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Efim Dzigan: Pseudo-classic of the Soviet Cinema

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Abstract

The history of Soviet cinema in the course of certain political changes has been revised more than once in film studies. However, the authors of the article believe that in the works of the majority of Soviet and Russian film critics, the assessment of the artistic quality of Efim Dzigan's work has been unjustifiably overestimated for a long time. Not until recently, few articles expressed an alternative opinion on the political situation and the actual artistic significance of Dzigan's work. In the present article, the authors analyze the films by Efim Dzigan in the context of their assessment in different historical periods. They conclude that this is a case study of Soviet ideological film production – politically engaged but of the average artistic level; and "We are from Kronstadt" is not a masterpiece, but a film built on ideological stereotypes glorifying the revolution and the Bolsheviks. The materials for our research are E. Dzigan's films, film reviews and cultural studies research articles related to his work. The principal methods is a media text's analysis, classification and synthesis.

Keywords: soviet cinema, Efim Dzigan, film studies, film criticism, ideology, politics, political engagement.

1. Introduction

The history of Soviet cinema in the course of various political changes has repeatedly been revised in film studies (Dobrenko, 2007; Fedorov, 2011; Groshev et al., 1969; Kenez, 2001; Kremlev, 1966; Leyda, 1983; Lvov, 1967; Matizen, 2010; Miussky, 2005; Mokrousov, 2010; Parfenov, 2003; Plange, 2007; Salynsky, 2010; Taylor, 1994; Tverskoy, 1967; Yakubovich, 1986, etc.). In the works of many Soviet and Russian film critics (Groshev et al., 1969; Kremlev, 1966; Lvov, 1967; Miussky, 2005; Parfenov, 2003; Salynsky, 2010; Tverskoy, 1967; Yakubovich, 1986) an assessment of the artistic quality of films directed by Efim Dzigan has been excessively overrated. However more recently the process of re-assessment of the Soviet film legacy began (Matizen, 2010; Mokrousov, 2010), and articles expressed an alternative opinion on the artistic significance of E. Dzigan's work in the political context. In this article, we attempt an analysis of Efim Dzigan's most prominent films in the context of critics' assessment of his work in different historical periods.

2. Materials and methods

The materials for our research are E. Dzigan's films, film reviews and cultural studies research articles related to his work. The principal methods is a media text's analysis, classification and synthesis.

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3. Discussion

Film director Efim Dzigan (1898-1981) directed 14 full-length feature films – mainly on the so-called historical-revolutionary/military theme: *The First Cornetcy Streshnev*, *God of War*, *We Are from Kronstadt*, *If War Comes Tomorrow*, *The First Cavalry*, *Prologue*, *Iron Stream*, three of which (*We Are from Kronstadt*, *If War Comes Tomorrow*, *Iron Stream*) are in the list of 1000 box-office hits of the Soviet period.

It should be noted that two of his films (*The First Cavalry* and *Always on the Alert (In the North, in the South, in the East, in the West)*), were banned from being shown in the cinema theaters. *The First Cavalry* had a distinctly anti-Polish orientation. “The lost Polish campaign of 1920 is presented in the film as a victorious war. The Poles are disgusting, Pilsudski sends spies to kill Stalin, while he is also bothered by internal enemies, Trotsky's henchmen. The film is trite, there are few battle scenes, but there is a lot of the trinity Stalin – Voroshilov – Budyonny, an anecdotal boy of the people and a woman communist tortured by the Poles. There is also hidden polemics against Tukhachevsky, who did not believe in the future of the cavalry, as well as Babel, who slandered, as Budyonny thought, his First Cavalry. However, by 1941 the objects of controversy, including Trotsky, had disappeared from the list of the living, and the political situation was changing every day” (Mokrousov, 2010: 15).

In autumn 1940, *The First Cavalry* was completed, but after the obligatory preview of the political elite it was sent for alterations. And in June 1941, the Soviet Union was attacked by the Nazis, the Great Patriotic War began, and the anti-Polish theme instantly lost its relevance: *The First Cavalry* was shelved for indefinite time.

The film *If War Comes Tomorrow* (1938), directed by E. Dzigan together with Lazar Antsi-Polovsky, Georgy Berezko and Nikolay Karmazinsky, was supposed to visually embody the official thesis, dominating in the USSR in the 1930s, that in the event of hostilities the enemy would be promptly defeated on its territory. Real army units and military equipment were involved in film production. In the year of its release, the film was a success, and later it was awarded the Stalin Prize.

Understandably, in the 1940s the propaganda film shelved and became available to a mass audience only with the beginning of the Internet. In an artistic sense, *If War Comes Tomorrow* is of little value, but from a historical and ideological point of view, of course, it is creditable (Fedorov, 2011).

Film critic Dmitry Salynsky writes that, starting from June 22, 1941, this film became a symbol of facile optimism. However, if we ignore the discrepancies between its content and reality, we will see quite interesting cinematography. In fact, in the 1930s there was a genre which may be defined as *defense fiction*, devoted to the upcoming war as literary works – *What has not happened, but may: one of the pictures of the future war* (1928, S. Bertenev), *Submarine war of the future* (1940, P. Grokhovsky), *Air Operation of the Future War* (1938, A. Sheidman, V. Naumov), *The Defeat of the Fascist Squadron* (1938, G. Baidukov), etc., and films: *Perhaps Tomorrow* (1932, directed by D. Dalsky), *The Motherland Calls* (1936, directed by A. Macheret, K. Krumin), *Deep Raid* (1937), *On the Border* (1937), *Tank Crew* (1939, directed by Z. Drapkin, R. Maiman), *Squadron No. 5 (The War Begins)*, 1939, directed by A. Room) and others. All of them responded to the "defense" doctrines that were being actively introduced into the people's consciousness that the war was inevitable. Dzigan's film stood out in this row. It combined the features of chronicle and fiction, utopia and anti-utopia. The incredible popularity of the song "If War Comes Tomorrow, if We March Out Tomorrow" is rooted not only in its slogan lyrics and a catchy melody, but also in the film direction. The enemies speak German, but their general has a gray-haired professorial imperial beard, referring to the portrait features of Trotsky (Salynsky, 2010: 148-149).

Thirty years later, Efim Dzigan directed another war film – *Iron Stream*. This drama is about the Civil War and was commissioned specifically for the 50th anniversary of the Soviet power, which was solemnly celebrated in the USSR in November 1967.

Surprisingly enough, in 1967, the magazine *Iskusstvo Kino (Cinema Art)*, instead of a predictably laudatory review, published a rather critical article, which, at first, certainly praised the importance of the historical and revolutionary themes, but then pointed out that “when faced with aesthetics of the color large-screen film, the authors do not always come out the winners. They do not always find the strength to "mercilessly delete" this or that beautifully shot landscape, skillful mise-en-scène. ... Suddenly a spectacularly filmed, almost tourist Caucasian mountain appears and arithmetically constructed columns of Tamans stretching along its narrow paths, as if in a ballet.

But does the creator of *We Are from Kronstadt* need to be reminded of the principle of maximum documentality in a feature film as an resolute rule of great epic films? Unfortunately, it brings to one's memory such a concept as "make-up cinematography", looking at the obviously glued beards, at the obviously make-up faces of the supporting characters (Lvov, 1967: 68).

Unlike *Iskusstvo Kino*, *Sovetsky Ekran* (Soviet Screen) magazine did not dare to aggravate the orthodox communist ideologues and published an enthusiastic review stating that "Efim Dzigan created a spectacular, truly deeply work" (Tverskoy, 1967: 11).

Today the "ideologically consistent" *Iron Stream* is thoroughly forgotten by the audience, and it is only remembered by the older audience who watched it in childhood.

After the large-scale epic *Iron Stream* director Efim Dzigan decided to thrill the audience with an equally large-scale color film about spies and border guards *Always on the Alert* (alternative title: *In the North, in the South, in the East, in the West*). Originally, a dilogy was planned, but in the end, by 1973, only the first part was made: the production was suddenly stopped, and the film was censored.

Journalist and critic Alexei Mokrousov believes that the plot of the film *Always on the Alert* is similar to an anecdote: "a military general is looking for spies but lets guided tours for foreign journalists in the museum of border troops. Spies make their way to the tank manoeuvres of the Warsaw Pact countries... But Soviet officers have been on the alert from the moment when the enemies arrived on an ice floe to the Soviet coast. ... The sad story of a man who was interested in the social mandate in the cinema, who followed political turncoats, but tragically did not keep up with the aesthetic demands of the time. ... In art, he had long been interested not in the form, but in the social commissioning, he stopped studying the language of cinema, switching to political editorials. Was he aware, at least later in life, that it were the authors of the editorials who were forgotten in the first place? ... The case of Dzigan is not unique, but for some reason, the bitterness remains" (Mokrousov, 2010).

Film critic Victor Matizen argues that "having no artistic value, such works are of interest as fossilized evidence of the psychology of their creators and the social atmosphere. ... It is significant that many of these truly clinical pictures were filmed by quite elderly directors. In cinema, the signs of an intellectual power decline are much more pronounced than in literature. And when the lowering IQ is combined with truckling, inherent in some Soviet filmmakers, as people whose industry is most dependent on the authority, it is as good as lost" (Matizen, 2010).

What is the reason for banning the screening of the film *Always on the Alert*? It would seem that the reputation of the co-scriptwriter- the writer Vadim Kozhevnikov (1909-1984), the author of the renowned novel *Shield and Sword*, should have secured respect of political leaders. Moreover, the influence of Efim Dzigan, the director of the drama *We Are from Kronstadt*, officially ranked among the Soviet film classics, could not just be ignored. Additionally, the theme was a proven success – a lot of films about enemy spy (unsuccessful) intrigues in the USSR were welcomed on screen.

Film critic Viktor Matizen supposes that the reason for the prohibiting *Always on the Alert* was in its low artistic quality and "excessive lack of common sense, which caused the same soreness among the high authorities, as the last film by Grigory Alexandrov – *Starling and Lyre* (Matizen, 2010).

This inference seems to me flawed, since dozens of artistically weak and dull films appeared on screens in the USSR in 1972-1973, also earlier and later. Conversely, political reasons could be the reason: during the film production, in May 22-30, 1972, the visit of the U.S. President R. Nixon to the USSR took place, during which the USSR and the USA signed an agreement on the limitation of anti-missile defense and on the joint space program "Soyuz-Apollo". Moreover, on October 18 of the same year, the USSR and the USA signed a trade agreement. The film representation of American spies becomes untimely.

On top of that, in 1974, R. Nixon again visited the USSR and on July 3 signed an agreement on the limitation of underground nuclear tests. Detente did not stop after Nixon's resignation: on November 23-24, 1974, US President J. Ford visited the USSR. On July 17, 1975, the successful docking of the Soviet Soyuz and the American Apollo took place in space. And on August 1, 1975, the USSR, together with Western countries, signed the Helsinki Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Consequently, from April 1973 and almost until the early 1980s, no new Soviet films featuring characters – American spies were released.

This new political situation was very well felt by the author of *The Resident's Mistake* (1968) and *The Resident's Fate* (1970), directed by Veniamin Dorman (1927-1988). During the detente era, he promptly switched to making adventure films *The Lost Expedition* (1975) and *The Golden River* (1976), but in the new round of the Cold War, he deliberately went back to *The Return of the Resident* (1982) and *the End of Operation Resident* (1986).

The main film of Efim Dzigan was still *We Are from Kronstadt*. Despite the fact that neither before nor after the historical-revolutionary picture *We Are from Kronstadt* (which received the Stalin Prize) Efim Dzigan did not produce any artistically significant feature films, he has been officially included in the list of the Soviet cinema classics.

Probably the most honest view of the ideological pose of *We Are from Kronstadt* can be found in "Brief History of Soviet Cinema": "The Civil War, the people and the party received a new philosophical and publicist coverage in the film. ... The role of the party and the organization of the revolutionary sailor masses is the main theme of the work. It was represented primarily through the image of Commissar Martynov. ... In this picture, unlike *Chapaev*, there is no central character that pulls together all the threads of the plot. In general, there are no thoroughly elaborated characters at all" (Groshev et al., 1969: 214-215).

Indeed, this film by Efim Dzigan clearly and pathetically (albeit superficially) features the image of a communist commissar, a former political emigrant who arrived in Kronstadt in October 1919: he speaks English and German; by citing Lenin and by personal example leads "irresponsible" Baltic marines, promises to the hungry kids that as soon as the Bolsheviks defeat the Whites, "there'll be everything: both bread and gingerbread", and in the finale he heroically dies with the marines.

Controversially, further on the authors of the volume *Brief History of Soviet Cinema* argue that the film "testifies to the further development of the epic cinema genre. In it, the ideological depth of the theme of the revolutionary struggle led by the Bolshevik Party, achieved in *Battleship Potemkin*, as well as the scale in depicting events and the masses, is combined with a vivid development of individual characters. ... The film is distinguished by the strict unity of the pictorial interpretation. ... *We Are from Kronstadt* became one of the outstanding Soviet films and won wide recognition abroad" (Groshev et al., 1969: 216-217).

Film critic German Kremlev, in a jubilee article dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the release of the film, also praises it (including the non-existing depth of the characters), emphasizing that "the film reproduces an episode from the civil war, when a murky White Guard wave struck red Kronstadt, but crashed against its impregnable strongholds. ... And behind the movement of stormy, foaming events, boldly, sweepingly sketched by Vishnevsky's wide brush, the viewer sees the most detailed and dramatic close-ups and long shots" (Kremlev, 1966: 20).

For the 50th anniversary of the film *We Are from Kronstadt*, critic Oleg Yakubovich once again notes that this film is "as alive as ever, recognized as a classic of Soviet cinema, loved by the audience" (Yakubovich, 1986: 22).

Thus, starting from the premiere, in Soviet times, the official point of view on the film *We Are from Kronstadt* did not change: it was considered a classic film, praising the revolution and the Bolshevik party.

Surprisingly, also in the 21st century, in the post-Soviet years, cinema researchers continued to strongly support the myth that *We Are from Kronstadt* is an immortal masterpiece, a film classic of "the highest artistic value" (Salynsky, 2010: 148).

Film critic I. Miussky included *We Are from Kronstadt* in his book *One hundred great Russian films* (Miussky, 2005). Lev Parfenov in his article, also written in post-Soviet times, insistently emphasizes that "classical works of art, as you know, are distinguished by a deep artistic comprehension of life in its real complexity. Therefore, they stand the test of time, discovering over the years what was previously not noticed for various reasons. *We Are from Kronstadt* is a classic of Russian cinema. Conceived from the standpoint of the ideology of the 1930s, the film turned out to be more multidimensional in its content. Watching the film again, many years after its creation, one can see that it conveys the stunning tragedy of the fratricidal Civil War, merciless on both sides. ... Ordinary soldiers, Russian people who, by the will of fate, found themselves on the other side of the barricades – this is how, after several decades, we are reading the film. It is tragic in historical being. Like the whole movie. But it was true, and in this sense *We Are from Kronstadt* is a tragic impression of the time (Parfenov, 2003).

One must give credit to foreign film studies (Kenez, 2001; Plagne, 2007, etc.), which, in contrast to Russian one, give a much more objective assessment to the film *We Are from Kronstadt*. In particular, Nicolas Plagne claims that “it is not difficult to understand the political message: history and sentiments are aimed at legitimizing Soviet power. The discipline and unconditional loyalty to the party line established by a leader dedicated to the cause of the people ... are exalted as the only means of victory. ... We are at the center of the Lenin's myth, sharpened at the Stalinist stage of the early 1930s: the history of the party is idealized ... The film also shows the communist core of the marines ... presented as an exemplary elite ... Thus, the dictatorial style of the communists is paradoxically justified by the natural harmony between the party and the proletariat but also the intellectual superiority of the Bolsheviks (Plagne, 2007).

4. Results

To generalize the cinema critics' assessment in favor of the film *We are from Kronstadt*:

- the film characters are portrayed in depth and reflect the marines' solidarity;
- the authors have accurately depicted the tragedy of a merciless fratricidal civil war;
- the film is characterized by an innovative visual style.

As noted above, there is no objective evidence of the in-depth characterizations in the film. On the contrary, the clichés of the time prevail. Namely, the Bolshevik Commissar is noble, brave, loyal to Communist ideals, loves and takes care of children. The white guards are evil, cruel, and mercilessly kill a kid, ignoring the red sailors' pleadings to let him live. The absurd soldier, whom the Whites apparently dragged into their ranks by force, looks like a buffoon. The anarchist seaman is at first emboldened, but then becomes ideologically loyal to the Communist position. In contrast, the same ideological pathos orientation permeated the characters in the film *Chapaev* much more convincing.

In fact, there is no emphasis on the "fratricide" nature of the Civil War in Efim Dzigan's film. The authors clearly stand on the positions of "good Reds", "bad Whites" and "unconscious personalities" in between.

Similarly, there have been attempts of some modern Russian film critics to perceive *Battleship Potemkin* as nearly humanistic work about brotherhood. While in fact it is far from it, being a film that calls and justifies the revolutionary revolt and violence. As for its artistic technique, it is, in our opinion, it cannot be compared to the actual innovation of *Battleship Potemkin*.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the director Efim Dzigan is an example of an artificially created official film classic. In fact, he was a politically engaged director who never rose above the average artistic level of Soviet ideological film production. *We Are from Kronstadt* is not a masterpiece, but a picture based on revolutionary stereotypes that glorifies the revolution and the Bolsheviks.

Filmography

We Are from Kronstadt. USSR, 1936. Directed by Efim Dzigan. Screenwriter Vsevolod Vishnevsky. Actors: Vasily Zaichikov, Grigory Bushuev, Nikolai Ivakin, Oleg Zhakov, Raisa Esipova, Pyotr Kirillov, Misha Gurinenko, Pyotr Sobolevsky, etc.

If War Comes Tomorrow. USSR, 1938. Directors: Efim Dzigan, Lazar Antsi-Polovsky, Georgy Berezko, Nikolai Karmazinsky. Screenwriters: Georgy Berezko, Efim Dzigan, Mikhail Svetlov. Actors: Vsevolod Sanaev, Inna Fedorova, Serafim Kozminsky, etc.

Iron Stream. USSR, 1967. Directed by Efim Dzigan. Screenwriters Efim Dzigan, Arkady Perventsev (based on the story of the same name by Alexander Serafimovich). Actors: Nikolai Alekseev, Lev Frichinsky, Nikolai Denisenko, Vladimir Ivashov, Alexander Degtyar, Yakov Gladkikh, Nikolai Dupak, Nina Alisova, etc.

Always on the Alert (In the North, in the South, in the East, in the West). USSR, 1973. Directed by Efim Dzigan. Screenwriters Efim Dzigan, Vadim Kozhevnikov. Actors: Tatiana Lennikova, Alexander Degtyar, Pyotr Chernov, Nikolay Alekseev, Alexey Presnetsov, Sergey Martynov, Vladimir Sokolov, Victor Pavlov, Dalvin Shcherbakov, Maya Menglet and others.

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