Socialist Unrealism: The Polska Kronika Filmowa and Stalinist Culture in Poland, 1944-1958

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My research studies the history of the Polska Kronika Filmowa (PKF) between 1944 and 1958. I examine how the PKF oriented itself vis-à-vis the conflicting demands of its viewers and its governmental sponsors, illuminating the workings of Polish culture during Stalinism and the universal complex relation between entertainment and propaganda. My sources include the Polish Film Studio Archives, governmental documents, interview transcripts, contemporary newspaper articles, and secondary writings in English and Polish.

With the establishment of communist rule in Poland after 1945 came the establishment of a new official culture, ‘socialist realism’ through an all-out culture war waged on every front, from art and architecture to the institutions of daily life. As Stalinism solidified itself this culture created an Orwellian state of endless buzzwords of success and triumph against a background of terror and repression. Film, after the Soviet model, formed a backbone of the propaganda, and thus the government produced the Polska Kronika Filmowa, a bi-weekly newspaper seen by over 5 million viewers a week in agitation, cinema boxes, and traditional theaters across the country.

Yet unlike other cultural forms of ‘social realism’ propaganda, the PKF did not become noted for its bombastic pomposity and sterile repetitiveness but its ‘light’ tone and lively presentation. Indeed, the PKF became a beloved institution which would last 9 years after communism’s collapse and enjoy immense popularity, even today in DVD re-releases and television programs. How was this possible?

In order to ingratiate itself with the viewers, the PKF developed a trademark ‘light’ aesthetic to balance out its repetition of socialist slogans and praise of Stalin. Documentary montage met drama-like story development to create a representation of the world ‘prettier than life’ yet doctrinally sound which pleased both the viewers and the authorities. The jokiness colloquialism of the narrators allowed the viewer the ironic distance needed to continue watching even when the film contradicted his political beliefs and his perception of reality. This tone also inserted a destabilizing bit of laughter into the otherwise serious face of social realism which enabled the PKF’s versatility and success.