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FEATURE FILMS AND DOCUMENTARIES ON SOVIET HISTORY AS A MEANS OF CONSTRUCTING POLITICAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Abstract

The author of the article evaluates the manifestations of the construction of political identity in modern fiction and documentary films about the Soviet period of Russian history. The methodological basis of the research is social constructivism, as well as qualitative discourse analysis and an axiological approach. The empirical basis of the article includes feature films and documentaries that released on the screen in 1992–2023. The author came to conclusions about the loss of the ideological integrity of the content of post-Soviet film production, about the increasing importance of the attractive and communicative functions of films. At the same time, since 2012, the state order for the formation of patriotic values and the construction of a positive historical identity of Russian citizens has been increasing, what is gradually changing the image of the Soviet past in the mass consciousness.

Keywords: *feature films, documentaries, Soviet history, contemporary Russia, political identity construction, means.*

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INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the research topic. Feature films and documentaries are an important means of forming political identity and reproducing historical memory. Despite the growing competition of new genres of visual and sound effects on consciousness (short videos, blogs), films and television films retain their influence on identity and collective memory due to their artistic properties. The influence of film production on political identity is also increasing due to the informatization of modern society, which has generated the effects of virtualization of reality. This is confirmed by public opinion polls.

The topic is especially relevant for the research of identity and historical memory in post-Soviet Russia. In our opinion, the topic has not been studied enough. Contradictory assessments of modern film production about Soviet history are manifested in scientific works.

The purpose of the article is to identify the manifestations of the construction of political identity in modern fiction and documentary films about the Soviet period of Russian history.

The methodological basis of the research is social constructivism, as well as an axiological approach and qualitative discourse analysis. Social constructivism provides an interpretation of identity as the result of purposeful formation, the fruit of the efforts of elites and specialists in shaping public opinion. Identity is mobile. It reflects the modern demand of the ruling groups, and not the objective historical reality. Political identity consists of a variety of interrelated social practices and symbols, images and myths. In this aspect, the works of P. Berger and T. Lukman,¹ F. Barth² are important. The axiological approach³ is aimed at identifying the values of society and various social groups, forms of manifestation of values in political orientations and emotional perceptions of works of cinematography. Qualitative discourse analysis allows us to establish typical images and symbols used in public communication, stereotypes of perception of reality approved by society or

¹ P. Berger, T. Lukman (1995), *Social construction of reality: A treatise on the sociology of knowledge*, Moscow: Medium.

² F. Barth (1969), *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organization of culture difference*, Bergen: Universitetsforl.

³ N. Kallos, O. Trasnea (1982), "Political Values: Their Status and Social Function", *International Political Science Review*, London, Vol. 3, № 2, 182-189.

significant social communities.⁴ The works of P. Nora⁵ and M. Halbwaks⁶ on the essence of historical memory, A. Assman – on the methods of historical policy⁷ have methodological significance. Applied methods of analyzing films as historical sources are argued by M. S. Zvonareva⁸ and V. V. Smirnov.⁹

The empirical basis of the article includes Russian feature films and documentaries about the events of Soviet history, which were released on the screen in 1992–2023. Taking into account the significant volume of sources, we took for analysis the films with the largest viewing audience and recognizable in public opinion. Ratings published on Internet sites were used to identify them. The films are ranked according to the historical period described in them, as well as by genre (detective, romance, thriller, documentary investigation, biographical cinema). The author's greatest attention is focused on films about the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. The results of questionnaire and expert surveys, focus group studies are also cited.

The degree of elaboration of the scientific problem is insufficient. Sociologists began to explore the topic of historical memory and the sources of its construction in the mid-2000s (article by L. I. Afanasyeva and V. I. Merkushin).¹⁰ Film critic N. A. Zorkaya examined the visual images of the Great Patriotic War.¹¹ Historian V. A. Khokhlov drew attention to new interpretations of the Great Patriotic War in the fantasy genre.¹² V. A. Dronov studied the issues of the authenticity of the image of the enemy in modern Russian films about the war.¹³ O. V. Rodionova

⁴ O. K. Pedersen (2009) *Discourse Analysis*, Copenhagen: International Center for Business and Politics Copenhagen Business School.

⁵ P. Nora (1999), *France – memory*, St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg University Press.

⁶ M. Halbwaks (2007), *The social framework of memory*, Moscow: New Publishing House.

⁷ A. Assman (2014), *The Long Shadow of the Past: Memorial culture and historical politics*, Moscow: New Literary Review.

⁸ M. S. Zvonareva (2019), “Documentary cinema as a historical source: features of analysis and interpretation”, *Locus: people, society, cultures, meanings*, No. 3, 98-107.

⁹ V. V. Smirnova (2019), “Documentary cinema in the system of mass communication: a source of formation of knowledge and ideas among the audience”, *Communication: electronic scientific journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, 66-72.

¹⁰ L. I. Afanasyeva, V. I. Merkushin (2005), “The Great Patriotic War in the historical memory of Russia”, *Sociological research*, no. 11, 11–22.

¹¹ N. A. Zorkaya (2005), “Visual images of war”, *Memory of the war 60 years later: Russia, Germany, Europe*. Moscow: New Literary Review, 736-753.

¹² V. A. Khokhlov (2010), “The Great Patriotic War in modern Russian cinema: continuation in the fantasy future”, *New Historical Bulletin*, no. 1 (23), 67-74.

¹³ V. A. Dronov (2015), “Historical and attributive authenticity of the image of the enemy in modern films about the Great Patriotic War”, *Power*, vol. 21, no. 4, 182-186.

explored the image of the war from the perspective of reflecting historical memory and the way viewers identify themselves.¹⁴ I. I. Kuznetsov emphasizes the contradictions between the patriotic and nihilistic perception of the Great Patriotic War in modern Russian cinema.¹⁵ The impact of cinema on the formation of patriotic memory of Russians is highlighted by I. V. Griban and K. A. Antropov,¹⁶ V. E. Anisimov, E. V. Gafiyatova and E. D. Kalinnikova.¹⁷ So, a fairly developed tradition of research on post-Soviet cinema as a source of historical knowledge and values of Russians has been formed. At the same time, the political discourse of modern films about Soviet history is dynamically changing, as well as priority topics. This makes the problem poorly understood.

THE STUDY

After the collapse of the USSR, the attitude of Russian citizens towards the Soviet period of history has radically changed. It should be borne in mind that cardinal transformations took place in the context of the collapse of the traditional Soviet film distribution system. In the 1990s, many movie theaters were turned into commercial establishments. Collective viewing of films in halls of 500–1500 people was replaced by individual viewing on video recorders, then on computer screens, laptops, smartphones. The culture of discussing movies in school lessons, after family viewing, has disappeared. Computer games and clip-based thinking had an irreversible effect on film production changes, destroying the line between the real and virtual world, weakening the viewer's ability to think critically and perceive complex ideas. New genres of profit-oriented Russian fiction and documentary films have emerged: thrillers, erotic films, “scandalous” investigations and short videos created not by professional historians, but by dubious publicists. Until the

¹⁴ O. V. Rodionova (2017) “The image of the Great Patriotic War in cinematography as a reflection of cultural and historical memory and the mechanism of self-identification”, *Culturology*, no. 1 (768), 146–167.

¹⁵ I. I. Kuznetsov (2020), “Russian cinema about the Great Patriotic War: between historical narrative and political sabotage”, *Genocide of peoples: the tragedy of the era of the Second World War* (round table – 09.25.2020), Moscow Pedagogical State University.

¹⁶ I. V. Griban, K. A. Antropov (2020), “Cinema and memory: The Great Patriotic War in the mirror of modern Russian cinema”, *West, East and Russia: Questions of universal history*. Yekaterinburg: Ural State Pedagogical University, Issue 23: Historical memory: genesis and problems of succession, 327–341.

¹⁷ V. E. Anisimov, E. V. Gafiyatova, E. D. Kalinnikova, (2022), “Realization of the idea of patriotism in film discourse: on the example of Russian patriotic cinema”, *Bulletin of the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia. Series: Theory of Language. Semiotics. Semantics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 96–124.

1990s, such genres were impossible in the USSR due to ideological and moral reasons.

In addition, feature films and documentaries of any time reflect the value system, aesthetics and typical images of the famous modern society, and not the “authentic” historical reality of a particular era shown on the screen. Filmmakers subconsciously transfer their life experience, a set of problems and attitudes to historical phenomena to the original plot. This was especially evident in the remakes of famous Soviet films – “And the dawns are quiet here...”, “Quiet Don”, “Chapaev”, etc. It is natural that viewers approve of Soviet original films more than remakes.

In fact, Russian society now represents a completely different audience than it did 35–40 years ago. Most of the current viewers have undergone primary socialization already in conditions of political pluralism and uncertain ideological orientations. They are disappointed in any ideological projects and expect only entertainment from film productions. But the opposite trend is also evident. A significant part of the audience, tired of constant revelations and negative assessments of history, seeks to create in their minds a positive image of the past, based on the continuity of perception of the events of the imperial, Soviet and modern periods. Let us explain for foreign readers that in Soviet cinema the negative image of “tsarist Russia” was rigidly opposed to the idealized image of the USSR, and many key aspects of Russian history, for example, the Orthodox civilizational value system, were ridiculed or hushed up. Now new generations of Russian citizens can create their historical knowledge and attitudes to the past more freely than before the beginning of Perestroika, being in a more adequate system of ideological coordinates.

In the 1990s, the predominance in public opinion had a nihilistic, supercritical perception of the Soviet experience; it was supported by the ruling elites through the restructuring of educational programs, support for anti-Soviet content in the mass media. For example, these are the assessments of the Stalinist period of history in the feature films “Khrushchev, mashinu!” (directed by A. German, 1998), “The Thief” (directed by P. Chukhrai, 1997) and “Tired of the Sun” (directed by N. Mikhalkov, 1994). In these films, the actions of ‘a little human being’ and a soulless, irrationally cruel totalitarian government; there is no positive hero or he is contradictory; there is no trust between people, and the heroes’ hopes for happiness are deceived. There is no positive ideal, no purpose in life. It is obvious that such values of the filmmakers of the 1990s are

a projection of modern realities on the historical past. But viewers increasingly perceived such attitudes negatively, and viewers were tired of the monopoly of negative images of the past. As a result, a vacuum of positive values arose, which the directors tried to fill by glorifying the pre-revolutionary (imperial) period of history and creating biographical films about monarchs, generals, poets, the discoverer of Siberia Ermak, etc. Since the mid-1990s, there has been a reduction in the share of anti-Soviet content on Russian television. It is being replaced by re-transmissions of Soviet historical films, however, with the exception of those in which the communist ideology was clearly expressed. There were few new films about the Great Patriotic War, and in them the emphasis was on existential experiences of the horror of war, rather than on overcoming fear, not on heroism for the sake of high social goals. In this series, only the films “June 22, exactly at 4 o’clock...” (directed by B. Galkin, 1992), “The General” (I. Nikolaev, 1992), “Angels of Death” (Yu. Ozerov, 1993), “I am a Russian soldier” (A. Malyukov, 1995), “Essay on Victory Day” (S. Ursulyak, 1998).

In the 2000s, the situation gradually began to change towards a positive perception of such aspects of Soviet history as the Victory in the Great Patriotic War, the friendship of peoples, the courage of soldiers, and the conduct of an independent foreign policy. A landmark event was the release of the feature film “In August of the 1944” (directed by M. Ptashuk), a fairly successful film adaptation of V. Bogomolov’s novel. This detective film shows the feat of Soviet counterintelligence workers “SMERSH” during the liberation of Belarus and Poland from the Nazis. The characters of the film are shown with obvious sympathy, the director tried to preserve the context and tonality of the novel as much as possible, although he did not quite manage to squeeze the dynamic action into an hour and a half of screen time, he had to sacrifice showing the memories and experiences of the characters. In fact, this is the first positive image of Soviet security personnel in feature films in 15 years. It is no coincidence that the liberal-minded cultural critic Anna Talaver accused the creators of the films “In August of the 1944” and “The Star” of static images and categorical division of roles according to the “friend–enemy” scheme, saw in the reviewed film a dangerous sign of the revival of the “Soviet myth” about the war.¹⁸ From our point

¹⁸ A. Talaver (2013), *The memory of the Great Patriotic War in post-Soviet cinema. Stages of understanding the past (from the 1990s to the 2000s)*: preprint WP 20/2013/06. Moscow: Publishing House of the Higher School of Economics, 28-29.

of view, we are talking about the revival of a healthy and more objective patriotism than in Soviet times; about pride in our people.

At the same time, the image of the Great Patriotic War in films and television films of the 2000s and 2010s underwent commercialization and virtualization. It is explained that as the contemporaries of the war pass away from life, the memory of the events of the past becomes more and more mediated, constructed. The films “We are from the Future” (directed by A. Malyukov, 2008), “The White Tiger” (directed by K. Shakhnazarov, 2012), the TV series “SMERSH” (started in 2007). Their plots are frankly fantastic, and the aesthetics are a mixture of the style of computer games and American action movies. Given that such films received government funding for production, let’s assume that there is a certain political order to blur the “Soviet” discourse about the war. In our opinion, the tendency to dehumanize the plot and the style of its presentation is dangerous. The struggle of ideologies and principles of the world order is replaced in such films by the final battle of “hero No. 1” with “hero No. 2”, in which the physically stronger wins. This trend is fraught with a dangerous substitution of orientations: for example, in the movie “The Priest” (2010, directed by V. Khotinenko) the main character is an Orthodox priest who collaborates with the Nazis, and Soviet prisoners of war are shown as uncomplaining and humiliated, they do not inspire sympathy.

The aesthetic aspect cannot be ignored either, since the choice of color, image shape, and music greatly affects the perception of works of art. If we compare the aesthetics of Soviet and modern films about the war, it is easy to notice the emphasis by current directors on the ‘dirty’ sides of life. From film to film, we are shown torn and dilapidated walls of houses, unshaven faces and sloppy clothes, poor living conditions (for example, in the TV series “Kill Stalin”, “Forgotten”, the film “Five Brides”) – even in situations where the plot does not require it. On the contrary, the life and military affairs of the enemies are demonstrated in an embellished form, with obvious admiration (in the TV series “Red Chapel”, “Zorge”).

Undoubtedly, such signs of the times existed in historical reality. But in Soviet-era films, the viewer saw, first of all, the opposite – the faces of the positive characters glowing with happiness, energy and moral superiority. And this was not an idealization, not a ‘varnishing’ of reality, but an expression of the value principle of Soviet cinema: the spirituality of the characters is more important than the convenience of

clothes or the comfort of life. If we move away from empirical historical description towards civilizational analysis, then the aesthetics of the best Soviet films about the war (for example, “Cranes are Flying”, “Ballad of a Soldier”, “Officers”, “And the Dawns are quiet here”) latently reflected the Orthodox worldview. Heroes who selflessly die or suffer for their Motherland, overcoming fear and pain for the sake of national Victory, show the highest human values. They inspire empathy in the viewer, the desire to help them and be the same in reality. Alas, the heroes of countless modern films applying the aesthetics of a thriller or a computer game do not arouse compassion and pride, they are lifeless, even if they are depicted technically perfectly. After all, they express the values of another civilization – the Western one, which is absolutely alien to Russian society. Such values can only be imitated, they are meaningless.

At the same time, film broadcasting and television in the 2000s ‘cleansed’ the events of the Soviet past from communist ideology, bringing to the fore the perception of ‘big’ history through the eyes of the ‘little man’ with his daily pragmatic concerns. One of the main themes in the films of the 2000s remained the confrontation between man and the state. It was shown by the example of a conflict between a hero – a representative of the people and a member of the party and state authorities or a ‘villain-chekist’. Positive features were given to heroes who defend their views, act independently and are not afraid to take risks (borrowing the image of the hero from Western, especially American cinema, is obvious). At the same time, characters who supported the values accepted in Soviet society and acted in accordance with the orders of their superiors were evaluated negatively, as A. A. Dupak rightly believes.¹⁹ A series of documentaries covering the daily life of Soviet people in the 1950s and 80s became characteristic in this aspect: their work, rest, love, search for scarce goods, hobbies in music, sports, etc. The emphasis in such films was on the struggle between people’s desire for freedom and bureaucracy, ideological rigidity of power. Covering the biographies of famous artists, singers and writers, the directors of documentaries of the 2000s emphasized the conflict of intellectuals with the authorities. The positive hero of these films was the ‘silent majority’ of ordinary people, who found loopholes for enrichment and self-expression, gradually making society and the state more free.

¹⁹ A. A. Dupak (2019), “The image of the Soviet man in Russian cinema: a sociological analysis”, *Bulletin of St. Petersburg University. Sociology*, vol. 12, issue 4, 385.

But there was another version of the liberal discourse: the glorification of dissident heroes who hate power, fighters for new phenomena in culture, art and fashion. In the TV series “Forgotten” (directed by V. Schegol’kov, 2011), the main character is a young lawyer who returned from the war with a disability, investigates brutal murders committed by Communist party officials. He cohabits with the local Komsomol chief, secretly despising her and the entire system of government. The only good memory for the hero remains a fleeting affair with a Frenchwoman at the front. This series is simply saturated with hatred of the Soviet system. The film “Dudes” (directed by V. Todorovsky, 2008) is also characteristic. In it, the bulk of the youth of the 1950s are presented as thoughtless “cogs” of a repressive machine headed by careerists. The positive hero is a student and a Komsomol member who is fond of jazz and becomes a ‘stylyaga’ – a carrier of a youth counterculture that imitated the Western way of life. In the finale of the film, the demonstration of young oppositionists from different times is emotionally praised. Similar ideas are expressed more restrainedly in the television series “Thaw” (2013, directed by V. Todorovsky). It is difficult to get rid of the impression that the political projection of such a discourse was the pro-Western attempts of the ‘color revolution’ in Russia in the winter of 2011–2012.

Since 2012, Russian cinema and television have been creating more and more films imbued with the ideas of patriotism and personal service to the common good. These are the films “Stalingrad”, “The Battle for Sevastopol”, “Upward Movement”, “Legend No. 17”, a series of documentaries about Soviet intelligence officers (“Legends of State Security”) and national politics (the cycle “USSR. The Empire is on the contrary”). At the same time, modern historical cinema is still a space of ideological competition. The “allergy” to communist ideologies remains partly in force (for example, in the TV series “Red Mountains”). Television films are also characteristic, in which sharply negative assessments of the creators of Soviet society are given – “Lenin. Inevitability” and “Trotsky”, the documentary series “Kronstadt 1921”. There is a contradictory perception in public opinion of a number of films about the enemies of the Soviet state – K. Mannerheim, A. Vlasov, and the leaders of the White Movement. Simultaneously with the changes in the value orientations of filmmakers, the priority historical periods and plots chosen for making films are changing. It is known that since 2012 the theme of the Victory of the Soviet people in the Great Patriotic War became the “core” of the memory policy and historical policy of

the Russian Federation. This is natural, since Victory is the only event in the Russian history of the twentieth century that integrates the vast majority of citizens and mobilizes them to defend their Homeland.

A mass questionnaire survey conducted by employees of the Federal Research Sociological Center (FNSC) In 2020, the Russian Academy of Sciences (a proportional sample of 2,000 people) confirmed that it is the Victory that respondents are most proud of (67% of respondents), and then in descending order – great poets, writers and composers, the christianization of Rus, Yuri Gagarin's flight into space, liberation from the Mongol yoke, the October Revolution of 1917, the formation of the USSR, the proclamation of the Russian Empire, the abolition of serfdom in 1861, and the reunion of Crimea with Russia.²⁰ 73% of the respondents acknowledged their interest in Russian history. It is important that the respondents recognized as sources of historical representations: 44% – feature films, 40% – documentaries, 32% – family memory, 26% – Internet resources, 25% – fiction and only 21% – history textbooks. At the bottom of the rating are scientific literature, scientific programs and talk shows on TV, memoirs of historical figures (from 12% to 21%).²¹ At the same time, 91% of respondents recognize themselves as patriots, there are no special age differences in the level of patriotism between young people and the elderly, as another questionnaire survey conducted by VCIOM in March 2023 shows (a sample of 1,600 people over the age of 18).²²

It is characteristic that in the ranking of the 100 most successful feature films in terms of profit and attendance for 2004–2023 are “T-34”, “Stalingrad”, “Battle for Sevastopol”, “Moving Up”, “Legend No. 17”, “Admiral”, “Salyut-7”, “9th Company”, “Time of the first”, “Kandahar”. Thus, films directly covering the Soviet period of history make up at least 10% of the most commercially successful films of Russian production.²³ Almost all of them relay to the viewer the values of pride in their country, hard work, dedication, and mutual assistance.

The attitude of Russian citizens towards the coverage of the history of the Great Patriotic War in the mass media is characteristic. A survey organized by the Public Opinion Foundation in April 2023 (a proportional sample of 1,500 people) confirms that 86% of respondents

²⁰ A. Chetverikova, Poll: what Russians consider symbols of the country and know about history.

²¹ *Ibidem*

²² Kaleidoskop Poll: More than 90% of Russians consider themselves patriots.

²³ Al'perina S. Kinopoisk presented the rating of “100 great films of the XXI century”.

consider Victory Day a holiday. Most often, respondents experience feelings of pride for the country and people on this day (32% of responses), joy (20%). The perception of the holiday is contradictory: at the same time, 16% feel grief, sorrow, sadness; 12% – fear, horror; 9% – memory of dead relatives. At the same time, the absolute majority of respondents recognize the coverage of the Great Patriotic War in the mass media as truthful (75% of the responses). 58% recognize their knowledge of the events of the war as sufficient.²⁴ Thus, Russian society has developed a positive perception of the history of the Great Patriotic War and the tone of media coverage of its events. But such a perception does not yet have sufficiently strong rational grounds, which is caused by the predominance of mass culture as a channel for relaying historical memory.

CONCLUSION

The author came to conclusions about the loss of the ideological integrity of the content of post-Soviet film production, about the growing importance of the entertainment and communicative functions of films. Having experienced stress while trying to force the imposition of Western liberal values, now the majority of Russians are trying to find support in symbols of historical pride, to build their new political identity based on continuity and a positive perception of Soviet achievements. On the contrary, a significant part of Russian society, especially young people and residents of large cities, have a negative or skeptical attitude towards positive assessments of the Soviet heritage. The inconsistency of the perception of history, eclecticism is manifested in both fiction and documentary films. Among them, films about the Great Patriotic War prevail – a historical event that unites Russian citizens most of all and has positive ratings in public opinion. The periodization of the development of post-Soviet historical cinema in Russia is given according to the criterion of the ideological orientation of the prevailing content. We have identified three stages in the development of film production: the 1990s, 2000–2012 and from 2012 to the present. The first stage is characterized by a radical rejection of Soviet ideologies, coverage of previously forbidden topics (White Movement, opposition, collaborationism, dissidence, etc.). The second stage is marked by a gradual weakening of pro-Western liberal tendencies and an increase in patriotic assessments of history, but no longer on a Marxist, but on a conservative basis. Since

²⁴ On the 78th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War.

2012, the state order for strengthening patriotic values and constructing a positive historical identity of Russian citizens has been gradually increasing, which is gradually changing the image of the Soviet past in the mass consciousness.

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