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Author: Sublime Gaze and Suffering Woman in Soviet World War II Cinema

Many Soviet films made during World War II foreground female characters. Such films as *She Defends the Motherland* or *Rainbow* feature female protagonists who actively fight with the Nazis along with or even at the head of men. Female body, however, is also a privileged locus of suffering. Unlike most men, women in these films often come to hate the enemy through individual traumatic experiences. Even when there is no story of initial trauma, women are shown as taken prisoner, tortured, and executed much more often than men.

In this paper I will address the ideological and psychological significance of foregrounding a suffering yet active woman in war-time Soviet films. I will concentrate on Leo Arnshtam's film *Zoya* (1944) based on a real-life story of a Komsomol hero Zoya Kosmodemianskaia. The framing scenes of violence in which Zoya is tortured and executed are contrasted with flashbacks that narrate a bright story of her life. The two Zoyas, however, are linked by Zoya's gaze, which transcends not only the brutal reality of the Gestapo torture chamber but also the everyday life of a Soviet schoolgirl. Her gaze, together with her body and discourse, makes Zoya an exceptional character visually resembling Carl Dreyer's Jeanne d'Arc more than a typical heroine of the 1930s Soviet cinema.

In this paper I will concentrate on the significance of the sublime object of Zoya's gaze. I will analyze the conflation of Zoya's transcendental desire, male desire for Zoya in the diegesis, and spectatorial cinematic desire; I will address the role of this conflation for the ideological efficiency of the film. I will then put the film in the larger context of Soviet war cinema.