Nazisploitation Films: Hermeneutic Analysis

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Abstract

The article uses examples of specific feature films of Nazisploitation for a hermeneutic analysis of cultural context – a study of the process of interpreting the media text, cultural and historical factors influencing the point of view of the agency/author of the media text and the view of the audience. At the same time, the author means that hermeneutical analysis implies comprehension of the media text through comparison with historical, cultural tradition and reality; penetration into its logic; through comparison of media images in the historical and cultural context, combining historical, hermeneutical analysis with structural, narrative, ethical, ideological, iconographic/visual, analysis of media stereotypes and characters of the media text.

Keywords: media text, hermeneutic analysis, Nazisploitation, media culture, film, movie, cinema.

1. Introduction

For a long time, the topic of Nazism/Fascism in cinema was presented in a certain genre palette – psychological dramas, adventure detectives and thrillers, satirical (The Great Dictator by Ch. Chaplin, for example) or lyrical (Heavenly Quiet Move) comedies prevailed. For quite a long time strict censorship bans – both in the West and in the USSR – did not allow the creators of films on the Nazi topic to turn this kind of media texts into a commercial product, naturalistically emphasizing the scenes of violence and sex. However, since the second half of the 1960s the situation has changed, especially in Western Europe...

2. Materials and methods

In our previous works (Fedorov, 2008; 2012; 2018, etc.) we have repeatedly referred to the technology of hermeneutic analysis of media texts (Eco, 1998; 2005; Eco, 1976; Silverblatt, 2001: 80-81). This time, audiovisual media texts of the world cinema exploiting Nazi themes will be used as an example. In our opinion, the analysis of media texts data is especially important for media-educational tasks in the education of future historians, culturologists, media critics, sociologists, philologists, psychologists, and teachers.

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3. Discussion

Many Western researchers (Evers, 2011; Fuchs, 2012; Koven, 2004; Krautheim, 2009; Magilow et al., 2011; Roy, 2013; Spector, 2005; Stiglegger, 2001 and others) have repeatedly addressed the subject of the Nazisploitation in movies and media culture, noting such characteristics as the fetishization of the Nazi form, the relish of scenes of violence and sex, and the appeal to the conflict of executioner and victims.

However, there is an opinion (Moskovitza, 2011) that the trend of Nazisploitation was also evident in Soviet cinema. Thus, for example, in the spy film On the Far Shores (1958) there appears a kind of "woman-executioner, showing her victims a stocking gum as a "last object", the dividing line that triggers the mechanism of panic identification of castration. It is the feeling of agonizing disorder, fantastic rupture, born of a stocking accidentally seen by the Nazis... that causes the need for aggressive deviation" (Moskovitza, 2011), and in the popular hit Away from the Motherland (1960, 42 million viewers in the first year of the distribution) "for the first time revived the images of the hidden Nazi sado-eroticism on the screen, who were just beginning to make their way through the covers of Anglo-American men's magazines... – the Gestapo-obsessed, algorithmic, tormenting the charming anti-Nazi woman in the satin black, and the Nazi Fräulein, who took their fantasies out on courageous but helpless prisoners with naked torsos" (Moskovitza, 2011).

Another thing is that the images and trends of nazisploitation, which so brightly and openly captured the Western screen of the 1970s, in Soviet cinema were usually latent: Instead of directly showing sexy and sadistic scenes in the films On the Far Shores (1958) and "Cyclone" will Start at Night (1967) "brothel scenes do not appeal to the pornographic imagination (as Brass, Vertmuller and a dozen other epigones of the genre), and open to the astonished viewer another – unknown – social space... In the Soviet view, a brothel is a thieving raspberry, a robber's lair, i.e. another zone of transgression outside the social. Meanwhile, a brothel is a place where sexuality still exists in the sphere (albeit on the edge) of social life. As early as 1967, film director Ada Neretniece showed the Soviet audience, who always wanted to look into the gap between the atomicity of heapish sin and the criminal voluptuousness of amour fou, a brothel as a mechanism of the social system of supervision and control over an individual through repressive sublimation" (Moskovitza, 2011).

Of course, sex was a by-product of the Soviet version of nazisploitation. The main thing that attracted the unspoiled Soviet viewers to the screen was a savoury display of the luxurious life that Soviet agents pretending to be Nazis could afford. Soviet spies on a mission to the enemy's rear not only flaunted in spectacular uniforms and smoked expensive cigars / cigarettes, but also lived in luxurious hotel rooms or private flats, where they could flirt with young host daughters. By raising glasses of champagne, whiskey, or excellent French cognac with an indispensable toast "To Our Victory", they could afford everything that many Soviet viewers had only secretly dreamt of (remember, here at least such hits of the Stalinist era as The Feast of a Scout, and Secret Mission). It should be noted here that the Soviet cinema, which tells the story of the life of the "rear" Nazis, has successfully used the stereotypes of Soviet films about the civil war, where the White Guards (and the Reds, who pretended to be Whites) have always been regulars of luxury restaurants, variety and cabaret, connoisseurs of beautiful women's companies, soulful romances with guitar and selected alcoholic beverages...

The level of such a luxurious life has already become absolutely over the top in one of the first colorful Soviet films about espionage in Germany – A Man in Civilian Clothes (1973) and Squire and Lyre (1974). Thus, "in the early 1970s, scenes of excessive demonstrative violence, full of theatrical effects, which until recently had been the hallmark of the Nazisploitation, were replaced by sketches of the existence of fascism as "order" as a theoretically possible way to equip the "state" on the pragmatic foundations of burger vulgarity – the invisible and unshakable foundation of the Nazi myth. The latent interest in ecstatic camp meat grinders was replaced by respectful attention to the bureaucratic rationality of interrogations of different degrees. ... color meant refusing to flirt with the black-and-white semantics of "documentary", leaving the macabre to glamour" (Moskovitza, 2011).

One can also agree that in Squire and Lyre "the only living purpose of all these spy games and political intricacies was only one thing: to give a beautiful woman and her chosen one the opportunity to live according to their ambitions and innermost desires. Among the bankers,
generals, aristocrats, capitalist ministers. In luxurious mansions, ancient castles, fashionable hotels. In the most picturesque corners of Europe” (Kushnirov, Shpagin, 1993).

It should be noted here that not the last reason why the Soviet cinema for a long time avoided the demonstration of colored Nazism was the red color of the Nazi flag and armbands with swastikas. In black and white cinema, the Nazi banners (especially against the background of concentration camps) looked gray and black and did not cause unnecessary associations...

The triumph of the demonstration of routine Nazism on the screen came, of course, in the unforgettable Seventeen Moments of Spring (1973), where, according to the apt judgment of V.P. Demin, "the most secret floor of the fascist state machine, wheels and screws of the behind-the-scenes mechanism of the Reich, the secrets of the imperial office, the underground bunkers of the Gestapo – all suddenly opened before our eyes at once. But there was also one puzzling circumstance here. Almost all the viewers writing to the editorial office paid attention to the "saloon peace" of the state corridors – and this at the end of the war, a few weeks before the Fuhrer's suicide?" (Demin, 1973). Here, in my opinion, the clear trend of Soviet Nazisploitation cinema is clearly defined: as a rule, their action takes place in the second half of 1944 – early 1945, when Germany was on the verge of defeat, but, nevertheless, the Soviet screen managed to show the amazing stability of normal life: hotels, restaurants, bars, variety, brothels continued to work properly, and the Soviet spies along with the Nazi environment, one way or another, enjoyed the earthly benefits of different varieties...

Almost a parody peak of the Soviet screen Nazisploitation was, in my opinion, a colorful entertaining spy action One Chance Out of a Thousand (1968), in which all the Nazis in a row were frankly and skillfully fooled into the Soviet scouts...

4. Results

Technology of hermeneutic analysis of audiovisual media texts of world cinema exploiting Nazi topic

Location, historical, cultural, political, ideological context

Historical context

The place of operation of media texts: as a rule, during the Second World War (1939-1945), although it is possible to postpone the operation to other historical periods (e.g., 1933-1938), Germany and other countries;

When did these media texts premiere? These media texts were available in different versions in different countries – depending on market conditions, the duration of films, their names, language versions, age ratings for the audience, etc.

How did the events at the time affect the media texts? What events took place at the time of the creation of the media texts? How do media texts comment on events? How does knowledge of historical events help to understand media texts?

The emergence of Nazi exploitative films (Nazisploitation) was significantly influenced not only by the easing of censorship and the so-called "sexual revolution" that peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the USA and Western Europe. A significant incentive to create a long series of Nazisploitation films was the famous psychological drama of the brilliant Italian director Luchino Visconti The Damned (1969), in which the denunciation of Nazism was so powerfully accompanied by violent Freudian chords of latent and open perversion, bisexuality, homosexuality, executioner and victim complex and incest. The development of this kind of treatment of Nazi themes was also seriously influenced by the works of two other famous Italian masters – Liliana Cavani (The Night Porter, 1974) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (Salo, or 100 Days of Sodom, 1975), in which, in contrast to the The Damned theme of violence, perverse sex, sadomasochism, fetishism and voyeurism had already dominated.

Ideological, political context

How do media texts reflect, strengthen, inspire or shape an ideology?

Instead of the old anti-Nazi/anti-fascist message, which is used to in post-war cinema (positive heroes, humane ideas fight against negative characters – the carriers of ultra-nationalist, racist ideas, cruel and ruthless anti-Semites, invaders of other people’s territories, etc.), Nazisploitation's films of the 1970s have developed other stereotypes of how events are interpreted, which are densely marked by violence and sex. But here P.A. Sorokin is absolutely right, the
appearance of commercially speculative film production does not deny the existence of really great films, whether their main theme is sex or anything else, in which the material is presented with the ennobling elegance of true art. However, unfortunately, great films are rare exceptions to the vast mass of vulgar paintings that feed the public every day (Sorokin, 2006: 39).

*The Night Porter* (as opposed to *The Damned*) is not a great one, but his ideological message undoubtedly provided a significant justification for most of the Nazisploitation films released after 1974. In general, this concept is very accurately noted by S.I. Yutkevich: "Love or, rather, passion is carnal, overpowering all social, political and moral barriers. Nazism is not a monstrous social calamity, a generation of the worst racist theories, ... but only the inexhaustible drives dormant in the depths of the human subconscious. Concentration camps are not a hell where millions of people are destroyed, but rather a purgatory that awakens the instincts of pleasure, revealing the dark depths of human nature of his being" (Yutkevich, 1978: 121).

No less influential in the further development of the subject matter was the fact that L. Cavani was too pacifist, looking at the history with all simplicity "without finding in separate human individualities neither right nor wrong. Every man has his own alibi, justification and does not bear responsibility for the crimes of the totalitarian regime" (Kudryavtsev, 1991: 221).

It should be noted that in the 1970s many Western critics and journalists, including Italian ones, did not accept the *The Night Porter* precisely because L. Cavani deliberately evaded the accusation of the main character, a former SS member who was destroying prisoners in concentration camps. To the viewers who did not forget the horrors of the Second World War, the very idea of the director – the study of the dramatic complex of "executioner and victim", living in "each of us", painted with the same sadomasochistic eroticism – seemed blasphemous and horrible.

The love story that broke out in a concentration camp between a Nazi and a Jewish prisoner continued on the screen in a Vienna hotel in 1957, the elegant Dirk Bogard was magnificent in black SS uniform, and Charlotte Rampling in black leather gloves above her elbow. Aesthetes were conquered by the demonic appeal of the visual series.

I dare to be called a fancy retrograde, but *The Night Porter* seems to me to be a secondary one literally from the very first shots. You can think as much as you like about the fact that “Liliana Cavani’s characters are Romeo and Juliet XX century. Of course, there were, exist and will exist ordinary love stories, but it is this one that remains cardinal for our time” (Lavrentyev, 1991: 4), but every "unengaged" viewer, who has at least once in his life seen *The Damned* (1969) Luchino Visconti, will agree that almost the entire visual series is "written off" from there. From the genius film Visconti came to *The Night Porter* Dirk Bogarde and Charlotte Rampling, bewitching the shine of black uniforms, gloomy painful erotic scenes, and the situation itself "executioner and victim". Undoubtedly, only a pathologically suspicious viewer can accuse Cavani of plagiarism, but the countless enthusiastic responses of the Russian press published in post-Soviet times, in which *The Night Porter* was declared almost an immortal masterpiece, seem to me a clear overdose ...

In general, the ideological and political context of the worldview depicted in media texts exploiting Nazi themes can probably be presented as follows (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Ideology and political context of the worldview portrayed in Nazisploitation media texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key questions for media texts, exploiting Nazi topic</th>
<th>Picture of the world of ordinary people</th>
<th>Picture of the Nazi world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the ideology of this world?</td>
<td>As a rule, it is not clearly manifested. Ordinary people in Nazisploitation films are shown as victims of Nazism, for whom it is important just to survive.</td>
<td>Aggressive nationalist, imperialist, racist ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which worldview does this world represent – optimistic or pessimistic?</td>
<td>Mostly pessimistic, because the characters understand that they have little chance to survive.</td>
<td>For the most part, it is self-confident and optimistic, Pessimism is only possible in the negative final of the film for Nazi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Even when engaging in sexual contact with the Nazis, the "ordinary" characters understand the fragility, danger and transience of such "happiness".

Imperialism, Nazism – aggression – cruel treatment of victims, sexual domination, disrespect for subordinates.

What is the hierarchy of values according to this worldview?

The main value is the physical existence of man.

Imperialist, Nazi values, fear for one's life (the latter prevails only in the finals of some Nazisploitation films).

What values can be found in this media text? What values prevail in the final?

A person's physical existence, his sexual desires.

It means being a Nazi, ruthless to his victims.

What does it mean to be successful in this world? How does one succeed in this world? What kind of behaviour is rewarded in this world? How stereotypical is it?

It means being able to either adapt to (and even enjoy) Nazi mores or rebel against your executioners. However, the first stereotype in Nazisploitation films clearly dominates.

This means being a Nazi, ruthless to his victims. In this, the characters are stereotypical, but can also have individual traits (intelligence, calculus, cunning, stupidity, cowardice, irony, sarcasm).

Cultural context

How media texts reflect, strengthen, inspire, or shape cultural attitudes, values and myths.

The media texts of Nazisploitation are built both (to a lesser extent) on vulgarized echoes of ancient Greek and medieval mythology, and (to a greater extent) on the sexual and sadistic myth of the Third Reich, which is dominated by perversity and uncontrollability (Fuchs, 2012; Stiglegger, 2001). Nazism in these media texts is "not so much a political doctrine as a kind of show business, a grand spectacle, a performance, a show. The current "attractiveness" of Nazism is not in content, but in form: its entire outer surroundings, all its beautiful and seductive, cabaret-carnival, festive wrapping easily turns into a sexual fetish, inciting the lust of millions, awakening and releasing the darkest instincts of the crowd" (Vasilchenko, 2008).

At the same time, the Nazisploitation media texts are based on the true facts of the heinous crimes committed by the Nazis (Koven, 2004; Krautheim, 2009; Spector, 2005; Vasilchenko, 2008 and other sources); another thing is that they are shown not for the purpose of their condemnation, but for the purpose of perverse entertainment.

Genre modifications: mainly drama and melodrama with a rating "for an adult audience" and action (the dose of violence and sex in Nazisploitation media texts can range from "standards" adopted in software porn to absolutely trash XXX that initially do not fall on a wide screen, but are designed for video/DVD sales).

But if L. Visconti and L. Cavani was attracted by famous actors – Dirk Bogarde (1921-1999), Ingrid Thulin (1926-2004), Helmut Grim (1932-2004), Charlotte Rampling and Helmut Berger, and talented cameramen – the true masters of the image Pasqualino De Santis, Armando Nanuzzi, Alfio Contini, the rest of the movies (except for the epigone Salon Kitty by T. Brass) involved unknown to the general public, artisans with varying degrees of success achieved their main goal – the exploitation of Nazi themes for commercial gain, with minimal cost of production and almost no artistic objectives.

The basic dramaturgical stereotypes of Nazisploitation media texts are manifested in the fact that the Nazis:

- The Nazis have turned concentration camps into a synthesis of dirty brothels and chambers for sophisticated torture, brutal medical experiments, murders, and genocide against Jews, often led by a depraved sadist (Nazi Love Camp 27, SS Experimental Camp, Hell Camp, Women's Camp
Brothels and orgies are organized for the SS and Gestapo personnel; here, the motifs of the "executioner-victim" from the *The Night Porter* (*Salon Kitty, Deported Women for the SS: Special Branch, Bloody Nights of the Gestapo, The Last Orgy of the Third Reich, etc.*) are often repeated in a repeatedly worsened version.

- "Routine" (but very comfortable in the everyday sense) life of Soviet spies in Nazi Germany (*Away from the Motherland, Shield and Sword, Squire and Lyre, Seventeen Moments of Spring, etc.*).

At the same time, for example, a low-budget film in the style of Nazisploitation *Ilza – Wolf SS* (1974) was so financially profitable that caused not only a wave of imitations, but also sequels. One of them was *Ilza: The Siberian Tigress* (1977), where the head of the concentration camp, which is called one in one (only with the change of nationality and form – from German to Soviet) was transferred to the Siberian land, where it is still engaged in their favorite work – satisfy their insatiable sexual desires with prisoners, torture, torture and kill...

### Techniques of depicting reality (iconography) – the situation, household items, etc.

- Modest dwellings and household items of "simple" characters (as long as they are still at large, not in a concentration camp); clearly richer standard of living of Nazi characters, unified textures of service offices with an indispensable swastika on the banner, military uniforms; the horrific conditions of detention in concentration camps; the ominous sterility of medical rooms, where bloody sadistic "scientific" experiments on prisoners take place; the "baroque" luxury of an environment with a predominance of anxious red in the episodes of Nazi orgies.

### Typology of characters (their values, ideas, clothing, physique, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures)

- **Age of the character:** 18-60 years old (men), 18-30 years old (women).
- **Appearance, clothing, and physique of the character:**
  - Nazi characters are usually dressed in SS uniform with the appropriate attributes (black uniform, leather – again black – cloak, cap, whip, etc.), they have a strong physique, although they may have ordinary physical data, and in most cases look unpleasant (although there may be exceptions).
  - The victim characters are dressed modestly (especially the villagers), and their physique varies widely depending on the context of the particular film; the appearance of the female characters claims to be attractive;
  - **Level of education:** higher (officers), secondary, although for Nazisploitation media texts this does not matter.
  - **Social status, profession:** The social status of Nazi characters is roughly the same (although the life of the leadership is, of course, much more comfortable); the social status of the victim characters differs greatly depending on the degree of their involvement in the "pleasures" of the Nazis.
  - **The family status of the character:** it is of no importance that executioners and victims can be equally married and single, and this does not affect their functions in the plot in any way. Character traits: cruelty, meanness, sexual obsession, purposefulness, hostility, cunning, strength (Nazi characters); sexuality, obedience, doomedy, less often courage (victim characters). Nazi characters are portrayed by evil, rude and violent fanatics with primitive vocabulary, active gestures and unpleasant tone of voice. In general, the characters of all the characters of Nazisploitation media texts are dotted down, without deepening into psychology. The characters speak (for the sake of clarity to most viewers), as a rule, in English and Russian, despite the fact that many of the Nazisploitation films were made in Italy and USSR. In rare cases, individual replicas are pronounced in German.
  - **Value orientations (ideological, religious, etc.) of the characters:** Nazi values are clearly expressed in the couple with a focus on sexual pleasure and sadism. The values of "simple" characters are reduced to a desire to survive at any cost. Religious values tend to go beyond media texts. The character's actions, his ways of resolving conflicts: the actions of the characters are dictated by the development of the aforementioned stereotypical plot of media texts. The actions of the Nazi characters are dominated by cruelty and ruthlessness, and their victims clearly feel either
doomed and broken, or masochistic enjoyment of the status of relentless slavery. However, all this sometimes does not prevent the "simple" characters from looking for radical ways to resolve conflicts (escape from the camp, revolt against the Nazis, etc.).

Significant change in the media text and character life story, the problem encountered, the search for a solution

The victim characters either live a peaceful life at first (they are given a minimum of screen time to do so) or are immediately in a situation of slavery and subjugation (concentration camp, brothel). Negative characters enjoy sadism and sex for 90% of the action. The problem that arose is that the lives of the victims are at risk as a result of the Nazi lawlessness. And there are only two ways to solve it – total submission to the Nazis, or fight against them.

In Soviet cinema, the main conflict unfolds between a spy and the Nazi environment. In the final, the Soviet scout must perform his task.

5. Conclusion

Although Nazisploitation cinematic boom was in 1970s, the topic was, in one way or another, played out in the cinema and in subsequent years. Let's remember, for example, the brilliant parody of many Nazisploitation motifs in Quentin Tarantino's film Inglourious Basterds (2009), the somewhat less successful comedy fantasy about the Nazis on the Moon Iron Sky (2012) and even the Russian trash comedy Hitler Kaput! (2008). One should not forget about the numerous fantastic horror films (e.g. Nazi zombies) and computer games containing elements of Nazisploitation. You can also add a series of films about more or less modern motorcycle gangs using Nazi symbols if you wish...

So, I tried to make hermeneutic analysis – a study of the process of interpreting the media text, cultural and historical factors influencing the viewpoint of the agency/author of the media text and the viewpoint of the audience – on the examples of specific feature Nazisploitation films of the world cinema.

Of course, it was meant that hermeneutical analysis implies comprehension of the media text through comparison with historical, cultural tradition and reality; penetration into its logic; through comparison of media images in the historical and cultural context, combining historical, hermeneutical analysis with structural, plot, ethical, ideological, iconographic/visual, analysis of media stereotypes and characters of the media text.

Selected filmography

*She Demons*. USA, 1958.
*"Cyclone" will Start at Night*. USSR, 1966.
*The End of "Saturn"*. USSR, 1967.
*Shield and Sword*. USSR – East Germany – Poland, 1968.
*Sons of the Fatherland*. USSR, 1968.
*The Experiment of Dr. Abst*. USSR, 1968.
*They Saved Hitler's Brain*. USA, 1968.
*He Was Not Alone*. USSR, 1969.
The Tormentors. USA, 1971.
Ilsa, She Wolf of the S.S. Canada-USA, 1974.
Salo o le 120 giornate di Sodoma / Salo, 120 Days of Sodom. Italy, 1975.
The Black Gestapo. USA, 1975.
Variant "Omega". USSR, 1975.
Deported Women of the SS: Special Section / Le deportate della sezione speciale SS / SS Special Section Women. Italy, 1976.
Nazi Love Camp 27. Italy, 1976.
Hell Camp / S.S. Hell Camp / Holocauste Nazi / La bestia en calore / S.S. Experiment Camp 2. Italy, 1977.
The Last Orgy of the Third Reich / Gestapo’s Last Orgy / Boureaux SS / Des filles pour le bourreau / L’Ultima orgia del III Reich / La Ultima Orgia de la Gestapo. Italy, 1977.
Le lac des morts vivants | The Lake of the Living Dead. France | Spain, 1981.
Le Tresor des morts vivants | La tumba de los muertos vivientes | El desierto de los zombies | Oasis Of The Zombies | The Oasis of the Living Dead. France | Spain, 1982.
Unknown Pages from the Life of a Scout. USSR, 1990.
Blitzkrieg: Escape from Stalag 69. USA, 2008.
Hitler kaput! Russia, 2008.
Inglourious Basterds, USA, 2009.
Zombies From Outer Space. Germany, 2012.
Frankenstein’s Army. USA – Netherlands – Czech Republic, 2013.
Werewolves of the Third Reich. UK, 2017.
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