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MODERN MOTION PISTURES AND TV SERIES AS TOOLS OF SOFT POWER

Abstract

The article highlights examples of the use of soft power in films and serial content using the example of the USA, Russia and some countries of the post-Soviet area. The author makes a conclusion that this usage is influenced by government regulations and efforts of subjects in the sphere of production and purchases of entertainment content. The combination of these factors results in the production of content that carries out the desired narratives.

Keywords: *entertainment content, TV, soft power, cinema, motion pictures, TV series.*

If by hard power we mean force or, as it is be called nowadays, ‘kinetic’ influence, then all methods of sociocultural influence – cinema, theater, literature, arts in general – should undoubtedly be classified as soft power. However, if we consider the methods and degrees of socio-cultural impact on society,¹ it will become obvious that ‘the degree of softness’ of content are not the same.

In Russian on- and off-the-air TV broadcast programs since spring 2022 till spring 2023, a significant increase in socio-political broadcasting in comparison to entertainment broadcasting (both TV shows and series) has become obvious. It seems logical that at the acute moment of open confrontation between Russia and forces of the united West represented by Ukrainian proxies, the Russian audience was craving for detailed

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¹ Зоран Милошевић (2021), *Светост и дух времена*, Београд: Институт за политичке студије.

information and explanations of ongoing processes, which was brought out by information and analytic television programs which differed in directness and power of influence on the audience. We consider such types of sociocultural influence to be the hardest of the palette of soft power, to which various types of arts in general belong.

Starting from the spring of 2023 onwards, the broadcasting of socio-political content began to gradually move towards ratings preceding the start of the special military operation, giving more space in all types of broadcast to entertainment content and, in particular, feature and TV series content. Thus, at the conference “Media Space 2023: Trends and Transformations”, Ksenia Boletskaya, Director of Business Relations at “Yandex”, said: “If in 2021-2022 Russia fought for leadership with the United States – both countries produced about 30% of the most popular TV series, then already in March 2023, domestic (Russian) films occupied 43% of the top index. The share of American TV series dropped down to 22%. The third place is kept by Japanese content (14%), the fourth is Turkish (7.5%). South Korean TV series (3%) close the top five”. According to unconfirmed data, the number of original Russian TV series released in 2023 is 241 projects.¹

The content analysis of Russian feature films and TV series lies beyond the scope of this article, so we will only note that values and constants stated inside the content, which, while being quite various, still demonstrates the continuation of the trend that we described back in 2020.² In the present article, we will use some examples of feature films and series soft power.

Divergent impacts of arts on society were noted already by Plato in his dialogue *Republic*. Thus, in the third book, ambiguously, in the author’s opinion, examples from the Homer’s poetry are given:

“And what about this? Won’t our youngsters need moderation?”

“Of course.”

“Aren’t these the most important elements of moderation for the multitude: being obedient to the rulers, and being themselves rulers of the pleasures of drink, sex, and eating?”

“They are, at least in my opinion.”

“So I suppose we’ll assert that it’s fine to say the sort of thing Diomedes says in Homer,

¹ Igor Maltsev (2023), “The Frontline is At the Proper Spot”, *Telegraph*, December 31.

² В. Л. Дубровин, С. Н. Комиссаров (2020), “Консервативный поворот прокатного российского кино – шаг к восстановлению ценностного континуума? (на примере лидеров российского проката 2015-2020)”, *Гуманитарий Юга России*, Том 9, № 3, 216-231.

Friend, keep quiet, and obey my word

and what's connected with this.

Breathing might the Achaeans went.

In silence, afraid of their leaders,

and everything else of the sort.”

“Yes, these things are fine.”

“And what about this?

Heavy with wine, with eyes of a dog and heart of a deer.

And what comes right after, and all the rest of the youthful insolence of private men to rulers that anyone has ever said in speech or in poem are they fine things to say?”

“No, they are not fine”.³

In the entire third book, Plato talks about the impact of Homer's power of persuasion on the youth and on the soldiers, that is, on representatives of society who have already been called or are about to be called upon to defend the state, that is, to carry out that very 'kinetic' confrontation, which is being expanded today on a scale that exceeds the wildest fantasies of ancient thinkers.

Moving from Ancient Greece to modern times, we suggest using some examples to consider film and TV series feature content as a tool of soft power.

American filmmakers should be considered trendsetters in this sphere. Everyone knows the film franchise “Top Gun” (1986) and “Top Gun: Maverick” (2022), which glorifies the American Air Force, American military-industrial complex (MIC) and American combat fraternity opposing international villains, as well as “Black Hawk Down” (2001), in which the losses of American personnel and materiel in Somalia (the story is based on real events) is praised as a heroic feat in the fight against evil. These examples are obvious and straightforward. It is much more unexpected to look at the famous romantic comedy “Pretty Woman” (1990) as an instrument of soft power. If you carefully follow not only the story of the happy love of a modern Cinderella and a handsome millionaire, you will notice the conflict around which the affair of Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) goes on. In the picture Edward Lewis is going to purchase and later sell off piece by piece the distressed company which belongs to a good-looking elderly gentleman, James Morse (Ralph Bellamy), the company which builds destroyers for the US Navy. In the negotiations scenes one can hear about the US Congressional

³ Plato (1968), *The Republic*, 389d-390a.

Appropriations Committee, about the Bill on the purchase of warships etc. Finally, Richard Gere's character, who has undergone his inner metamorphosis, tells Ralph Bellamy's character that he wants to cooperate with the latter in order to save the company. The elderly gentleman hugs the transformed business shark: "I'm proud of you, son!", and joyfully exclaims to the lawyers: "Mr. Lewis and I will make ships together, huge powerful ships!" Further on, the happy end with the protagonist returning to Cinderella/ the princess, case-hardens the connection between "warships – pride – love – happiness" in the minds of the audience. We have not conducted a study on how many viewers of "Pretty Woman" paid attention to the plot with the battleships, we admit that they were not numerous, but the film is still being demonstrated on different media screens with stable success as a perfect fairy tale about love – with a pronounced element of soft power, which, undoubtedly, affects its audience.

The series "The West Wing" (1999-2006, 7 seasons) shows the inside daily routine of the US presidential administration. The center of the story is not intrigue and behind-the-scenes struggle, but hard, day-to-day fruitful work for the benefit of the American people. The picture shows people of flesh and blood who sometimes make mistakes, but they always strive to correct them to put things right for an ordinary American voter, and for the United States as a whole. The memorable image of the man-of-the-people hardworking President performed by Martin Sheen and his team effectively and softly act to strengthen confidence in the US government system.

Since the Soviet period, Russia always energetically used cinema as an instrument of soft power (the issue of correlation between concepts of "soft power" and "propaganda" requires to be discussed additionally).

It was in the film "Alexander Nevsky" (1938) by Sergei Eisenstein that the audience heard "We have a saying: from your native land, die, but don't leave" and "Go and tell everyone in foreign lands that Rus' is alive! Let them come to visit us without fear, but if anyone comes to us with a sword, he will die by the sword! This is where the Russian land stands and will stand forever!"

Accordant message was declared by the Russian President Vladimir Putin during the meeting of the World Russian People's Council on November 23, 2023:

"The Russian world (Русский мир) contains all the generations of our ancestors and our descendants who will live on after us. The

Russian world includes Ancient Rus', the Muscovite Tsardom, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, today's modern Russia, which is regaining, strengthening and increasing its sovereignty as a world power. The Russian world unites everyone who has spiritual bonds with our Motherland, who consider themselves native speakers of Russian, who are native to Russian history and culture regardless of their ethnical or religious affiliation.

Without Russians as an ethnic group, without the Russian people, there is not and cannot be the Russian world and Russia itself. This statement does not contain any claim to superiority, exclusivity, or chosenness. This is just a fact, as it is the fact that in our Constitution the status of the Russian language as the language of the state-forming people is definitely secured. Russian is more than ethnicity. This has always been the case, by the way, in the history of our country. This includes cultural, spiritual, historical identity. Being Russian means, first of all, a responsibility. I repeat, there is a huge responsibility to preserve Russia, this is what true patriotism means. And being a Russian I want to say: only united, strong, sovereign Russia is capable to guarantee the future and unique development of both the Russian people and all other peoples who have lived and are living in our country for centuries, united by common historical destiny."

In the digest "Historical Consciousness of Russians: Assessments of the Past, Memory, Symbols"⁴ edited by M. K. Gorshkov, based on sociological research, an unambiguous conclusion is made: "The main sources of historical information for representatives of almost all socio-demographic groups of the population are historical feature films and documentaries, television series, family archives, as well as the Internet (especially among young people)".⁵ Speaking about the Internet, we should mention modern trends in media consumption, according to which, through the Internet, the audience often consumes feature content originally created for TV channels and/or online platforms.⁶

A huge body of artworks forming Russian beliefs and values was created during Soviet era portraying victories and triumphs of the Russian and Soviet people during numerous wars, especially during the

⁴ М. К. Горшкова (под ред.) (2022), *Историческое сознание россиян: оценки прошлого, память, символы (опыт социологического измерения)*, Институт социологии, Москва: Издательство Весь Мир, 248.

⁵ *Ibid*, 242.

⁶ Н. А. Васильев, В. Л. Дубровин (2023), "Изменения в медиапотреблении в современной России", *Знание, Понимание, Умение*, №. 3, 107-129.

Great Patriotic War (WWII for Western audience). As a striking example of the effective use of soft power, it is worth citing the documentary film “The Defeat of German Troops near Moscow” (1942) by directors I. Kopalin and L. Varlamov, which was the first Russian film to receive the Academy Award in the category “Best Documentary” in 1943.

A good example of the use of soft power to depict by artistic means the feat of Russian military and the Russian-Serbian combat brotherhood is the feature film co-produced by Russia and Serbia “The Balkan Line (Балканский рубеж)” (2019), based on the true story of the battle march of a unit of the Russian Airborne Forces to the Slatina Airfield in June 1999.

The development of confrontation between Russia and Ukraine starting with the Russian Spring of 2014 onwards, including the events of the period of the Special Military Operation (SMO), are gradually beginning to receive formalization through the means of cinematic language, although not as quickly as it was previously imagined. On one hand, highly rated feature films “Sunshine (Солнцезёк)” (dir. M. Brius, 2021) and “Donbass. Outskirts (Донбасс. Окраина)” (dir. R. Davletyarov, 2018) have been created in Russia. On the other hand, the thematically similar projects “Crimea (Крым)” (dir. A. Pimanov, 2017) and “Witness (Свидетель)” (dir. D. Dadunashvili, 2023) were not appreciated as high by the audience. Of course, creative interpretation of reality, especially the one so vital and painful, cannot be equally successful in every manifestation. Therefore, as in due time with regard to projects about the Great Patriotic War, we should expect an increase in the number and quality of feature films and TV series about SMO and Novorossiia.

On the other side of the Special Military Operation frontline, on the territory of Ukraine, the statement of one of the founders of the Ukrainian SSR, V. I. Lenin, about cinema as the most important of arts is also well remembered. And if during the Soviet period the image of a Ukrainian in feature films used to fit into the general multinational outline of the USSR policy – “Tractor Drivers (Трактористы)” (dir. I. Puryev, 1939), “Only Old Men Go to Battle (В бой идут одни старики)” (dir. L. Bykov, 1974), then after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Ukraine gaining independence, Ukrainian film and television content became the sphere for implanting different values of primarily anti-Russian sort.

We suggest reviewing the dynamics of the use of Ukrainian soft power during the post-Soviet period.⁷ For example, let's consider the retrospective of works of Ukrainian director and producer Oles Yanchuk.

"Famine-33" (1991): the picture is based on the story "The Yellow Prince" by Vasil Barka. The plot depicts events of 1932-1933, "when the crimes of the Stalin-Bolshevik regime against the Ukrainian peasantry led to tragedy – total famine in Ukraine".

"Attentat: Autumn Murder in Munich" (1995), A film about the activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the liquidation of Stepan Bandera by Bogdan Stashinsky in Munich.

"The Unbowed" (2000): the plot is based on the inglorious fate of the UPA commander Roman Shukhevych, the film's slogan is nationalistic: "Heroes never die".

"The Iron Hundred" (2004); Abstract from the Russian website Kinopoisk: "A hundred soldiers of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, led by Mikhaïl Duda-Gromenko, fearlessly fought first with the Bolsheviks, then with the fascists. It is clear that the forces were unequal, but the power of spirit and faith in the final victory propelled the indestructible "Iron Hundred," the remnants of which in 1947 carried out a heroic raid to the West, to Bavaria, which was then controlled by the American military administration" The website imdb.com states that "one hundred heroically fought the Bolsheviks and Nazis"; there is no mention of a heroic getaway to surrender to the mercy of American troops.

"Vladyka Andrey" (2008) – here both kinopoisk.ru and imdb.com repeat their annotations almost verbatim: "The film is based on the biography of Metropolitan of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church Andrey Sheptytsky, who resisted the repression of the totalitarian regimes of Stalin and Hitler and chose the path of serving God and people." Particulars about Sheptytsky at different points of time solemnly welcoming both Hitler and Stalin through the media as liberators from oppression is omitted from the brief information on the project.

"The Secret Diary of Symon Petlyura" (2018), a "documentary drama", as kinopoisk.ru characterizes this film, illustrates the period of Paris emigration of the chairman of the directory of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) until his murder. Imdb.com adds: "an assassination

⁷ Е. Попов (2022), "Постмајданска Україна: от култа нових историјских хероја до промене цивилизацијске метрице", Зоран Милошевић (прир.), *Историја као инструмент геополитике*, Београд, Институт за политичке студије.

orchestrated in the Kremlin at the very beginning of the Soviet occupation of Ukraine”.

Thus, considering the functioning of only one Ukrainian filmmaker, one is able to see a rather harmonious and consistent system of narrative construction which opposes the Russian Empire, the USSR and the Russian Federation against “historical Ukraine”. Undoubtedly, such products have made and continue to make significant contribution to creation of anti-Russian Ukrainian identity.

In addition, we will outline another important direction in the projection of soft power, which is associated not so much with content, but with personalities. In the aforementioned film about Petlyura, the part of Mykhailo Grushevsky, chairman of the Ukrainian Central Rada, professor and academician, author of the “History of Ukraine-Rus” and creator of the nationalist concept of a Ukrainian nation separate from the Russians, is performed by Bohdan Benyuk former member of the Ukrainian Parliament and the Deputy Chairman of the ultranationalist party “Svoboda” responsible for relations with Ukrainians all over the world. Despite his anti-Russian political activities, the actor Benyuk recently took part in Russian cinema: as a Ukrainian engineer of the crew in the film “Kandahar” (2010), as the singer Leonid Utesov in the TV series “Liquidation” (2007). Comprehension of the value-ideological settings possibly embedded by the actor into the performance of his part requires separate activity - some content analysis in the first place, which will always be an after-the-fact action in relation to works that already saw the light of day.

Few more artworks by Ukrainian filmmakers. The “Cyborgs: Heroes Don’t Die” (2017) picturizes a legend about Ukrainian military volunteers who hold back the pressure of Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) units, barricaded themselves at the Donetsk airport in 2014. The film demonstrates different types of Ukrainian nationalists – the spectrum from a native Ukrainian-speaking “Westerners” from the West of Ukraine to native Russian-speakers whose Russian parents at some point unexpectedly found themselves and their Russian regions voluntarily pushed into the Soviet Ukraine, who nowadays consider anti-Russianness to be the meaning of their existence.

The plot of the Ukrainian-Polish Christmas co-production “Shchedryk” (2022) set up during the WW II brings together three families: a Ukrainian, a Polish and a Jewish. Nasty Nazis and brutish Soviet security officers almost contemporaneously oppress all the families’ members

who, on the contrary, help each other to escape. Keeping in mind the history of the Babi Yar tragedy and many others of the kind, the touching images of the rescue of Jews by Ukrainians look especially vivid. The leitmotif of the film is a song “Shchedrik”, performing which a Ukrainian girl dreams of reconciling all the people around.

If we turn ourselves to depiction of Polish themes in Ukrainian cinema, then a recent motion picture “Dovbush” (2023), released in Ukrainian cinema theaters in August 2023, comes to mind. In it, the “Western Ukrainian Robin Hood” Oleksa Dovbush fights in the XVII century against Polish occupiers. The message of the movie – murder and destruction of Poles being the duty of any honest Ukrainian – caused keen susceptibility and sharp response in modern Poland⁸ so we should keep in mind that soft power does affect audience in different ways.

A Polish picture “Volyn” (2016), which caused furious reaction on both sides of the Polish-Ukrainian border and was dedicated to the Volyn massacre of 1943, in turn, depicted through the means of cinema the tragedy of Polish peasants and their families exterminated by Ukrainian nationalists. According to unverified data, the film “Volyn” is prohibited for cinema demonstration on the territory of Ukraine.

Compared to other post-Soviet countries, the Republic of Belarus is practically inactive in using soft power to promote the anti-Russian agenda. This is due to the strong alliance relations with the Russian Federation, as well as the fact that Belarusian cinema production capacities since gaining the country independence in 1991 are busy mainly with projects for Russian screens, leaving minimal space for local cinema, and the country population does not allow development of a full-fledged content industry for domestic consumption. Nevertheless, national motion pictures – national in every sense – are being filmed in the Republic of Belarus. The movie “Kupala” (2020) is perhaps the most striking recent example of such an artwork. A biopic about the life of the poet Yanka Kupala was supposed to make a significant contribution to nation-building – and not even to Belarusian, but to “Litvinian” – gently (and sometimes roughly) promoting the mythology of the Grand Principality of Lithuania as a truly Belarusian state as opposed to the alien, oppressive and totalitarian Russia. A detailed analysis of myths, distortions and outright mistakes of Kupala is contained in the article by K. V. Shevchenko “Cinema as an ideological hallucinogen. Meditations in

⁸ Мария Нестерова (2023), “Самый дорогой украинский фильм “Довбуш”: красавица-невеста, империализм, поляки в бешенстве”, *Telegraph*, September 2.

front of a toxic screen”⁹ However, unlike the Ukrainian Government regulator in the sphere of film distribution, the Ministry of Culture of Belarus, after considering the film for wide release, decided not to allow the exhibition of the picture. We admit that there was a whole complex of reasons behind the refusal to release the film on wide screens, but the most important thing here is the result – the audience, if it wishes, can watch this story exclusively on YouTube.

The Republic of Kazakhstan also uses soft power of audiovisual products. An example is the series “Red Level” (2018, dir. by Valery Myznikov), which was created to order of the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the KTK TV channel. The series depicts an investigation by officers of the National Security Committee (NSC) of Kazakhstan into a number of crimes that turn out to be linked to the chain of Islamists preparing a large-scale terrorist attack. The main idea of the picture is the unacceptability and inadmissibility of existence and participation in extremist Islamist groups, and the disastrous nature of such a path for its participants.

So, to summarize:

1. Soft power is present on different scale in almost all the motion pictures and TV series.
2. Each nation state, through local producers, to the extent possible, introduces currently relevant narratives into feature content. At the same time, the connection between the state and the ‘creators’ is mutual: not everything is imposed from above, a lot of things rise up from creative workers ‘following the heart’, after which they become accepted by the state.
3. It is necessary to continue studies of the use of soft power through feature content with the subsequent application of successful experience into the Russian practice to generate demands for Russian identity already at the stage of content creation.

⁹ Кирилл Шевченко (2023), “Кино как идеологический галлюциноген. Размышления у токсичного экрана”, *Наука Вера Культура*, Октябрь 21.

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