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**Analysis of Media Stereotypes of the Russian Image in Media Studies
in the Student Audience (example: the screen versions
of Jules Verne's Novel "Michael Strogoff")**

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Abstract

As a result of the analysis students come to the conclusion that the screen adaptations of Jules Verne's novel "Michael Strogoff" create, though an oversimplified and adapted to western stereotypes of perception, but a positive image of Russia – as a stronghold of European values at the Asian frontiers, a country with a severe climate, boundless Siberian spacious areas, manly and patriotic warriors, a wise monarchy. At the same time, both Jules Verne's novel and its screen adaptations contain clear-cut western pragmatism – the confidence that if a man has a proper will he can rule his destiny.

Keywords: media stereotypes; Russian image; media studies; media literacy education; film studies; students; screen; film; Michael Strogoff.

Introduction

The last bright *Cold War* movie peak fell on the early 1980s when Russians as part of the monolithic and aggressive system were portrayed as products of their environment – malicious, potent, highly revolutionary in the whole world. Nearly all Russian characters were represented definitely as agents of destruction: they were men who hated and usually threatened the American life-style. This message contained an unceasing and crystal pure demand addressed to advocates of liberty calling for their vigilance in relation to the evil Soviet system and its evil representatives (Strada, Troper 1997, 170).

But not all western films of the last century as well as the present century cultivated a negative image of Russia. Particularly, only during the last 50 years of the 20th century not less than 200 screen versions of Russian classical literature were filmed in the west that made up a fourth of the total number of films about Russia and with Russian characters. It is logical, as already since the second part of the 19th century the works of Russian classical literature produced a significant influence on the western spiritual culture. Many characters of Russian classical literature have become signs, emblems of the Russian national character, Russian soul, and

marked to a large extent the image of Russia. Generally, the western (and later, eastern) national cultures discovered ideas, images, problem collisions keeping with the times, definite circumstances and demands of these cultures in the Russian novel and the Russian culture, especially acute there proved to be the feelings of spiritual deficiency, desacralization of the world, estrangement and anonymity of the human personality... The western culture found major spiritual values; search for absolute truth, tragic depths of the human personality; opened for itself the wealth of Russian-eastern traditions in the Russian culture (Mosejko 2009, 24).

A.P. Chekhov's works have remained mostly screened in the west – his works were adapted for the screen for about 200 times. Also foreign filmmakers turned to the prose of F.M. Dostoevsky and L.N. Tolstoy – each of them inspired more than a hundred of western screen adaptations. They are followed by screen versions of A.S. Pushkin's, N.V. Gogol's, N.S. Turgenev's works (more than 50 screen adaptations for each one). With A.P. Chekhov – his plays were most often translated to the screen. With F.M. Dostoevsky – the novels *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Possessed*. With L.N. Tolstoy – the novels *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. With N.V. Gogol – the plays *The Inspector-General* and *The Marriage*. A.S. Pushkin's literary heritage is presented on the western screen in the form of the operas *Eugene Onegin* and *The Queen of Spades*.

It is logical to say in this context that the western culture sees a positive image of Russia generally in retrospect. If media images of the USSR (and now – of contemporary Russia) are apparently negative, then the virtual tsar Russia looks much more positive.

However, the western media culture is not content only with works of Russian classical literature with its deep "view from within". The West needs its own image of Russia that corresponds to the stereotyped notions of mass mentality of the "enigmatic Russian soul". In this regard, Jules Verne's novel *Michael Strogoff* (1875) is an ideal adaptation of the positive image of Russia for the western audience. The novel is set in the epoch of Alexander II. There is only one Jules Verne's novel - "20 000 Leagues Under the Sea" that can compete with *Michael Strogoff* in the number of screen adaptations. If taken together, western screen versions with plots about Russia cannot be compared with *Michael Strogoff* except for *Anna Karenina* (currently, there are more than twenty foreign screen adaptations).

It appears that the analysis of this phenomenal positive image of Russia adapted for the mass western audience will be of great benefit to students of many qualifications – future historians, political scientists, culture experts, art critics, and teachers.

Materials and methods

For the analysis of numerous screen versions of Jules Verne's novel *Michael Strogoff* I will follow the methodology worked out by U. Eco (Eco 2005, 209), A. Silverblatt (Silverblatt 2001, 80-81), L. Masterman (Masterman 1985; 1997), C. Bazalgette (Bazalgette 1995) and I will rely on such key concepts of media education as media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations, media audiences, since all these concepts have a direct relevance to value, ideological, market, structure and content aspects of media text analysis.

It's essential to note that U. Eco's (Eco 2005, 209) and A. Silverblatt's (Silverblatt 2001, 80-81) methodology completely satisfies the basic approaches of the hermeneutical analysis of audiovisual, space-and-time structure of media texts.

It needs to be reminded that the *hermeneutic analysis of cultural context* stands for study of the media text interpretation process, of cultural and historical factors that may have an impact both on the media texts authors/agencies and the audience's viewpoint. The hermeneutic analysis is connected with the comprehension of a media text by matching with the cultural tradition and reality; penetration into the logic of a media text; media text analysis based on artistic images comparison in the historical and cultural contexts. So, the subject of the analysis is a system of media and its functioning in the society, interaction with the man, media language and its usage.

Discussion and results

The authors' ideology in the sociocultural context, market conditions that contributed to the plot, creation and success of a media text (dominant concepts: media agencies, media categories, media technologies, media representations, media audience).

Here by authors we mean both Jules Verne himself and the main creators of screen adaptations of the novel *Michael Strogoff* – Screenwriters and film directors. Jules Verne conceived the novel during the reign of Alexander II, in the short interval of 1874-1875, when Germans became most evident enemies for the French after the war between France and Germany (1870-1871). Russia looked quite positive against this background. A tough confrontation of the Crimean War (1853-1856) in which Russia confronted the coalition of the British, French and Ottoman Empires and the Sardinian Kingdom became a thing of the past, and there were still two years before the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878).

Besides, a sustained war in Turkestan (the Bokharan khanate and the adjoining areas) waged by Russia in 1865-1881 was not regarded by the western world as a direct threat to their geopolitical interests. Moreover, Russia was seen as a certain outpost against the hostile Asian tribes that tallied with the media context of Chingis Khan's legendary raids.

Thereby, the novel *Michael Strogoff* (see one of the latest editions: Verne, 2010) was to a significant degree a response to the political and sociocultural context of 1872-1876. The novel related the adventures of an imperial courier sent by Alexander II (apparently, in the 1870s) from St. Petersburg to Siberia with an urgent message addressed to the Irkutsk governor (who was the czar's brother, in the great French novelist's version). Michael Strogoff was to warn the governor of the plot of former czar officer Ogareff who went over to the enemy – Tatars (!) and schemed to occupy Siberia...

At the same time, J. Verne created a distinct positive image of Russia and Russian people (including the Russian Emperor and his brother) in his novel. It especially concerns the protagonist - Michael Strogoff: he is thirty, strong and vigorous, a man with a heart of gold who has coolness and courage (Verne 2010).

As for the fictional war between Russia and Tatar tribes in Siberia it was probably brought about by the author's misgiving that the western reader would have no time for looking into the cobweb of Russian relationships with numerous Central Asian countries and nations whereas the word "Tatars" - the embodiment of the aggressive and perfidious East – was known to everybody in Europe as well as the word "Siberia" which a Parisian or any other European associated with the words "Russia", "Asia", "severe frost", etc.

In 1875, the novel *Michael Strogoff* was first published piecemeal in a journal, and in 1876, it was published as a book. It had such a tremendous success that in 1880 it was staged under the same name in the Parisian theatre "Odeon" and was welcomed by the public. Then the novel was republished dozens of times in many countries including Russia (except for the Soviet period). But to tell the truth, Russian readers with their "view from within" were much less impressed by the novel: it was regarded as a primitivistic fairy-tale rather than a reflection of real Russian life (by the way, *Michael Strogoff* has never been screened either in the UUSR or in Russia). The Russian audience would always prefer other Jules Verne's novels narrating of Captain Nemo's adventures, or of a fantastic moonflight...

The first screen adaptations of *Michael Strogoff* appeared in the age of silent movies. They were short American films made in 1908, 1910 and 1914. At that time the American perception of Russia fully correlated with the French one (1874-1876) - the mass consciousness of Americans pictured it as gigantic empire with snow-covered Siberian spacious areas inhabited by wild bears where courageous Russian aristocrats fought with hostile Asians...

The events of the World War I, the Bolshevik military coup of 1917 and the subsequent civil war in Russia of 1918-1920 accompanied, as is known, by the military intervention of western countries, made *Michael Strogoff* less attractive for the media. But Russian emigrants Victor Tourjansky and Ivan Mozzhukhin who lived in Paris became authors of the most well-known screen version of *Michael Strogoff* in the epoch of silent movies. This French-German screen adaptation that stuck to the main plot of Jules Verne's novel was highly popular with the public. On the one hand, there were thousands of Russian emigrants among them who crowded European capitals in the 1920s and felt nostalgic about the epoch of the Imperial Russia. On the other hand, there were native citizens of Paris, Berlin, Vienna and London among them to whom the previous Russian epoch of the 19th century was much more appealing than the Communist "sovietdom" which ruined the centuries-old way of life. Frankly speaking, that was why none of the screen versions of *Michael Strogoff* was shown in the Soviet Union. In fact, it was impossible to see a film

on the Soviet screen with the main character who served the condemned-by-all-school-textbooks "tsarist regime" with good faith and fidelity.

The following screen adaptations of *Michael Strogoff* were made in the epoch of sound movies – in France, Germany and the USA in 1936-1937. A famous actor Akim Tamiroff – expatriate Russian – starred in the American version. It is interesting, that Nazi authorities in 1936 did not object to the positive treatment of the Russian image in the plot of *Michael Strogoff*. Being in confrontation with the USSR, especially owing to the civil war in Spain, Germany managed to release a romantic adventure story about the czar's messenger, the more so because the fictional enemies of Russia in *Michael Strogoff* had nothing to do either with western Europe, nor with the German allies of that time – Turkey and Japan.

In whole, due to the establishment of the allied coalition of the USSR, USA and Great Britain during the World War II the Russian theme in the foreign cinematograph was increasingly full of sympathy. That explains the pathos of the Mexican screen version of *Michael Strogoff* (1944).

Interest in screen adaptations of Jules Verne's novel *Michael Strogoff* was revived in the era of the Cold War. Practically together with obviously anti-Soviet films *The Girl in the Kremlin*, *The Iron Petticoat*, *Jet Pilot and Beast of Budapest* a French colored screen version of *Michael Strogoff* (1956) was released on western screens with Kurt Jurgens starring in the film and famous USSR emigrant Valeriy Inkizhinov (*Chingis Khan's Offspring* directed by V. Pudovkin) acting as the Tatar sovereign who contrives to conquer Siberia. And five years after there was a sort of sequel invented by Viktor Tourjansky, - *Michael Strogoff's Triumph* (1961), practically with the same cast of actors.

One should think that the events of the Soviet political "thaw" of the second half of the 1950s and the space progress of the USSR in the 1950s-1960s somehow affected the new interest in the plot of *Michael Strogoff* and actualized the Russian theme.

At the same time, the Cold War went on and, naturally, it was absolutely impossible to imagine a movie about good Russians of the Soviet period in the west. That was why the Russian theme in the positive meaning was present only in the historical subject area (we would remind you that exactly in this period Hollywood released two high budget movies with famous actors - *War and Peace* and *Anastasia*).

Still in the 1970s filmmakers of France, Italy and FRG twice screened this Jules Verne's novel, and in 1975 *Michael Strogoff* was already a television serial.

In spite of the sudden change of the political and sociocultural situation caused by the USSR downfall the western treatment of *Michael Strogoff* did not undergo any changes in the Italian-German serial of 1999 either. It was the same romantic adventure story about the Russians of the remote past...

The popularity of *Michael Strogoff* in the West was confirmed by all the three French animation versions (of 1997 and 2004) as well as by the Parisian musical (2011) based on the novel.

The structure and narrative techniques in the media text (dominant concepts: media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations)

In the course of the group discussion with students one can draw a conclusion that both the novel *Michael Strogoff* and its screen adaptations are based on simple dichotomies: the hostile and aggressive Asian world, on the one hand, and the Russian world, - exotic, but still resembling Europe, on the other hand (there is the railroad and the telegraph there, after all); 2) positive characters (officer Michael Strogoff, Emperor Alexander II and his brother, beautiful Russian girl Nadya, and many other Russians) and villains (Tatars and traitor Ivan Ogareff); 3) a desire to protect Russia from wanderers' raids (Michael Strogoff and other positive Russian characters) and aggressive schemes (Tatars, Ogareff); 4) plan and result.

Schematically, the structure, plot, representativeness, ethics, genre modification peculiarities, iconography, character sketches of the screen adaptations of *Michael Strogoff* can be represented in the following way:

Historical period, scene: the Russia of the 1870s.

Setting, household objects: luxurious chambers of St. Petersburg palaces and the khan's marquee, comfortable train compartments, modest lifestyle of Siberian victualing-houses and taverns, Russian spacious areas, forests and rivers. The household objects correspond to the social status of the characters.

Representation of reality: an emphasized positive representation of positive characters, especially of romantic czar's messenger Michael Strogoff; a subtle grotesque towards negative characters.

Characters, their values, ideas, clothing, constitution, lexicon, mime, gestures: officer Michael Strogoff and his beloved – a Siberian professor's daughter, they have common patriotic values, though their relations are not without differences in the beginning. Dictatorial and cruel Tatar khan and more cruel and perfidious traitor Ivan Ogareff have a common desire to conquer Siberia. And who can imagine Russia without bears and gypsies! In one of screen adaptations *Michael Strogoff* beats a fierce Siberian bear in a hand-to-hand fight, in another screen version a gypsy instigates the Tatar executioner not to approach very close Strogoff's eyes with a red-hot sabre in order to save his eyesight... Michael Strogoff changes gowns depending on the situation. The czar's and khan's palaces are attired with the proper luxury; military men are dressed in smart outfit, and the gypsy wears exotic clothes. Western correspondents (a Frenchman and an Englishman) are dressed in field and convenient clothes of the European style. Male characters (regardless of their nationality) are robust. Female characters are shapely and graceful. The characters' speech is plain. Their facial expression and gestures are emotional. Naturally, the voices of the negative characters are far from being pleasant unlike the voices of the positive characters.

Significant change in the plot of the media text and the characters' life: the year of 187... Emperor of All Russia Alexander II charges valiant officer Michael Strogoff with an important mission – to pass to his brother – governor of Irkutsk – a package with an important message informing him of the sinister designs of Tatars and traitor Ivan Ogareff to conquer Siberia. Michael Strogoff goes on a long journey straight away (in one of the screen versions he travels from the very beginning with the Siberian professor's daughter named Nadya, in another screen adaptation he encounters her on his way).

Incipient problem: owing to Ogareff's crafty designs Michael Strogoff is taken prisoner by the Tatar khan and is condemned by him to blinding with a red-hot sword. The realisation of Emperor's task as well as Michael Strogoff's life are under threat...

Search for solutions to the problem: in Jules Verne's novel Michael Strogoff manages to avoid blinding thanks to... tears ("at the moment of the execution, Marfa Strogoff was present, stretching out her hands towards her son. Michael gazed at her as a son would gaze at his mother, when it is for the last time. The tears, which his pride in vain endeavored to subdue, welling up from his heart, gathered under his eyelids, and volatilizing on the cornea, had saved his sight. The vapor formed by his tears interposing between the glowing saber and his eyeballs, had been sufficient to annihilate the action of the heat" (Vern 2010). In the screen adaptations Michael Strogoff is rescued not due to the scientifically substantiated laws of moisture evaporation but owing to beautiful women (the khan's concubine and the gypsy) who instigate the Tatar executioner not to press the red-hot sabre very close to Michael Strogoff's eyes.

Problem solution: Michael Strogoff manages to escape, he hands the package over to the emperor's brother and kills betrayer Ogareff. The Russians defeat Tatars...

Conclusions

Thereby, as a result of the analysis students come to the conclusion that the screen adaptations of Jules Verne's novel "Michael Strogoff" create, though an oversimplified and adapted to western stereotypes of perception, but a positive image of Russia – as a stronghold of European values at the Asian frontiers, a country with a severe climate, boundless Siberian spacious areas, manly and patriotic warriors, a wise monarchy. At the same time, both Jules Verne's novel and its screen adaptations contain clear-cut western pragmatism – the confidence that if a man has a proper will he can rule his destiny. The conformists (Ogareff's gypsy mistress) remain prisoners of the Evil Spirit. The real heroes (Michael Strogoff) are able under seemingly desperate circumstances to change their fate (and the fate of their Motherland) for the better...

The discussion is summed up with a problem-solving question checking the audience's level of the acquired skills in the hermeneutic media text analysis: "What famous media texts can one compare this work with? Why? What do they have in common?"

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