival mixture that is made even more complex when the letter is embedded in a novel with a third-person narrator, or a narrator who is not the letter-writer (to say nothing – yet – of the added complexity when embedded in a visual narrative). Altman goes on to describe the particular relationship between the two consciousnesses linked by the epistolary form: “In letter language, [...] the addressee plays a role; he [sic] is able, and is expected, to initiate his own utterance. Such reciprocity whereby the original *you* becomes the *I* of a new utterance is essential to the maintenance of the epistolary exchange” (1982: 117). As we will see, the *letter language* in many films from the post-Soviet³ space (and indeed in many Soviet films) modifies, challenges, or even rejects this obligatory *reciprocity* between writer and recipient. These films often do this by featuring types of letter that do not comfortably fit within canonical descriptions of the medium: published open letters, forged letters, letters to dead or unreal addressees, and letters collectively written (by a *we* rather than an *I*) and/or addressed to a specified group of people rather than to a singular Other. There are

³ In this article I occasionally use problematic terms such as *post-Soviet* or *former Eastern Bloc* not to suggest that the contemporary cinema of Estonia, Ukraine, and Russia is legible only with reference to their common geopolitical ancestor, or that filmmakers in any of these countries are mere epigones of political and artistic conditions that are now three decades in the past, but as a form of convenient shorthand to refer to this region and some of the relevant shared legacies that are still topics of critical representation.

other, more subtle meaningful diversions from the traditional logic of the letter form that are achieved through the use of it in specifically cinematic ways.

With this tendency to diverge from accepted constituent features of epistolarity in mind, in what follows I analyse the functions of the letter device in recent films from three former Soviet republics: Russia, Ukraine, and Estonia. After briefly situating the device in the artistic traditions and historical cultural politics of the region, I will focus on how my chosen examples use various forms of what I will call *incomplete epistolarity* to, paradoxically, close gaps and collapse distances not between people (correspondents), but between the poles of more or less abstract binary concepts with particular significance in the former Second World: East and West, Public and Private, Life and Death/Afterlife, Freedom and Captivity, Science and Superstition, Authenticity and Imposture, History and Contemporaneity. The ways in which the films use the letter form to engage with these categories are often dependent on yet another conceptual dyad that is even more native to the Soviet sphere of which these countries were a part: power and powerlessness.

Another defining characteristic of epistolary discourse according to Altman is what she calls its “temporal polyvalence”: “The temporal aspect of any given epistolary statement is relative to innumerable moments: the actual time that an act described is performed; the moment when it is written down; the respective times that the letter is dispatched, received, read, or reread” (1982: 118). The use of the letter device in cinema, a medium that of course has its own complex relationship to time, only broadens the artistic possibilities of Altman’s *polyvalence*, especially in films that depict the historical past. Other distinctive features of the letter that are deployed in epistolary storytelling include its implicit promise of shared privacy between the writer/sender and reader/recipient, another seemingly obvious letter-quality that, embedded in a larger narrative, can be a powerful and versatile vehicle for dramatic irony, suspense, and other effects. This characteristic, too, has had a distinctive resonance in the countries of the former Soviet sphere, where the boundaries between public and private were often fraught and fluid. Actual letter-writing in the Soviet period and even before was, like all forms of expression and communication media, frequently coded as political. The politics of the Stalin period in particular created an atmosphere in which written communication was fraught with danger or simply impossible. Intercepted letters were used to prosecute and imprison thousands of Soviet political arrestees, including Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Letters home from soldiers at war, ubiquitous in Soviet films⁴, are still a common filmic trope. Letters of denunciation, as well as letters to Stalin and other leaders⁵ pleading for mercy, figure prominently in Soviet historiography and cultural production, especially since the end of censorship in the late-1980s, which was the beginning of a public, critical interrogation of Soviet history across all media that continues today.

A common official Stalin-era euphemism for a death sentence – “ten years [in a labour camp] without the right to correspondence” – became the title of Vladimir Naumov’s 1990 film-expose of the period, *Ten Years Without Right to Write Letters* (*Desiat let bez prava perezpiski*). In Georgian director Tengiz Abuladze’s *Repentance*

⁴ See Walsh, Susie. (2005). “Friendly Fire: epistolary voice-over in Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*.” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 33(4), 306-312.

⁵ See Surovtseva, E. V. (2010). *Zhanr “pis’ma vozhdii” v sovetskuiu epokhu (1950-e – 1980-e gg.)* Moscow: Airo.XXI. (The genre of the “letter to the leader” in the Soviet Period, 1950s-1980s).

(*Monanieba*, 1984), an allegorical film about Stalinism, relatives of those who received that sentence take devastated solace in another form of message: their disappeared loved ones, in a faraway logging camp, carved their names on the bottoms of logs that arrive in the town by train (Image 1). This suggests a link between the letter and the monument or memorial.



Image 1. *Repentance* (Tengiz Abuladze, 1984). Source: Screenshot.

The epistolary novel may have been less popular than in Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Fyodor Dostoevsky's early work *Poor Folk* (*Bednye liudi*, 1846) a notable exception, but letters certainly feature as narrative devices in any number of classic works by Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and others, often with the familiar functions of producing dramatic irony, melodramatically enhancing the affectual plane of the plot, and allowing for extended first-person narration within an otherwise third-person narrative.⁶ Despite its shared connotations of personal intimacy and even lyricism, however, the letter in Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet cultures – more so than in the West – has frequently had quite a different association: with expressions of political power and of individual and collective resistance to such power. The medium's representation in the *belles-lettres* and other arts of Russia and its historical sphere of influence have long reflected this association. Its function as a discursive venue for the playing out of power dynamics has expanded its generic potential beyond the features detailed by Altman and others.

The famously venomous sixteenth-century correspondence between Tsar Ivan the Terrible and the exiled Prince Kurbskii comes to mind (Kurbskii, 1955), as does the vulgar, insulting reply from the Ukrainian Cossacks to the Turkish Sultan's letter-

⁶ See for example Tatiana's letter in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1825), the letters between Anna and her lover Vronsky in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), and the letter from father to son in Turgenev's novella *First Love* (1860).

ultimatum in the seventeenth century, an episode canonized in Il'ia Repin's famous 19th century painting which itself was visually cited in the Ukrainian film *Cossacks: The Musical* (*Kak kazaki...*, Igor' Ivanov, 2010) (Image 2).

While Ivanov's comic citation is seemingly just a visual one-liner, it has an additional, allegorical meaning that also exploits the multiplanar temporality of which Altman writes: the scene uses a well-recognized representation of the ritual of collective letter-writing by a group of nationalistic upstarts to a hated imperial foe, a theme with relevance to the adversarial relationship between Ukraine and Russia in recent times. The conflict between the two countries will also be a central theme of Denis Shabaev's 2018 Russian film *Mira*, which also uses the device of the collective letter to draw lines between past and present, and between present and future.



Image 2. *Cossacks: The Musical* (Igor' Ivanov, 2010). Source: Screenshot.

Film letters that utterly or partially fail as (or simply do not function as) communicative media – *incomplete epistolarity* – is a subcategory of the form that has not been examined in any detail, although Hamid Naficy writes that “epistolarity involves the acts and events of sending and receiving, losing and finding, and writing and reading letters. *It also involves the acts, events, and institutions that facilitate, hinder, inhibit, or prohibit such acts and events*” (2001: 101, emphasis added). Unsuccessful epistolarity has long been a trope in Soviet and post-Soviet cinema, and one with a broad range of metaphorical meanings. Some of these epistolary *failures* can be read as an implicit commentary on the lost authority of verbal communication in the wake of the collapse of the thoroughly logocentric Soviet Marxist ideology. In Konstantin Lopushanskii's *Letters of a Dead Man* (*Zapiski mertvogo cheloveka*, 1986), for instance, a survivor of an accidental nuclear war composes mental letters to his dead son (the war itself is caused by a failure of verbal communication; a computer operator is unable to warn his colleagues that the computer has malfunctioned and launched a nuclear missile because he chokes on his coffee). The urtext for unsuccessful epistolarity in Soviet cinema is Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Unsent Letter* (*Neotpravlennoe pis'mo*, 1960), the very title of which indicates the fate of the mis-

sive in question. *The Unsent Letter* depicts the physical and emotional hardships of three Soviet geologists and their guide as they search for diamond ore in the Siberian wilderness. The titular letter is from the group's leader to his wife: he writes it during the journey to Siberia but forgets to give it to the pilot to take back for delivery, so he continues the letter, and it becomes the voiceover narration of much of the rest of the film. The text of the letter is also distinguished from the diegetic dialogue visually: the frames of the shots that accompany the voiceover have a superimposed fire in the foreground, a foreshadowing of the actual forest fire that dominates the film's second half. The flames are also a metaphorical representation of the characters' location in a kind of Hades (the Greek term for the underworld is more appropriate than *hell* to the film's representation of the geologists as super-human heroes sent to conquer the elements for the benefit of humanity). The letter is intended to traverse not only thousands of kilometres to Moscow, but metaphorically to bridge the gap between life and the afterlife, as is the map showing the location of the diamond ore that the group leader struggles to deliver at the end of the film. There are two other letters in the film, both of which continue the use of the epistolary as a form of enunciation by humans *in extremis*. One is a declaration of love by the never-married guide, whose interference in the established relationship between the two younger geologists is about to come to a possibly violent head when one of them, Tania, discovers the first sign of diamond ore (a discovery that makes her burst into tears, which initially seems to be a result of the emotional stress of the love-triangle). The second letter comes during the fire, when one of the male geologists is injured and thus hampering the progress of the rest to safety. He leaves the camp when the rest are sleeping, in a suicidal gesture of sacrifice for the survival of the others, and leaves a note begging them not to search for him. In all three cases, then, the private, emotional nature of the letter form is double-exposed with concerns for the collective, be it a group of scientists trying to deliver crucial knowledge from the periphery to the centre, or an individual giving his own life so that the rest of the group can survive.

The four recent examples of cinematic epistolarity to which I now turn also use epistolarity in double-voiced ways, to represent the discourse of both history and mundane contemporaneity, the individual and the collective, the public and the private. They all use the letter device metaphorically, in various forms of *incompleteness*, to critically engage with the past, present, and future while more or less implicitly commenting on the nature of communication. The meanings created via epistolary efforts to bridge spatial, temporal, and other gaps – on the part of both the characters and the filmmakers – are central to these cinematic projects of national and individual introspection. Three of the four films are set in the historical past, while the fourth diegetically depicts the clear influence of that past, and its incursion into the present.

2. *Forbidden Empire* (2014) by Oleg Stepchenko

Letters have been used by filmmakers as a medium for more-or-less explicit dialogue with Western culture, in ways both similar and different from how the East-West binary was represented in Soviet cinema. Oleg Stepchenko's *Forbidden Empire* (*Viy*) – a Ukrainian-Russian co-production – is a loose remake of perhaps the only Soviet horror film, *Viy* (Konstantin Ershov and Georgii Kropachev, 1967), itself an adapta-

tion of Gogol's 1831 story about a seminary student who is attacked by a witch, kills her, and then is forced to keep vigil over her body for three consecutive nights. Gogol himself was fond of the epistolary device, which he frequently employed to give insight into the (often disordered) consciousnesses of his characters. The first-person protagonist of his 1835 story "Diary of a Madman" (*Zapiski sumasshedshego*), for instance, steals letters from the basket of his love-interest's dog, reasoning that "[t]hese letters will reveal everything to me. Dogs are smart folk, they know all the political relations..." (Gogol, 2003: 286). The letters become a site for the increasingly incoherent diarist to (dis)place his own suspicions about the woman's real (profoundly negative) feelings for him. Another Gogol story, "The Lost Letter" (*Propavshaya gramota*, 1831) was adapted into a film by the Ukrainian director Borys Ivchenko in 1972, and is an example of a film letter being used as a MacGuffin: a man is charged with delivering an important missive to the Russian Empress, but is waylaid by an encounter with demonic forces. After his extended infernal ordeal, the contents of the letter turn out to be utterly insignificant, one of many examples of Gogol's critical expose of the written word's fundamental unreliability, another motif that we find in abundance in post-Soviet epistolary (and non-epistolary) cinema.

Stepanchenko's adaptation retains the central plot of *Viy* and introduces a Bram-Stoker-esque frame: an Englishman (named – in another nod to *Dracula* – Jonathan) on a scientific expedition in Ukraine communicates with the *civilised world* via a series of missives (delivered by pigeon) sent to his fiancée back home. As he is drawn deeper into the local world of folklore, superstition, and phantasmagoria, Jonathan composes long letters to her, writing them painstakingly in mirror-image (Image 3) as a sort of code (she must use a mirror to read them). Eventually the letters start to be intercepted by her disapproving father (played by the British actor Charles [Tywin Lannister] Dance, in another example of the filmmakers' interest in East-West dialogue, not to mention in appealing to an anglophone audience). As Jonathan's letters become more and more detailed in their scientific observations, as well as their growing horror at the locals' medieval worldview, the father comes to admire and accept his daughter's lover. Jonathan tells the locals, "you are simple peasants, you create these monsters and scare yourselves to death." At first glance, he seems to be correct: it is revealed that a corrupt, power-mad local priest has been using primitive technology, *special effects*, and strong homemade vodka to dupe the peasants into believing their villages are under siege by dark supernatural forces. The question is left open at the end, however. As Jonathan flees the *forbidden empire* in his carriage, he is pursued by small, flying, laughing demons, who will *deliver* to the West (just as Count Dracula did in Stoker's epistolary novel) a very different sort of message from the carrier pigeons that had earlier transmitted Jonathan's new-found knowledge from the depths of the backwards East.



Image 3. *Forbidden Empire* (Oleg Stepchenko, 2014). Source: Screenshot.

3. *You Won't Leave Me...* (2006) by Alla Surikova

The Russian filmmaker Surikova's period melodrama *You Won't Leave Me...* (*Vy ne ostavite menia...*) is full of diegetic letters, postcards, and telegrams that tell the story of a developing romance, but it is, from the beginning, a half-fraudulent correspondence. In a provincial Soviet city in 1951 (the tail-end of the Stalin period), a theatre artist named Grisha opens his mailbox and finds a postcard intended for his (much younger) wife, an actress named Vera (diminutive form: Verochka). It is from a young man named Victor, who writes of his fond memories of walking with her on the beach when she was alone on holiday at the seaside the previous summer:

Hello, Verochka! It's been two weeks already since I came back to Moscow. The institute where I work is all abuzz. Everyone's waiting for our assignments for the new experimental research, which is of vital importance to our country. Our department will be closely involved. Yet for the entire two weeks, every minute of every day, I have seen before my eyes our last evening together. The warm, calm sea, the white boardwalk, the aroma of the south. And you, Verochka, in a bright, airy dress. Did all of that really happen? Was it not just a dream? Forgive me if my note causes you any displeasure. I'll be happy to receive a few lines from you in reply. Yours, Victor.

Rather than confront his wife about the relationship, Grisha writes back in Vera's name, echoing Victor's impressions of their brief acquaintance:

Hello, Victor! I was so glad to receive your postcard. It's so cold and rainy here, with a nasty wind from the north. But I too can still see before my eyes the white boardwalk, the warm sea, and the seagulls. Remember how you threw bread to them, and they weren't afraid at all? They just shrieked and fought, like the women at the market. What a pity that it all went so fast. But at least we have our memories. Vera.

The voiceover text of the words he writes begin in Grisha's voice but switch, mid-sentence, to Vera's, underscoring the fact that what he is doing is not only of forgery, but imposture (or, in contemporary terms, identity theft). However, the same transition occurs when he reads Victor's postcards and letters: the voiceover begins in Grisha's voice and switches to Victor's voice (which Grisha, of course, has never heard). This literal "double-voicedness" (the co-presence of *I* and *You*) is a good example of how the cinematic medium can deploy the letter device in ways that are not possible in literature. The element of fantasy Grisha's mind is manifested visually, as well, with his imagined scenes of Vera and Victor frolicking at the seaside.

The correspondence evolves from postcards to letters (which adds the not-insignificant detail of an envelope), and from vague expressions of mutual admiration to declarations of love and Victor's promise to come visit when his work project finishes. Victor eventually tells Vera the specific date of his arrival, which – to Grisha's relief – comes and goes with no sign of Victor. The cruel punchline of the whole (non)affair comes in the form of the final letter intercepted by Grisha, this time from Victor's mother (Image 4):

Hello, Vera. On December 3, my son, Victor Prokofiev, was arrested in the city of Chelyabinsk and charged with sabotage. On December 14, he and two other engineers from his factory were found guilty and sentenced to death by firing squad. On December 17 the sentence [here the mother's voice breaks with emotion and she pauses and repeats herself] ...On December 17 the sentence [...] was carried out. Two days before the trial I was allowed a brief meeting with Victor, and he spoke only of you. He asked me to write to you and explain what happened. He was sure that you would believe he was innocent. Victor knew what was going to happen to him. He loved you very much, and said that your letters gave him the happiest days of his life. Thank you, Vera. Goodbye.



Image 4. *You Won't Leave Me...* (Alla Surikova, 2006). Source: Screenshot.

The mother (represented only in voiceover) is played by the director herself, giving the enunciation of this final letter a different, authorial narrative perspective by virtue of the discursive *presence* of the director.

Surikova's film letters highlight the tension between the public and the private, often coded in Stalinist society as political and personal, and the effect of that fraught binary on the individual. Victor's first postcard performs the expected public patriotism ("of vital importance to our country") before transforming into a love letter, and one that perfectly illustrates Altman's *temporal polyvalence* by anchoring itself firmly in the present while looking both to the past and the future ("I'll be happy..."). The love letter in particular lends itself to this complex temporal structure: "Memory, imagination, and hope make of past and future the only living present for the letter writer separated from the lover, visible in the very oscillation between past and future tenses" (Altman, 1982: 131).

The film and its use of the forged letter device is also noteworthy. The socio-political functions of inauthenticity, imposture, and bearing false witness in the Soviet (and especially Stalinist) period have been examined by many scholars, including Sheila Fitzpatrick (2005) and Mark Lipovetsky (2011), who uses Sloterdijk's notion of "cynical reason" (1987) to analyse the figure of the trickster in Soviet culture. In a country in which one's identity was under constant scrutiny for deviations from the current definition of *Sovietness*, self-fashioning and re-fashioning took on great significance, and was carried out at all levels, in public and in private, with those able to do it well earning admiration, in life and in art. Lipovetsky (after Sloterdijk) writes of a public atmosphere in which "the social space becomes totally theatrical, which in turn produces a culture of mistrust, where the expectation of deception, the readiness to trick and to be tricked and the admiration for tricksters become universal" (2011: 49). Although forgery, imposture, and other types of performed dishonesty in the Stalin period are most often presented as survival mechanisms, or forms of indirect violence, in *You Won't Leave Me...* Grisha's epistolary fraud – stealing the *I* of another – has unexpectedly positive results. Victor dies a happy man, and Grisha learns to allow himself to love his wife and be loved in return. When she tells him she is pregnant, he suggests that they name the child Victor if it is a boy. In this respect, the sudden intrusion of political terror – via Victor's mother's letter – into what had up to then been a love story and a melodrama does not destroy the lyrical plane of the film, but actually fortifies it, confirms its constancy in the face of cruel but transient political conditions.

4. *In the Crosswind* (2014) by Martti Helde

Estonian director Helde's hypnotic adaptation of the diaries (written in the form of letters to her husband) of Erna Tamm, one of the thousands of Estonians (and Latvians and Lithuanians) ethnically cleansed and deported to Siberia in June 1941 on the orders of Stalin, is an example of what Naficy calls a *letter-film*. This category of epistolary film is perhaps the purest combination of the two media; the film itself is "in the form of epistles addressed to someone either inside or outside the diegesis," and is thus distinguished from *film-letters*, which "inscribe letters and acts of reading and writing of letters by diegetic characters" (Naficy, 2001: 101). *In the Crosswind* (*Risttuules*) in fact draws on both types of epistolary film: the extradiegetic space

from which Erna's voiceover reads the text of the letter itself becomes an unseen, second diegesis, as we can hear the paper rustling and the pen scratching across the page as she writes/speaks. There are also several shots of physical letters, used for contrast between the diametrically opposite worlds of homeland and exile, freedom and captivity, family intimacy and separation, isolation, and death. For example, in the opening scenes, set in the idyllic period in Erna's life before the deportation, her family is breakfasting when she brings in a letter from a relative. The easy joy that this contact with distant loved ones provokes becomes a contrastive foreshadowing of the desperate and tragic (though lyrical) letters that will be written by Erna after the family is separated by what an on-screen dedication at the end of the film calls "the Soviet Holocaust."

The innovative use of the letter device is only one element of the film's aesthetic distinctiveness. It is completely devoid of diegetic dialogue, which allows for the text of Erna's letters to dominate the aural plane. Visually, *In the Crosswind* is even more original: all of the scenes – except the few that take place in Erna's Estonian homeland before or after her deportation and long exile – are composed of long-take, slow tracking shots in which the characters are motionless, arranged in complex *tableaux vivants* (Image 5). Helde himself describes the "visual language" of his film as "a walk through a sculpture garden" (Kudláč, 2014).



Image 5. *In the Crosswind* (Marti Helde, 2014). Source: Screenshot.

This visual device (and the filmmakers' choice to shoot the film in black and white) is linked explicitly to Erna's state of mind as described in one of her letters from Siberian exile: "Each evening turns everything around me to a dim, dull black and white picture." Helde has also said that he found inspiration for his visual choices in the documents he used as he was researching the historical events to be depicted: "[t]he idea for [this visual] form came from one of the letters that fell into my lap. In this letter, a deported Estonian wrote: 'Here in Siberia, I have the feeling that time is standing still, that our bodies have been brought to Siberia, but our souls are still in the summer in Estonia'" (Kudláč, 2014). Paradoxically, Erna also writes of her previous, comparatively charmed life in terms of a static existence: "The loveliest years of my life passed as if standing still," an implicit reference to the world-turned-upside-down nature of deportation, separation, and exile.

The meticulous arrangement of the frozen *tableaux*, and the camera's movement within them, are subtly, structurally linked to the letters, and not only because they mostly illustrate events about which Erna is writing. The slow movement of the camera through the living dioramas matches the pace at which Erna is describing them, and the speed of her pen (which, again, we can often hear). The transitions between different visual elements within the frames, through minutes-long tracking shots within a single, albeit large and detailed, *mise en scène*, resemble the narrative structure of a letter – impressionistic, governed by train of thought and associative thinking – more than they do the continuity of a more traditionally edited film.

The epistolary text is linked in other ways to the film's visual plane. Erna writes in another letter of a dream she had of her husband: they are together in their orchard, and Heldur has climbed an apple tree in order to trim the branches. He points to a branch and playfully asks her if it is the one that should be cut, and she replies no, a different one. At the moment she pronounces the word “point,” the camera enters the room where Heldur is being sentenced to death in a Soviet labour camp, and moves slowly towards the tribunal chairman's finger pointing out the window at the execution site (Image 6). Thus her dreamed demand that a different branch be chosen for cutting becomes a metaphorical enunciation of a desire (that she is unaware of having at that moment) that Heldur be spared the firing squad. Significantly, this scene is the only one in which the *tableau vivant* does not depict an event experienced by Erna herself, and functions as a kind of co-authorship between Erna and the director, Helde, who collaborate to create a double-voiced visual-verbal meaning.

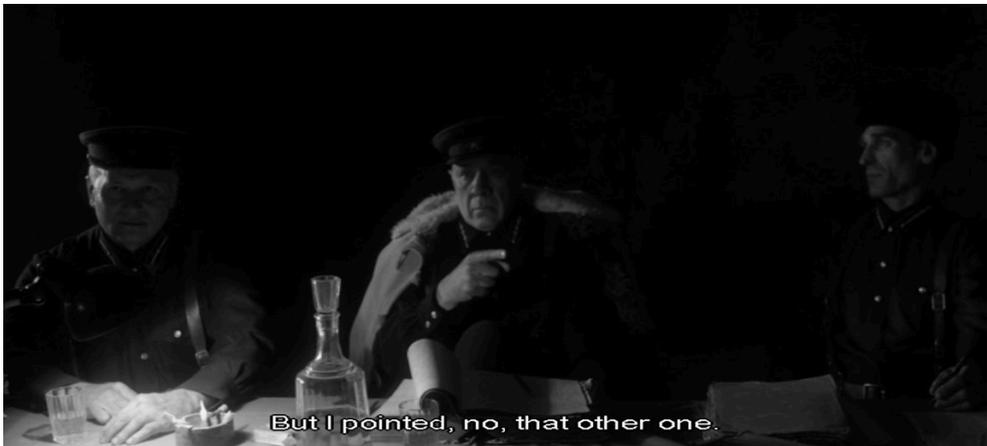


Image 6. *In the Crosswind* (Martti Helde, 2014). Source: Screenshot.

5. *Mira* (2018) by Denis Shabaev

This hybrid documentary-fiction film, by a Russian director and with Russian producers and funding, takes place in the Donbas region of Ukraine, epicentre of the Ukrainian military's conflict with pro-Russian separatists supported by the Russian Federation. Shabaev's film relies on several forms of epistolary enunciation. There are two actual letters, both of which appear near the end of the film, and both of them sent across not a geographical, but temporal distance: they are letters placed in time

capsules addressed to future generations (one from the Soviet past to the present, the second from the present to the uncertain future). The film is more epistolary than that, however, as it contains other arguable examples of the “epistolic medium” (Naficy, 2001: 101), including Skype conversations, a police interview, and an intercessional prayer by an Orthodox priest. These enunciative acts formally resemble a letter correspondence in various ways: their use of alternating second-person address and first-person (I/we) monologues (in the case of the interview and the videocall, with the expectation of reciprocity), and their formulaic rhetorical structures relative to the unstructured discourse of dialogue in the rest of the film (much of which was improvised by the non-actors who more or less *play* themselves). Moreover, a diegetic video-call or video-message embedded in a film can be said to fulfil a role analogous to a letter within a novel, as Skype relies on the same *raw materials* as a film (sound and picture), just as letters and novels are both made of written words.

There is a more abstract association between epistolarity and the plot of the film. The titular protagonist, Mira, describes himself as a professional wanderer. He is a Slovak working as a labourer in London who travels to eastern Ukraine to meet his Skype acquaintance and potential love interest, Natasha. In his get-to-know-you conversations with her over Skype, and his frank and introspective answers to a police investigator’s questions when he is arrested later in the film (he tells her he came to Luhansk because he began to feel like “he was of no use to anybody”), he exemplifies the self-aware desire implicit in the choice of such communicative means. Hamid Naficy (and Linda Kauffman) write of an essential connection between the kind of physical and spiritual displacement felt and expressed by Mira, the eternal exile, and the epistolary urge:

Exile and epistolarity are constitutively linked because both are driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss and by the desire to bridge the multiple gaps. Whatever form the epistle takes, whether a letter, a note scribbled on a napkin, a telephone conversation, a video, or an e-mail message, it becomes, in the words of Linda Kauffman, a “métonymie and a metaphoric displacement of desire” (1986: 38) – the desire to be with an other and to reimagine an elsewhere and other times. (Naficy, 2001: 101)

Letters, then, become a shortcut or fantasy that relieves the writer of the distress caused by separation from a longed-for place, person, time. The geographic *elsewhere* that is the object of Mira’s desire is itself phenomenologically unstable. Still in London, he tells a co-worker that he plans to “fly off to Russia.” When he wires money to Natasha, he first tells the clerk that he is sending money to “the Republic of Luhansk,” and when told there is no such place listed, he says, “try Ukraine.” Once in Luhansk, his friend tells him, “this is not Russia, this is Donbass.” Mira’s project once the love affair does not materialise conjures the presence of yet another geopolitical entity: The Soviet Bloc. Noticing the decrepit state of a Lenin statue in the town (which has been damaged in the fighting), he hires two local men (whom he meets in jail after being arrested for breaking curfew) to help him restore the monument, and other Soviet-era statues. During one such restoration, of a large monument to Stalin’s minister of defence, Kliment Voroshilov, they discover a time-capsule containing a letter to the future, written by local miners. One of the crew reads the letter aloud, which is made difficult by the smudged print and the young man’s un-

familiarity with the jargon of socialist discourse (Image 7). The text of the letter, addressed to the miners and other Soviet citizens of the future, performs the expected paeans to Labour, Revolution, and Socialism. Despite the fact that their project involves the restoration of monuments to the ideology represented by the letter, the men burn it without a thought, and continue their drinking session. It is noteworthy that this verbal monument perishes, while the men's restoration of the visual monuments (statues and busts) is successful.



Image 7. *Mira* (Denis Shabaev, 2018). Source: Screenshot.

The film ends with a public dedication of one of the monuments rescued by Mira's team: a socialist-realist ensemble sculpture of a miner, a child, and a Party member. The ceremony begins with a local priest blessing the sculpture with holy water and an intercessional prayer (Image 8).



Image 8. *Mira* (Denis Shabaev, 2018). Source: Screenshot.

The ceremony concludes with another epistolary performance that echoes, and implicitly comments critically upon, the unearthed time-capsule letter. A local worker, in Ukrainian-accented, halting Russian, reads aloud:

Today is the time to create and work for the sake of peace and future generations. We left our naïve faith in progress behind us, together with our faith in the utopian Communist project and the Capitalist future [...] probably you will be no greater and stronger and wiser than us. But don't feel desperate and don't ever give up. Never put anything off until tomorrow. You are creating your own tomorrow. And you're doing it now. So remember us [here the speaker seems to get lost and skip a line] and later gave us the strength to descend into the bowels of the earth and fly, in our minds, to the stars.

This recitation can be read as an example of Naficy's understanding of "free-indirect discourse" (2001: 145), an utterance that seems to be from the perspective of the author (filmmaker), or another *authoritative* source, but which is

contaminated by the enunciative properties of the characters' speech [...]. One of the key contributions of this style is to force the dominant language [...] to speak with a minoritarian voice [...]. This free-indirect voice is not a dual voice of both a character and a narrator but a bivocal utterance that fuses both direct and indirect elements to express dramatically the double consciousness of a divided self. (102)

If the *narrator* in the dedication scene is represented by the text of the letter itself (a collective address to the future), it is rendered polyvalent by the specific form of its enunciation, in a *Ukrainian* voice. The film up to this point does not represent the Ukrainian side (in both the military and rhetorical meanings of the term) at all. Earlier in the film, Mira and his crew re-paint in black a park bench that had been painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. Mira visits his old militia unit, made up of pro-Russian separatists who speak disparagingly of their Ukrainian enemies. All of the characters voice their support of the Russian side, and Mira himself bonds with his two crewmembers by declaring them all part of the "Russian world community" (*ruskii mir*), a politically loaded term that has been used by Vladimir Putin and his supporters. Despite the success and popularity of Mira's restoration project, he himself sours on it, and is arrested after destroying a Lenin monument and starting a fire. In his police interview, he says that he no longer has any use for the *Russian world community* and its tainted Leninist legacy. A final intertitle tells us that Mira returned to London shortly thereafter.

6. Conclusion

All of the constituent features of the letter device – its establishment of a distinctive I/you relationship with the possibility and expectation of reciprocity, its reliance on intimacy and privacy, and the means by which it structures time – have been problematised in the countries of the former Second World in ways particular to the region, its history, its complicated cultural politics, and its artistic and discursive traditions. In his own oft-cited description of letter-writing, Franz Kafka ascribes a dark, even pathological function to the medium:

The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced – from a purely theoretical point of view – a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a com-

munication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness. (Kafka, 1954: 229)

The quartet of films I have analysed here use the letter device, each in their own way, to draw attention to the *terrible dislocation of souls* that so troubled Kafka (himself a dislocated soul and prolific letter-writer), and to address a variety of *spectres*. In *The Forbidden Empire*, Stepanchenko parodically revisits the hackneyed opposition between the benighted East and the civilized West, playfully depicting that East as a miasma of superstition and ignorance from which the enlightened and intrepid Western interloper must send desperate missives by pigeon. In *In the Crosswind*, the “walk through the sculpture garden” of Erna Tamm's epistolary accounts of her desperate and tragic present, written to the specific *you* of her doomed husband, acquire another, collective addressee in the contemporary Estonian (and global) film viewer. Just as the letters themselves were her attempt to reach across the vast space between Siberia and Estonia, and between her pre-deportation life and her captivity in exile, the film and Helde's use of the letters is a bridge between the fading historical past and the contemporary viewer. In *You Won't Leave Me...* Surikova deploys an ostensibly deceptive series of intimate letter-lies that, in fact, are the catalyst for revealing truths to both the protagonist and the twenty-first-century viewer. In Shabaev's *Mira*, the contact between the past and present (and between the present and the future) takes place diegetically, in the form of two double-voiced, incomplete letters, reminding us that all epistolary enunciations – and perhaps all forms of communication and representation – are double-voiced and incomplete.

7. References

- Altman, Janet Gurkin. (1982). *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Donovan, Victoria. (2019). “Denis Shabaev: *Mira* (2018).” *Kinokultura*, 63. Retrieved from <http://www.kinokultura.com/2019/63r-mira.shtml>
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila. (2005). *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gogol, Nikolai. (2003). “The Diary of a Madman.” *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*. London: Granta, 279-300.
- Martin Kudláč. (2014). “Martti Helde - Director.” *Cineuropa*, 24 October. Retrieved from <https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/265169/>.
- Kafka, Franz. (1954). *Letters to Milena*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Kauffman, Linda S. (1986). *Discourse of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fiction*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kurbaskii, Andrei Mikhailovich. (1955). *The Correspondence between Prince A. M. Kurbsky and Tsar Ivan IV of Russia, 1564-1579*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lipovetsky, Mark. (2011). *Charms of the Cynical Reason: The Trickster's Transformations in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press.
- Naficy, Hamid. (2001). *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Sloterdijk, Peter. (1987). *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Surovtseva, E.V. (2010). *Zhanre "pis'ma vozhdii" v sovetskuiu epokhu (1950-e – 1980-e gg.)*. Moscow: Airo-XXI.
- Todd, William Mills III (1976). *The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Walsh, Susie. (2005). "Friendly Fire: Epistolary Voice-Over in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 33(4), 306-312.
- Zvonkine, Eugénie. (2011). "Pavel Bardin: *Gop-stop* (2010)." *Kinokultura*, 33. Retrieved from <http://www.kinokultura.com/2011/33r-gopstop.shtml>