

Final Report
Digital Storytelling Project Fund

“Socialism at the Movies – Creating a Digital Narrative of Postwar East European Film”

Eliza Ablovatski

HIST 337: Socialism at the Movies

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I. Project Description:

With the grant from the Digital Storytelling Project Fund through the Kenyon College Center for Innovative Pedagogy, supported by the Mellon Foundation, students in my history seminar, “Socialism at the Movies,” created as their final project a website and three short, original documentary videos. This was a capstone project for them to synthesize and organize their accumulated knowledge and work from the semester. The website contains the research students did individually all semester as they prepared their required presentations and short papers, as well as visual material like photo stills and movie advertising poster art that they researched and selected to illustrate their work. They made the website through Weebly.com, where it is publicly published on the internet as a resource to anyone interested in the topic. In three groups, they also produced short documentary films, based on analytical papers they had written during the semester (using these as the basic “scripts”). These three documentary films incorporate still images and clips from the films being analyzed with voice-over narration by the students. These three videos are publicly published on the website as well. Completed course website: <https://socialismatthemovies.weebly.com>

II. Outcomes:

The project was quite successful in achieving several of my pedagogical goals and gave the students a high level of satisfaction and feeling of achievement. Because state socialist film is largely unknown (with a few Oscar-winners as exceptions), this class requires students to absorb a large body of evidence at the same time as they are analyzing that evidence to understand the history of the region. Over the course of the semester in this seminar, we examine a large number of films (those the class watches together in their entirety, films I show clips from, and a number of other films presented by students to the seminar) from several countries (the Soviet Union and also the postwar state socialist countries of Eastern Europe) and over a long period of time (from the early Soviet films of the 1920s through some of the early post-socialist films of the 1990s).

For this reason, I felt strongly that the final project should have the goal of synthesis – after our work in the semester, what did they think they had learned about film under state socialism? How did the films provide a window into the history of the

region? What were perhaps shared characteristics across time and national cultures, what things differed in different places and times? How did the films themselves as well as their creators and audiences change over time? For this synthetic thinking, I found the medium of Digital Storytelling to be helpful. In some ways, it got them over the thought that they needed a grand over-arching thesis to start with. In our planning lunch with Ashley Butler, as they started organizing how they would group together their material, they were thinking about the relationships between the pieces, moving things around, discussing how to group topics and films, in other words, they were working on their synthesis organically and quite democratically. I was quite impressed with this part of the planning that I observed.

The second goal that I had with this grant project was to get them thinking about film narrative from the inside out. All semester we watch films and often use a certain language about their creators' intentions or what the film "says" or "shows." I thought that it would be both fun and thought-provoking to create a film of their own, and for them to think about these questions of authorship from the other side of the equation. Because we only got the grant after the semester had started, and this was not a film-making class, I wanted to do something that wouldn't intrude too much on our seminar time. Ashley Butler was able to come in multiple times to the end section of our seminar for short sessions on topics of planning a visual narrative, copyright in visual creations, to introduce the iSkysoft software for creating clips and the WeVideo platform for creating the films themselves. This was a wonderful way to take a technical shortcut to video authorship. The students didn't have to learn too much technology but were fully able to think about many of the important issues that face the creators of even serious films. What did they want to say to the audience, what did they want the audience to see, how should the material be organized, how to credit the creators of copyrighted material, and many other questions (how to adapt their "scripts" from essays to film). I think these technologies and methods have a lot to recommend them – it was quite empowering for the students to realize at that planning meeting that they actually already had all they needed – the software, their own papers and presentation handouts, and that the work was in the presentation/authorship/storytelling, the creation of the digital narrative.

III. Future Applications:

I am very pleased with the results, and I actually hope to build on this further in future iterations of the seminar. I am not yet sure if I will build on the actual website created by this group of students, creating a larger and fuller index and website over time, or if perhaps it is best to let each group find their own format for their synthesis. I will probably continue to think about this before I teach it again. Also, because this was both my first experience with this project and I began the semester before the grant was decided, I think future versions will benefit from my more concrete understanding of what can be done in the space of the academic semester and what some pitfalls may be. In the end, because of time, the students only

produced three videos, but perhaps if I integrate the technology training into the seminar earlier, they could produce a few more, or submit them for peer editing over the semester.

The three groups produced quite different films and they are of differing quality in several aspects, ranging from technical issues to their choice of visuals, quality of sound and narration, as well as even the analytical content itself. Peer review, seeing what others have been able to do or what tricks they've discovered, could help with many of these issues, I think. And, of course, if the reviews were earlier in the course, it would give time for revisions, whereas these students were really working on this as a final project, mostly during the final couple of weeks of the semester.

The Digital Storytelling grant provided me with the support and impetus for a leap to a very new and potentially daunting final project for my seminar. I am neither a tech expert nor a film-maker, and so would have been hesitant to assign a project to my students that I wouldn't have known how to do myself. With support from the CIP, especially the incredibly helpful shepherding of Ashley Butler through her classroom instruction and tutorials, (as well as very helpful consultations with Jenna Nolt and Joe Murphy at the outset), my students were able to produce an impressive digital narrative as their final project, working as a group and not dependent on me. Particularly because of the seminar's subject matter, this project really enhanced and deepened the students' engagement with film as an object of cultural production and as historical evidence.