

Issues of Representation

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Some of the most striking changes post-1989 in gender roles, especially as embodied in the structures of everyday life, are to be found in the sphere of culture, and especially popular culture as it is manifested in pervasive mass media such as television and film, the popular press, and the Internet. And it is perhaps in this area above all that the position of women in post-communist societies is enacted and negotiated. Images and discursive constructions of women reflect the new realities of the region and also construct them; by the same token, discursive representations of gender are not neutral but are ideologically engaged and politically charged. The growing feminist consciousness in the countries of the region has given rise to a conscious use of imagery and discourse to offer alternative portrayals of women, their roles, and their position in society. At the same time, the ubiquity of pornography, which cannot but have shaped societal views towards women, has been accompanied by a (partially preemptive) political backlash against women's rights (and women themselves) that has also found expression, for example in portrayals of women in popular magazines, television serials, and films. In some cases, the visual imagery and linguistic discourses associated with women in the communist period are being re-appropriated and given an ironic twist for post-communist purposes. Throughout these processes the problem of censorship has continued to rear its head, articulated now from a more overtly masculinist perspective.

The aim of this panel is to explore significant themes in cultural representations of gender, especially with regard to women, in post-communist societies. What forms has the representation of women taken in mass media and also in "high" culture such as literature? What discursive tensions have been opened up by post-communist portrayals of women in popular culture? How have communist-era representations been adapted, re-imagined, and reused for contemporary purposes? And above all, how are cultural representations of private and public, of what belongs in which sphere, and of how to distinguish the two, functioning to shape discursive constructions of women and their position in society? The ultimate goal of the panel will be to suggest ways in which post-communist representations of gender roles can be usefully theorized, and how such theory can contribute to various disciplines both in the region and elsewhere in the world, including the West.