In 1942 the 29-year-old Hungarian film director István Szőts shot his *Emberek a havason* (*Men on the Mountain*), which later served as a strong impetus for the Italian Neorealism film school.¹ It tells a story of a poor peasant family from the Transylvanian mountains whose only shelter is religion. It also tells the story of how greedy speculators destroy the traditional peasant lifestyle. Szőts’s film was condemned by the Horthy Fascists as “Communist propaganda” and by the local Communists as “religious agitation.” Religious motifs in films were regarded by both totalitarian regimes as a basis for potential upheavals. The individual’s appeal to the Divine posed a danger that could not be controlled by secular authorities.

This article focuses on the major stations of cinema’s confrontation with religion and church. Particular attention is devoted to the Russian (Soviet) filmography due to the fact that its experience with this confrontation is the oldest one, it dates back to 1917. After 1945, regardless of various religious and cultural peculiarities, many countries of the so-called “Eastern bloc” had to go through the same challenges that Russia worked through in the decades preceding. What brings these filmographies together is the fact that Eastern European filmmakers continued to use (sometimes as a manifestation of their protest attitudes) religious motives in their works, despite the official atheistic state doctrine. In particular it applies the so-called Thaw period (mid-1950s to the early 1960s). The article explores these very confrontations, working only with those films which place religion at the center of the narration.

The February Revolution of 1917 in Russia brought with it cinematic liberty and the end of the clerical/state censorship. In early Soviet times, popular mainstream cinema made use of this new liberty by satirically depicting the downside of religion, e.g. bigoted clerics or diabolical nuns. More seriously, avant-garde filmmakers of the 1920s and 1930s explored the role of religious concepts in a new world dominated by materialist

¹ Schlegel, “Il ministro del cinema di Stalin,” 288–89.
concepts. While directors and theorists like Sergey Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov tried to deconstruct religious views with their dialectic-materialist concepts, they also referred to religious concepts in a productive way to develop their own aesthetics. Stalinist politics were accompanied by harsh attacks on church institutions, but at the same time, cinematic mockery of Orthodoxy was a surprising taboo—explainable by the obvious structural similarities between church and state. Stalin’s cult of personality was heavily influenced by Orthodox rituals and iconography, and this left traces in the cinema, too. The structural similarities between state and church allowed for a special form of subversive criticism used by filmmakers after Stalin’s death. The 1960s saw a renaissance of religious values and traditions, culminating in the “spiritual” movies of Andrey Tarkovsky that have been influencing directors from all over the world until today. The development of such new spiritual forms has continued since 1989, but the films using it now have to compete against blockbuster productions of relentlessly commercialized film markets, which include new forms of exploiting religion and linking it to nationalist agendas. On the other hand, current cinema has also given way to productions that foreground a new plurality of the religious and fresh scrutiny for the meaning of spiritual phenomena in people’s everyday life.

Anti-Clericalism in Early Soviet Film

The film history of “real socialism” ended in 1989, when the vaults of censored material that until then were so strictly protected were opened. A similar opening marks the beginning of the very same history 72 years earlier. In August 1917, after the downfall of the Romanov Dynasty, Aleksandr Kerensky’s provisional government dissolved the Most Holy Synod along with its lay head, the Chief Procurator, which had been introduced by Tsar Peter I. 1917 also saw the end of a narrow-minded state-church film censorship, which had for instance banned Yakov Protazanov’s film Ukhod velikogo startsa (Departure of a Grand Old Man; 1912; literally: The Death of the Grand Starec) because the excommunicated Leo Tolstoy is shown to be welcomed in heaven by Christ with open arms. The end of censorship—as a way of disciplining culture and spirit—was embraced

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2 In the USSR, this process began as early as (the perestroika year) 1986, on the 5th Congress of Filmmakers. See Pyaty syezd kinematografistov SSSR; and Schlegel, “Das zweite Tauwetter.”