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Grigory Rasputin in the Mirror of Western Screen

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Abstract

The article argues the approaches to the analysis of Western screen stereotypes of Grigory Rasputin as a kind of a metaphor of Russia's image in Western interpretation. Thus, as a result of the analysis it can be concluded that the Western film interpretations using Grigory Rasputin's image construct an extremely simplistic image of the country. Consequently, a barbaric, unpredictable, rebellious, mystical, and most importantly – a strange, not compatible with the normal US-European way of life, image of Russia is created.

Keywords: screen; film; USA; France; Europe; Russia; Rasputin; media education; media literacy; media competence; analysis; stereotype.

Introduction

I have already observed that Russian classical literature, with its deep "intimate glimpse", is not enough for Western media culture. The West needs its own image of Russia, corresponding to the stereotypical representation of mass mentality about "a mysterious Russian soul" [Fedorov, 2012]. While an ideal adaptation of the positive image of Russia for Western audience was the novel by Jule Verne "Mikhail Strogov" (1875), which takes place in the epoch of Alexander the Second reign, the image of barbarian, unpredictable, mystic, rebellious Russia was on a large scale featured on the screen in numerous versions of Western biopics of Rasputin (1869-1916). Grigory Rasputin, who was called a spiritual advisor, "a holy man", as it's known, had a big influence on Tzar's family and was assassinated on the 16th of December 1916 as a result of a plot by Duke F.Yusupov and other nobility, eager to change the course of Russian history.

I have to say that it is most unrewarding in this case to try and look for the historical truth in Western films about Rasputin. It does not make much sense to point out numerous absurdities and incongruities in them.

Western cinema first addressed the story of Rasputin in 1917, then, again and again (totally, about 30 times) they created a television/feature film image with a certain agenda. Certainly, the commercial success was important. However, the intention to reinforce a stereotypical interpretation of the riotous nature of "the Russian soul" in the Western society, was much more important. The Western screen needed not a historical portrait, but an image of G. Rasputin as a kind of a metaphor for a dangerous and disturbing image of Russia.

It seems that the analysis of this phenomenon of G.Rasputin as an image of barbaric Russia, adapted to a mass audience of the West, will be very useful for students of many branches of study – future historians, political scientists, culture, art historians, and teachers.

Materials and Methods

Applying methodology, developed by Umberto Eco [Eco, 2005, p. 209], Art Siverblatt [Silverblatt, 2001, p. 80-81], Len Mastermann [Masterman, 1985; 1997], Cary Bazalgette [Bazalgette, 1995], in my analysis of films dedicated to life and death of Grigory Pasputin, I will draw upon such key aspects in media literacy as media agencies, media categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences, since all these aspects

should be considered when analyzing the values, ideology, market, structure and contents of a media text.

Let me note that the methodologies of U.Eko [Eko, 2005, p.209] and A. Silverblatt [Silverblatt, 2001, p. 80-81] are fully consistent with the basic approaches of the hermeneutic analysis of audiovisual, spatial and temporal structure of media texts. Let us remember that the hermeneutical analysis of the cultural context (Hermeneutic Analysis of Cultural Context) is a study of the process of interpretation of a media text, cultural and historical factors influencing the viewpoint of the agency / author of the work and the point of view of the audience. The hermeneutical analysis suggests the comprehension of a media text through comparison with the cultural tradition and reality; penetration into the logic of the work; relationship of artistic images in the historical and cultural context. Thus, the object of analysis is the media system and its operation in society, human interaction, language, and use of media.

The ideology of authors in the social and cultural contexts, market conditions which contributed to the concept, process of production and success of a media text (dominant aspects: media agency, media category, media technologies, media representations, media audience).

Europe was in the state of the World War I for four years (1914-1918). In 1916-1917 protracted military actions had already lost its popularity in Russia. The murder of G.Rasputin, the overthrow of the monarchy and the rise to power of the Interim Government could not overcome a total crisis in society, which led first to the Bolshevik revolution, and later to a civil war. Naturally, with this state of affairs the Russian authorities in 1917 did not care much about cinema art. Cinemas showed dozens of commercial pictures of extremely poor artistic quality. For example, in 1917 the Russian short-lived films were overflowing the screens, the films which constructed unfavorable images of G.Rasputin and the royal family ("The drama of the life of Grigory Rasputin," "Washed in blood", "Dark forces – Grigory Rasputin and his associates "Holy demon – Rasputin is in hell", "People of sin and blood – Tsarskoe Selo sinners", "Love affairs of Grishka Rasputin", "Rasputin Funeral", "Mysterious murder in St. Petersburg on December 16, "The royal guardsmen "and others.).

Since Western press had already paved the way for "Rasputin film series", the same year of 1917 almost simultaneously the U.S.A. and Germany featured films picturing Rasputin as a demonic image of Russia, mysterious and hostile to Western civilization.

Media interest in G.Rasputin did not vanish in the 1920s-1930s: firstly, one could quite easily explain to the "masses" on both sides of the Atlantic the main reason for the fall of the Romanov dynasty and the Bolsheviks' rise to power by Rasputin intrigues; secondly, the legends of the mystical and sexual rites of Rasputin allowed Western filmmakers use them for media influence; thirdly, for Russian immigrants who worked in the Western film industry, it was a great opportunity to prove themselves as "experts on Russian history and Russian soul."

It is worth noting that the insatiable passion of filmmakers for the subject matter sometimes brought them not only profits, but also losses. For example, after the release of the American film "Rasputin and the Empress» (the USA, 1932) Princess I. Yusupova, who was in emigration then, demanded from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to compensate her moral damage (as she was outraged by a slanderous interpretation of her image as a raped mistress of "the holy man"), and after a lawsuit, she received 750 thousand dollars of compensation from the studio.

The Second World War ousted Rasputin theme for a while, however, since the 1950s the interest in this kind of metaphoric image of Russia once again captured the imagination of foreign studios and authors who were non-indifferent to Russia.

Among the "Rasputin series" of the 1950s – 1960s there was a spot of historic credibility – Robert Hossein film "J'ai tué Raspoutine" (France, 1967). "I Killed Rasputin" was based on the memoirs of Prince Felix Yusupov. But on the whole, the storyline and character traits of the protagonist were correlated with the established tradition: wildly rolling eyes, a giant with a beard fascinates the royal family and beautiful women, heals the young prince, drinks gallons of vodka, prophecies and desperately fights for his life in the final scene of his murder.

In 1970s-1980s similar things happened to Rasputin character on the Western screen. Sometimes ("Nicholas and Alexandra", the USA, 1971) the authors strained for some minimal likelihood. Sometimes they placed their stake on sexual accents ("Rasputin - Orgien am Zarenhof", Germany, 1984). On the whole, there was a well-adjusted conveyor of commercial interest.

Curiously enough, this tendency has not changed after the collapse of the USSR. Western films of the 1990s and the beginning of the XXI century, even with famous Russian actors starring ("Raspoutine", France, 2011), in my opinion, are made in a similar vein.

By the way, in the last 20-25 years previously banned in the USSR, Western movies about Rasputin became quite available to the Russian public, however, unlike in the West, they have not caused mass interest. Even such an ambitious project as French "Raspoutine" (France, 2011) starring Gerard Depardieu failed the box office in most film theatres, and was soon released on DVD and broadcast on television. Most likely, the reason for Russian mass audience's rejection of the Western "Rasputin stories" is simple: even not evaluating the artistic features of films, the Russian audience does not accept them as a "raspberry" degree of approximation (i.e. unlikelihood) to Russian realities and characters.

However, released in 1985 Soviet film distribution (previously banned for a dozen years) "Agony" by E.Klimov featuring G.Rasputin character, attracted 18 million viewers only for the first year of screening. In "Agony" the Russian crisis of 1916 was shown with the intrinsic E.Klimov's synthesis of irony and psychological depth. Farcical, eccentric scenes alternated terrible naturalistic visions. In the center of the picture is a figure of Grigory Rasputin, powerfully performed by Alexei Petrenko, who managed to achieve amazing results, switching between volcanic temperament, animal fear, superhuman strength, humiliated weakness, corruption and religiosity. It was a very challenging task, but the actor was able to embody the ambiguous character.

Structure and techniques of storytelling in a media text (key aspects: media categories, media technologies, media language, media representation).

During the group discussion the students come to conclusion that on the whole Western cinema "Rasputin series" is based on simple dichotomies: 1) barbarian world of G.Rasputin vs. somewhat European world of the Tzar family and nobility of the Russian Empire; 2) good characters (royal family, noble beauties, Prince Yusupov and his friends) vs. "crazy monk" Rasputin; 3) intention to protect Russia from Rasputin's harmful influence (Yusupov and his friends) vs. Rasputin's boundless lust for power.

Schematically, a structure, a plot, representation, ethics, peculiarities of genre modification, iconography, and characters in Western film texts about Rasputin can be presented in the following way:

Historical period, location: Russia in 1905-1916 (most often, 1916, the year of Rasputin's assassination). Sometimes as a postscript there is a scene of the royal family assassination in 1918, too.

Environment, everyday objects: luxury palace chambers of St. Petersburg and noble mansions, modest life of the poor, Russian open fields, forests and rivers. Household items correspond to the social status of the characters, although many look too "western" (which, incidentally, is not surprising, because until the 1990s, foreign films about Rasputin due to ideological reasons, could not be filmed on the Russian territory).

Techniques of depicting reality: positive with respect to the positive characters, grotesque (sometimes even comedian, as in the British film "Rasputin: The Mad Monk" (the United Kingdom, 1966) regarding "demonic" G.Rasputin.

Characters, their values, ideas, clothes, physique, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures:

The royal family, noble elite (including young pretty ladies), united by monarchy values and patriotic ideas.

Wildly rolling eyes, a bearded giant G.Rasputin is a religious messiah, the hypnotist, the fortuneteller who gains the trust of the royal family and the beautiful women, heals the young prince, drinks gallons of vodka and has excellent appetite.

The royal court is dressed with corresponding luxury, military men wear beautiful uniform. Characters of noble descent are endowed with graceful physique – especially women. Their vocabulary is exquisite. Facial expressions and gestures are emotional. Naturally, the tone of voice of "good" characters (in sound films) is pleasant and smooth.

Rasputin is dressed in a rural merchant-folk style, always with an Orthodox cross. He is characterized by powerful physique, simplicity and "simple folks" language, facial expressions and gestures are big, he speaks in bass voice, and inspires awe with his sententious intonations.

A significant change in the lives of the characters: 1905. "A holy man" appears at the Russian royal court – G. Rasputin, which wins the hearts of the imperial couple and beautiful

noblewomen with his mystical prophecies, healings and charisma (alternatively, a film begins in the 1910s, when Rasputin had already become an influential figure at the royal court, or even in 1916).

A problem: patriotic nobles, led by Prince F.Yusupov, become aware of Rasputin's negative impact on the royal family and the fate of Russia.

The search for solution: Prince Yusupov and his friends plot a scheme to murder G.Rasputin.

Solution: Yusupov manages to lure Rasputin into a trap and kill him.

Conclusions

Thus, as a result of the analysis it can be concluded that the Western film interpretations using G.Rasputin's image construct an extremely simplistic image of the country. Consequently, a barbaric, unpredictable, rebellious, mystical, and most importantly – a strange, not compatible with the normal US-European way of life, image of Russia is created.

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