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Analysis of the stereotypes of Soviet film image of the war in a media education classroom

ABSTRACT

Media education classes at university involve the analysis of media texts of various types and genres. The film analysis plays an important role. For instance, students examine films on the theme of the Second World War. This article describes a possible technique of film analysis about the Second World War as an example. Applying methodology, designed by Umberto Eco, the author use three lines which are meaningful in a film: an author's ideology; market conditions that determined its plot, and the process of script writing/creation; and story-telling techniques. This approach correlates to the key media literacy concepts, such as media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences. All these concepts are directly linked to the ideological, market, and structural-contents aspects of media analysis.

KEYWORDS

stereotype, media education literacy, film studies, film analysis, war.

1. Introduction.

Media education classes at university involve the analysis of media texts of various types and genres. The film analysis plays an important role. For instance, students examine films on the theme of the Second World War. This article offers the explanation of a possible technique of film analysis about the Second World War using the film by Valentin Vinogradov *Eastern Corridor* (USSR, 1966) as an example.

2. The structure of the ideology and plot stereotypes of Soviet war-theme films made in the 1940s-1960s

The structure of the ideology and plot stereotypes of Soviet war-theme films made in the 1940s-1960s was like the following:

The historical period, action taking place: any time of the war between 1941 and 1945, the USSR, Germany, more seldom – other countries.

Environment: military headquarters, vehicles (tanks, airplanes, ships, trucks, etc.), front line, trenches, dug-outs, of Soviet officers and soldiers; modest dwellings of civilian Soviet citizens in occupied territories and in the rear, more comfortable housing, military technics and property of German and/or Western characters.

Methods of representation: more or less realistic (especially it's true of films made after the second half of the 1950s) or conventionally grotesque (characteristic feature of comedies, filmed in the 1940s, and later Stalin period epics like *The Fall of Berlin*) picture of people's life during the war.

Majority of mainstream Soviet films on the war theme were based on uncomplicated dichotomies:

- 1) hostile and aggressive imperialistic “new order” of the Nazi’s Germany vs. peaceful, friendly Soviet regime, the country of advanced workers, athletes, cheerful children and enthusiastic builders of the happy communist society;
- 2) positive, ideologically correct (i.e. true to communism and patriotic) characters vs. villains – Nazis and their toadies, with cannibal ideology of hatred towards everything non-Aryan;
- 3) heroism/self-sacrifice vs. aggression/treason;
- 4) honesty/sincerity vs. betrayal/guile;
- 5) plans (Soviet vs. Nazi) and results (defeat, although often put off for Nazis, victory, although often put off as well, for Soviet characters).

Characters, their values, ideas, clothes, verbal and nonverbal language. Positive characters are exponents of Soviet, communist ideas; negative characters embody anti-human, nazi, military ideas. As a rule, characters are not only divided by social, but also by material status. Nazi characters are usually shown as rude, violent people, well built, with rude language, evil faces, active gestures and unpleasant guttural voice timbres. They are dressed in military uniforms of Wehrmacht and SS; sometimes appear on the screen in their underwear (when running out of the house on fire or blown up dug out). Traitors-polizeis are shown cringing before nazi-masters: disgusting, often miserable appearance, violent, drunk, dumb faces, revolting mimics, shrill voices, dressed in stolen clothes, often out of size...

Soviet officers and soldiers are dressed of course poorer than Germans: during the battle/afterwards their uniform is covered with dust and dirt, at the time of the short breaks they try to look according to the regulations. In addition, certainly, a situation may occur when a soviet soldier gets a secret scout/intelligence assignment: in this case he is dressed like a nazi. Soviet characters may be shown on the screen either like good looking athletes or like ordinary people. The main accent is that while they are cruel to enemies, they are humane and sympathetic people. Their lexis may not be always correct according to the literature canons; however they have kind faces and pleasant voices. Soviet civilian people are shown mainly as victims of nazi cruelty, suffering from evil occupants and helping soviet soldiers and partizans. Workers in the rear in spite of all the difficulties give it all “for the front, for the victory”.

Crucial change in characters’ lives: evil characters (Nazis and their servants) begin to implement their antihuman ideas (aggression with weapons, mass murders of helpless civilians, explosions, bombarding, terror acts and other crimes).

Problem occurring: life of good (Soviet) characters, and life of the whole nation is under threat.

Searching for the problem solution: armed struggle of good characters against evil ones.

Problem solution: mass heroism of soviet nation, termination/arrest of evil Nazis, victor of good characters (intermediate or final), return to peaceful life.

Besides the victory of the soviet army over the Nazis not only was represented as the victory of the great nation, defending their motherland from outer aggression, but also as the victory of the only true communist ideology, soviet regime over the fascists, imperialists, traitors, etc.

3. The line of media education literacy analysis

Applying methodology, designed by Umberto Eco, let us distinguish three lines or systems which are meaningful in a film: an author’s ideology; market conditions that determined its plot, and the process of script writing/creation; and story-telling techniques (Eco, 2005, c.209). This approach is to my mind correlates to the media texts analysis scheme by A. Silverblatt (Silverblatt, 2001; 2014) и С. Bazalgette (Bazalgette, 1995) based on the key media literacy concepts, such as media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences. All these concepts are directly linked to the ideological, market, and structural-contents aspects of media analysis.

As an example of the media text analysis we are going to examine the film by Valentin Vinogradov *Eastern Corridor* (1966), created contrary to the stereotypes of Soviet cinematic image of war. This will enable us to distinguish the ideological, social-historical context of the time when the film was made and its structure.

Authors' ideology in a sociocultural context (dominating concepts: media agency, media representation, media audience). By main authors of the film in our case I mean the director and script writer Valentin Vinogradov (1933-2011), script writer Oles Kuchar (1910-1996), and the camera man Yuri Marukhin (1938-2001).

By the time of filming *Eastern Corridor* (1966) Soviet cinema has collected a big number of moving pictures connected to the theme of the second world war (some of them – *Secretary of Regional Committee, She Defends Motherlands, Zoya, Two Soldiers, At 6 pm after the War, The Fall of Berlin, Feat of the Scout, Star, The Cranes are Flying, The Alive and the Dead, Ivan's Childhood, We're Taking the Fire*), including films of the “partisan” series, filmed in Belorussia (*The Girl is Looking for her Father, Cross the Cemetery*, and others). The most common genre was understandably, a drama, but rarely, it was a detective story, a melodrama or even a comedy.

The authors of the “Eastern Corridor” against the widespread stereotypes, and practically for the first time in the history of the Soviet cinema, offered a different ideological concept of the war theme: the war as the destruction of the humanistic origin on the whole. Of course, still in *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) by Andrei Tarkovsky (by the way, a fellow classmate of V. Vinogradov, who played one of the roles in Tarkovsky's course work) there was a piercing theme of the destructive influence of war of the psychology of a child. The *Eastern Corridor* authors go even further, proving that the war is a both sides sharpened sword, crippling souls, hearts and bodies of all parties involved...

The title of the film is allegoric itself. It is known that Nazi's Germany on the eve of the World War the second insisted on Poland giving it the so-called “eastern corridor” one mile wide for free, extraterritorial communication with Konigsberg enclave. In 1939-1943 a kind of “eastern corridor” (supposedly, towards the world supremacy) for the Third Reich was not only Poland but most part of Eastern Europe, including Belorussian territory, of course. On the other hand, Baltic republics, western part of the Ukraine, Belorussia, and Poland in 1939-1941, and later during the war and after it, were viewed as the “eastern corridor” of the Soviet geopolitical power in Europe. In 1945 this corridor (in the slightly softened regime of the “social camp countries) included Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and other eastern European countries.

Market conditions that promoted the idea, and the creation process of the media text (key concepts: media agency, media categories, media technologies, media audiences).

The philosophical parable *Eastern corridor* was created in the times of the end of “the thaw”, when Soviet artists got some (although limited and censored) freedom. Due to the fact that film industry as any other industry in the 1960s belonged to the state, the question of commercial profit from screening the film, although considered, was not the dominant one. There was so called state order on important for soviet ideology films, such as revolutionary, war, historical, and some other themes. It was only logical that within framework of the “war theme” they allowed some detective films like *Feat of the Scout* or *Far Away from Motherland*, and some films originally not aimed at the mass audience, but significant for a year's state thematic plan.

Thus undoubtedly *Eastern Corridor* was on the thematic plan of the “Belorus-film” studio, in the division of partisan dramas, telling about the heroic deeds of soviet people in occupation. However in the result the film turned out to be not like the studio bosses expected, and was met with hostility both by Party's officials and film critics.

That's how Vinogradov's film was evaluated, for example, in the article of 1968, written by Tatiana Ivanova: *Eastern Corridor* belongs to those films after watching one needs to read the synopsis: to understand the sequence of events, to make head or tail of it. It feels as if a simple picture was cut in many pieces, big and small, shuffled and shaken and was laid down in a new odd puzzle (curiously enough, Ivanova almost word for word anticipates the complaints of other critics about A. Tarkovsky's *Mirror* (1974) – A.F.). So is the general compositional structure and so is the artistic expression of each episode. A suffering, lifted wooden arm is coming out of the streaming grain – turns out to be a cross, a cross with the broken wooden bar; an oddly twisted branch is filling the screen, is shown in different angles,

is hypnotising our imagination – this is the beginning of the scene at the river. Really, a puzzle inside a puzzle. In the end, one can make head or tail in here. But one question remains, it's a question about the necessity of such a form, about the artistic justification of this mixture of violent naturalism and visual sophistication which reigns on the screen... There will be a lot of other scenes, but the very first one reveals something very significant for the general atmosphere of the film. It's the abundance of cruel effects. It's the extravagance of the entourage. It's a refined mastership of the camera man. Taken together – it's the aesthetization of naturalism" (Ivanova, 1968, p.94).

It is amazing that after two years of staying "on the shelf" (i.e. forbidden to be shown), the film *Eastern Corridor* however was shown on limited number of screens in 1968.

It seems that if the film had been presented at any European film festival in the late 1960s, it would have most surely enjoyed triumph like *The Cranes are Flying* or *Ivan's Childhood*. But, alas... After the film the career of Valentin Vinogradov obviously went down. The outstanding director's talent stayed unrealized, he had to surrender to creative compromises, making "ordinary cinema" (*Countrymen*, *White Dance*). A brilliant camera man Yuri Marukhin made a few more visually interesting films (*Lion's Grave*, *Night's Chronicle*), and then also gave up and began making standardized film works...

The structure and techniques of story telling (key concepts: media categories, media technologies, media language, media representation).

By the time of the filming *Eastern Corridor* besides ordinary, now forgotten films, there had been made such outstanding pictures as *The Cranes are Flying* (1957) by M. Kalatosov and S. Urusevsky, *The Soldier's Ballad* (1958) by G. Chukhrai, *Ivan's Childhood* (1962) by A. Tarkovsky, *The Alive and the Dead* (1963) by K. Simonov and A. Stolper. Each of these films breached the official cinema stereotypes: dramatic life of the "wrong" from the point of view of orthodox communists, Veronika (*The Cranes are Flying*), tragic image of underage front scout Ivan, whose childhood was taken away and who was turned into a ruthless revenger by the war (*Ivan's Childhood*), bitter episodes of horrible defeat of the Soviet army in summer 1941 (*The Alive and the Dead*)...However even these films didn't break the traditional codes of distinct division of characters into good and evil ones.

As S. Kusnetsov correctly observed, *Eastern Corridor* is a film about the partisan war in Belorussia, that makes you understand Soviet censors who decided to protect their people from such a shock. It's not another war "eastern" with shootings and Lenin-style kind secretaries of partisan committees, but a hard and frightening mystic picture that leaves unrevealed not only such trifles, as who is the traitor, but also the motives of almost all characters, acting as if the field of unknown forces, directing them, transforming and in the end, killing them. A dark and mysterious film, some episodes of which become imprinted in one's memory forever, that may like a nightmare haunt you afterwards" (Kusnetsov, 1999). I can add that during the whole film, the authors create an ambivalent feeling of ominous reality and fantom non-reality of action.

Certainly, *Eastern Corridor* relied to a perceptible degree upon the achievements of the best films about the war. Like in *Ivan's Childhood*, the visual language of *Eastern Corridor* is notable for the sophisticated black-and-white graphics, permeated with the complicated play of space and symbolism. But this is the case when cinematic quotations (visual tunes of early Andrzej Wajda, Miklós Jancsó, Andrei Tarkovsky, war themes in the Czech "new wave" cinema (*The Fifth Rider is Fear*, *A Waggon to Vienna*, *Diamonds of the Night*), black-and-white parables by Ingmar Bergman of the late 1950s-early 1960s, etc.) have naturally entered the film, not damaging its existential meditateness, philosophical and visual authenticity.

The expressive, dream-like style (torn montage with interrupted dialogues and events in the mode of French *nouvelle vague*, deep compositions of the shots, nervous, sharp camera movements, weird play of the lights and shadows, with all the spectrum of black and white tints) and the parable plot of Valentin Vinogradov film today fell subject to Roman Volobuev's sarcasm who decided that *Eastern Corridor* is *Reservoir Dogs* about Belorussian partisans, made under the impression by Bergman, new wave cinema, and who knows what, with Tariverdiev music and absolutely crazy camera work. Characters captured by fascists through flashbacks try to understand who betrayed them (by the way, not

succeeding in that till the end). The film is based on two similarly riotous things – Christian symbols and a cold, pathologically as-if-Bergman erotics. A collaborationist rapes a peasant girl in the elevator, and the elevator is a former church, and she painfully crawls through the grain towards the cross. Insolent muscular fascists are going to torture a young Valentina Titova with electric shock, and order to take her clothes off...There is also a daughter of Jewish scientist, who looks like Anna Karina parody (the actress in lots of Jean-Luc Godard's 1960s films – A.F.) walking around wearing a short black dress and high heels. A concentration camp is more like a metaphorical thing – people come and go, almost voluntarily. One more thing – only fascists sit in the film. Good characters stand, casting shadows, or lie down with broken legs. If a good character sits down, it almost means his change for the dark side. In the end the director goes mad: the extermination of the Minsk ghetto is shot in the form of expressionist mystery play, with a utterly foppish flight of the camera along a complicated trajectory, while in the background people are being drowned, and a naked young blond running to and fro, arguing with God in the front" (Volobuev, 2008).

However the ironic vigour of Roman Volobuev once again proves that Umberto Eco is right: "Texts, aimed at certain reactions of more or less distinct circle of readers (let it be children, "soap opera" fans, doctors, good citizens, youth subcultures, presbyterians, farmers, middle class women, divers, tender snobs or representatives of any other imaginable sociopsychological category), in fact are open for various "erroneous" decodings" (Eco, 2005, c.19).

That is why both the dislike of the *Eastern Corridor* by T. Ivanova in 1968, and its sarcastic seizure by R. Volobuev in 2008, do not cancel the opinion of Alexander Shpagin, which I share, too: "Valentin Vinogradov, and absolute heretic, has come 30 years ahead of his time...In the film *Eastern Corridor* the town occupied by Nazis is shown in the mode of the absurd carnival, where all customary signs and stereotypes are shifted from their usual places. Each act is twisted into nonsense, into chaos. It's only the concentration camp that makes sense – there one can feel oneself among others, same as you, prisoners, and try to escape into the obscure and paranoid "freedom", where everybody is suspected. "Give me another war!" – cries one of the characters thrown in prison, being unable to distinguish, who he is. The level of alienation is so high, that I wonder – something like this in the end of the 1960s one could only see in Czech cinema about war!" (Shpagin, 2005).

There is one inaccuracy in the Shpagin's quote. The character captured by Nazis is crying out the phrase far more dangerous for the censorship: "Give me a normal war! Without hostages! So that nobody beats your bladder, so that nobody sees living rats into your guts!". This scream is becoming sharper in the context of the film because *Eastern Corridor* starts with the voice-over quotation of field-marshal W.Keitel encouraging nazi army to the most sadistic actions against soviet soldiers and partisans, because they were not obeying the rules of the "normal war".

The authors of the film unambiguously assert that there is no such a thing as a "normal war". It's always inhuman, always oppresses a personality by violence and fear. Partisans in *Eastern Corridor* are afraid of and suspect everyone and are ready to kill anyone – a man or a woman – under a slightest shadow of doubt.

Here appears a counterpoint with the clear-cut voice-over, reading the victory news about feats of the partisans. But it's only on the radio where everything is simple and clear – black vs. white, heroes vs. enemies. In reality some nazi characters are different. One of them is the head of the prison, inclined to ironic philosophical dialogues about "a hangman and a victim" with his prisoner – an artist. A special authenticity of these scenes is contributed by the fact that this nazi is played by the Lithuanian Voldemars Akuraters, who had been first in the German army and then in Stalin prison. Among the partisans there is Lobach (played vividly by Regimantas Adomaitis, resembling a little bit Evgeny Urbansky in this part). He is a stranger everywhere, suspected of treason; he passionately goes inevitable deathwards.

Touching upon the approach to war in the Czech new wave cinema, Y. Lukesh has correctly noticed the importance of anti-mythological and disturbing themes in such films as *The Fifth Rider is Fear* (1964), *A Wagon to Vienna*(1966), *Diamonds of the Night*(1964). But this influence is especially vivid in the film *A Shop on the Square* (1966), directed by Jan Kadar and Elmar Klos, that made the audience face the principal dilemma of moral responsibility of a person, surrendering to authority (Lukesh, 2002). I suppose, *Eastern Corridor* emphasizes this problem again and again: the pressure of the Authority (Nazi, Soviet, partisan, and other), reaching its peak during the war, breaks down

characters' lives, making them sacrifice, make impossible decisions, and in the result turning them all into puppets of the history.

Despite reproaches for graphic violence scenes, the authors show horrifying scenes of murders and tortures without blood details however creating emotionally terrifying effect. Especially the mass Holocaust scene, Jews drowning in seething water flows, is like a death itself versus the prayer.

In fact, the religious theme in *Eastern Corridor* sounds very bold. A beautiful character played by Valentina Titova, tells her husband, a sculptor, that he looks like Apostle Peter (the one who seized by the spiritual weakness three times gave up Christ). However after she was arrested the sculptor did not join partisans in the woods, thinking that thus he would betray the beloved woman. He shows the reproduction of the Michelangelo' fresco *The Last Judgment* to his friends, artists, and finds "his" face there – the face of the terrified sinner, who has no power either for struggle, or for denial, not even for life.

Religious symbols as if from the paintings of Renaissance epoch are felt in the composition of lots of shots, especially ones in the cathedral and in the former church, turned into the granary.

Bitter irony and allusions to intellectuals of the 1960s, lyrically praising "commissars in dusty helmets", accompany the image of collaborationists in *Eastern Corridor*. The editor-in-chief of the local newspaper had probably written some pathos articles about the happy communist future short time before. Artistic bohemians is getting adjusted to the new regime.

A special place in *Eastern corridor* is taken by the female characters. Sexually attractive, ready for self-sacrifice, they remain unattainable (at least within the film shot) for male characters.

Valentin Vinogradov uses music totally contrasting the picture. Micael Tariverdiev melody has some light notes of hope, and what we see on screen is hopeless. Even the incredibly lucky escape of a partisan right from the Gestapo office is ruined by the accidental meeting with an old acquaintance who had long been spied on by the Nazis.

4. Conclusion

In my opinion, *Eastern Corridor* is the forerunner of not only a partisan drama by Alexei German *Road Control* (1971), but his phantasmagoric *Khrustalev, the car!* (1998). Moreover, some episodes of V. Vinogradov's picture can be paralleled to not yet made at the time *Stars and Soldiers* (1967) by M. Jancsó and *Death of Gods* (1968) by Luchino Visconti with their fascinating plasticity of the shot and distanced erotism in orchestrating violence.

A lot of films and TV series about the war have been filmed in Russian over the last decade. These media texts authors are not influenced by censorship any longer, they reveal dramatic pages of the horrible 1940s for the audience. Still even compared to them, apparently criticized and forgotten, "Eastern Corridor"'s film language seems very modern. "Manuscripts" actually do not burn...

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