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Russian Image of the Modern Western Screen: Case Film Studies (2 films of S.Spielberg and J.Stelling)

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Abstract. This article analyzes the modern Western films about Russia and Russian characters – in terms of their ideology, social and cultural context. As examples – the films of S.Spielberg’s and J.Stelling.

Keywords: media text; analysis; media studies; film; policy; ideologies.

Introduction.

This article analyzes the Western films of the modern period about Russian world and Russian characters - in terms of their ideology, social and cultural context. As examples - the films of S.Spielberg’s and J.Stelling.

Case Study 1. Steven Spielberg’s “Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull” as a Burlesque Transformation of Media Stereotypes of the “Cold War” Within the Framework of Mass/Popular Culture of the XXI Century

In 2008 the Russian subject was suddenly taken up by the very Steven Spielberg, who made the legendary character Indiana Jones fight with beast-like Soviet special forces in the action movie *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

In this connection it is curious to trace how media stereotypes of the *Cold War* underwent the burlesque transformation within the framework of this product of mass/popular culture of the XXI century.

The authors of many Russian researches of the past years reproached the creators of works of popular culture for using unseemly methods of psychological pressure (constant repetition of the facts regardless of the truth), misinterpretation of fact and tendencies, selection of unfavorable features in representation of political opponents, “sticking of labels”, “embroidering”, “simple folks games”, referring to authorities to justify lies, etc. As a matter of fact global conclusions were made on the basis of particular facts, since among the creators of works of mass culture there have always been not only honest professionals who make up their plots taking into consideration humanistic values, but also “craftsmen” inclined to political conformism and momentary hack-work.

Meanwhile popular/mass culture media texts have success with the audience not due to their supposed orientation to people with low aesthetic taste, subjected to psychological pressure, easy believing lies, etc., but because their authors respond to real needs of the audience, including informational, compensatory, hedonistic, recreative, moral, etc., which are worthy of respect and study.

The rise of the “industrial society inevitably leads to the formation of the special type of culture – mass, commercial culture... which satisfies the fundamental need of mankind to harmonize psychic life of people on the basis of contemporary technologies” (Razlogov, 1991, p.10). At that mass culture which is unthinkable without media, is a natural constituent of the contemporary culture in general, to which almost all artistic works created all over the world belong. It can be regarded as the effective way of involving the vast masses of viewers, listeners and readers into various cultural processes; as the phenomenon begotten by the newest technologies (firstly by the communication ones), world integration and globalization (the destruction of local communities, blurring of territorial and national frontiers, etc.).

In my opinion such definition of mass/popular culture logically fits in the context of functioning of media – the systematic spreading of information (by way of the press, television, radio, cinema, sound/video recording, the Internet) among “vast and dispersed auditory with the purpose of strengthening of spiritual values and having ideological, economical or organizational influence on people’s evaluations, opinions and behavior (Philosophical encyclopedia, 1983, p.348).

V.Y.Propp (Propp, 1976), N.M.Zorkaya (Zorkaya, 1981), M.I.Turovskaya (Turovskaya, 1979), O.F.Nechay (Nechay, 1993) and M.V.Yampolskiy (Yampolsky, 1987) brought out clearly that for the total success of works of mass culture it is necessary that their creators take into consideration the folklore type of aesthetical perception, so “the archetypes of fairy tale and legend and the corresponding archetypes of folklore perception when meeting each other produce the effect of integral success of mass favorites” (Zorkaya, 1981, p.116).

Indeed the success with the audience is closely connected with the mythological layer of a production. “Strong” genres – thriller, fiction, Western – always rest upon “strong” myths (Yampolskiy, 1987, p.41). Interrelation of unusual, but “real” events is one of the basic archetypes (resting upon the deep psychological structures, which exert influence upon consciousness and subconsciousness) of fairy tale, legend, - is very important for the popularity of many media texts.

In my opinion, O.F.Nechay quite correctly pointed out the important peculiarity of mass (popular) culture – the adaptation of folklore in the forms of society. I.e. in author’s “text” the ideal shows through reality (in the center of the plot is the character-personality), and in social and critical “text” the main character is taken from everyday life (simple person), however the mass culture proposes ideal norms in real environment (in the center of the plot is the epic hero) (Nechay, 1993, pp.11-13).

Serial mass culture has great influence upon the audience. Here the “backbone properties of serials come into action: 1) long-term narration, 2) discontinuity of the narration, 3) special plot organization of the series which require certain identity of their structure and repetition of separate parts, 4) the presence of fabulous characters, permanent heroes (or the group of heroes)” (Zorkaya, 1981, p.59). Besides the creators of media texts of mass culture take into consideration the “emotional tone” of perception. Sameness, monotony of plot situations often leads the audience to stop the contact with the media text.

That’s why in the works of such professionals as Steven Spielberg the change of episodes which cause “shocking” and “soothing” reactions takes place, however with constant happy ending which causes positive “relaxation”. In other words, among popular media texts there are many of those which can be easily divided into parts (often interchangeable). Chiefly it is necessary that these parts were connected by well thought-out mechanism of “emotional drops” – the alternation of positive and negative emotions felt by the audience.

Many bestsellers and blockbusters are built up according to the similar “formula of success” including folklore, mythological basis, compensation of these or those feelings lacking in the lives of the audience, happy ending, the use of spectacular scenes. Their action is usually built up on the quite fast change of short (in order not to bore the audience) episodes. Let’s add the sensational informativeness as well: the events take place in various exotic places, in the center of the plot is the world of Evil, and the main hero, almost fabulous character, stands against it. He is handsome, strong and charming. He comes out of all the supernatural situations safe and sound (a great occasion for identification and compensation). Besides many episodes touch upon human emotions and instincts (for example, the sense of fear). The serial character of the film is present, it presupposes sequels.

With more or less technical splendor of a media text of mass success like action movie we can single out the additional components of success: fights, skirmish, chases, beautiful women, disturbing music, the feelings of the characters which are bursting forth, minimized dialogues, maximized physical actions and other “dynamic” attributer which are rightly described by R.Corliss (Corliss, 1990, p.8). Indeed, a contemporary media text (film/television/clip, internet, computer game) sets up higher claims for eyesight because we must watch every inch of the frame waiting for flash-like stunts and special effects. Together with their high-speed technical inventiveness, surface polish and sound cynicism, “dyna-films” are the ideal kind of art for the generation brought up by MTV, blinded by the light flashes of videoclips, accustomed to films with bloody scenes (Corliss, 1990, p.8).

At that it's worth mentioning that in many cases the creators of "mass" media texts wittingly simplify, trivialize the life material which they touch upon, evidently trying to attract that part of the young audience which enthusiastically plays computer games based on these or those actions of virtual violence. There's no doubt that there's logic in this, and N.A. Berdyaev justly wrote that "culture in the noble sense of this word is difficult for the masses which are not accustomed to the cultural goods and values, for them technical equipment is relatively easier" (Berdyaev, 1990, p. 229).

At the same time all this is only a part of success of a mass culture media text, because its popularity depends on the hypnotic influence on perception. Instead of the primitive adapting to the tastes of "the broad masses", the "secret subconscious interest of the crowd" on the level of "irrational feat and intuitive irradiation" is divined (Bogomolov, 1989, p. 11).

Similar plots having fallen into a common "craftsman's" hands or, for instance, into Steven Spielberg's, gather different scales of audience. Masters of popular media culture have perfectly mastered the art of creation of multi-level works, calculated on people of different ages, intelligences and tastes. Thus appear certain half-stylizations and half-parodies alternately with "half-seriousness", with countless allusions to the films of the past years, direct quotations, references to folklore and mythology, and so on, and so forth.

For example for some viewers the *media text* of Spielberg's series about Indiana Jones will be equivalent to viewing the classic *The Thief of Bagdad*. For others which are more experienced in media culture it will be a fascinating and ironical journey into the realm of folklore and fairy-tale archetypes, cinematic associations, delicate parodies. Moreover one of the special features of the contemporary social situation besides standardization and unification is that popular media culture adapts the peculiar methods which are characteristic of "author's" works. This is another example of pluralism of popular media culture calculated on satisfaction of different demands of the audience.

The therapeutic effect, the phenomenon of compensation is also necessary for the mass success of a media text. It is natural that a person compensates the feelings and emotional experience missing in his real life. S. Freud wrote that culture must mobilize all its forces to restrict the original aggressive desires of man and inhibit their manifestations by means of creation of the necessary psychological reactions (Freud, 1990, p.29).

Thus the success of media texts of popular culture is influenced by many factors: the basis on folklore and mythological sources, constancy of metaphors, orientation toward the consecutive realization of the steadiest plot schemes, the synthesis of natural and supernatural, the address to emotions through identification (the imaginary transformation into the characters, fusion with the atmosphere of the work), "magical power" of the characters, standardization (replication, unification, adaptation) of the ideas, situations, characters, etc., serial and mosaic character of the work, compensation (the illusion of realization of cherished might-have-been dreams), happy ending, the use of such rhythmical organization of audiovisual media texts when not only the contents but also the order of frames influences the emotions of the audience; intuitive guessing of subconscious interests of the audience, etc..

In his action movie *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) S. Spielberg collected a bouquet of virtually all usual Western stereotypes with respect to Russia and the Russians. Indeed, the beast-like Soviet soldiers in full combat gear and with corresponding combat equipment who somehow managed to get to the USA look mockingly grotesque on the screen. Wikipedia rightly points out the burlesque "errors": the commander of the Soviet landing troops Irina Spalko is acting by order of Stalin, though by the time the actions in the film take place (1957) he has already been dead for four years; the Soviet soldiers dressed in American military uniform, are armed with Chinese submachine guns; the Soviet soldiers are openly walking the American deserts and jungles in Soviet uniform, they drink vodka and dance "kalinka-malinka" to the accompaniment of balalaika.

Anyhow S. Spielberg turned *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* into a digest of stereotyped perception of the image of Russia and the Russians by the Western world of cinema...

Case Study 2. Ideological and Structural Analysis of the Interpretation of the Image of Russia on the Western Screen in the Post-Soviet Period (1992-2010) (by the example of the film "Duska" by J. Stelling)

As a case in point let's turn to the analysis of the ironical drama *Duska* (2007) by the famous Dutch director J. Stelling. We shall try to reveal not only social and historical context of the time of the creation of this media text, but also its structure, the plot, representativeness, ethics, the peculiarities of genre modification, iconography, and the characters of the personages.

Following the methods developed by U. Eco, let's single out the three "rows" or "systems", which are important in a work: author's ideology; the market conditions which determined the idea, the process of writing and success of the book (or at least which contributed to all three of them); the methods of the narration (Eco, 2005, p.209). As we have already mentioned these methods sort quite well with C. Bazalgette's methods of the analysis of media texts (Bazalgette, 1995) – with the resting upon such key words of media education as "media agencies", "media/media text categories", "media technologies", "media languages", "media representations" and "media audiences", since all these concepts are directly related to ideological, market, structural and contents aspects of the analysis of media texts.

Ideology of the authors in social and cultural context (dominating concepts: "media agencies", "media representations", "media audiences")

In the Western image of Russia "the two poles represented by the two archetypes/myths existed for centuries: Russia as an external threat (a barbarian at the gate) and Russia as an object of education (a pupil)" (Moseyko, 2009, p.25).

The authors of *Duska* conceived and created the film in the post-Soviet period, when the active political confrontation of the West and the USSR was firstly changed into a sympathetic and patronizing attitude. Russia was considered to be a pupil who unfortunately is unable to reach the American and the European standards of living (the first half of the 1990s), but later (in the 2000s) the attitude towards Russia was changed back into the counteraction to the "barbarian at the gate".

In my opinion, in *Duska* J. Stelling attempted to combine both the Western ideological approaches to Russia ("pupil" and "barbarian at the gate"), however there's an opinion that the setting of the film is suitable for the economical, social and cultural conditions on Russia in the beginning of the 1990s rather than of the middle of the 2000s. Say "well, we are ready to sneer at ourselves with a weary smile, nodding in repentance: we can't find common language with Europe, that's why the film is practically silent. But the parody is 15 years late or so" (Lyubarskaya, 2007).

However the director J. Stelling in spite of the obvious ironical mockery with respect to the Russian/Slavic life doesn't aim at making a trivial comedy. Speaking of its genre, *Duska* is rather a synthesis of drama, bitter comedy and ironical parable.

J. Stelling once told in his interview: "Doesn't it come to your head that *Duska* and *Bob* are one and the same person, rationality and soul, the head and the heart? And as many people's heads and hearts disagree, *Duska* and *Bob* always quarrel... As for me the main theme of the film goes beyond the conflict of the West and the East. I tried to make something more existential. It's just a story of a man who has his creation and his muse. But then he meets a bum. This creature is the archetype of death, inactivity, emptiness, but at the same time he's a very nice and charming creature. And for me namely the choice between love, creativity and inactive death was the main issue in this film. All the other layers are superficial" (Stelling, 2007).

As a result though J. Stelling "took a fancy to Russia he is still a Western man who clearly sees the impassable gap between our Eurasian world and the purebred Europe. The Dutch director represents our people with sympathy but still the film is if not a caricature, than a friendly jest. And how else, if all the noble impulses are driven to grotesque which is interesting to observe from the side but with which it is impossible to get along for a long time, especially forever" (Tsyrukun, 2008).

The market conditions which contributed to the conception, the process of creation and to success of the media text (dominating concepts: "media agencies", "media/media text categories", "media technologies", "media audiences")

The Western directors of the 2000s frequently turned to the Russian themes. During the period of 2000-2009 more than 160 fiction films about Russia/the USSR or with Russian/Soviet characters were shot.

Certainly *Duska* as well as all the other films by J. Stelling is a typical Art House film, which never aspired to be successful with the audience. Nevertheless the low budget works by J. Stelling practically always pay off due to export, "alternative distribution", selling for television broadcast, DVD production. However in this particular case the dominance of the Russian theme and the

Russian character apparently didn't inspire the European producers. Maybe that's why the director had been searching money for his film (2 million euros) for five years...

The scenario of the film was also based on the director's own impressions after visiting post-Soviet Russia (in particular – the film festival “Kinotavr” in Sochi). As a result these impressions though in a grotesque form were realized in the plot of the film.

The structure and methods of narration in the media text (dominating concepts: “media/media text categories”, “media technologies”, “media languages”, “media representations”)

On the whole the film *Duska* is built up on simple dichotomies: 1) the unceremonious, though somewhat charming, Russian/Slavic “barbarian” who is unwilling and unable to be a “pupil”, and the representative of the Western intellectual world; 2) inactivity/emptiness and creativity; 3) aspiration for independence and conformism; 4) the plan and the result.

The structure, the plot, the representativeness, the ethics, the peculiarities of genre modification, iconography, and the characters can be represented as follows:

Historical period, scene: *Russia/Ukraine, early 1990s (mostly in retro episodes), the contemporary Holland.*

Setting, household objects: *the interiors of the flat, the streets, the movie theatre, the bus.*

Representation of reality: *ambivalent with respect to practically all the characters, in which good harmonizes with evil, at the same time “Duska” is constructed on banalities of different levels, from the simplest which are connected with the ideas of the Russians and their mentality, to the intellectual clichés” (Tsyrkun, 2008).*

Characters, their values, clothing, constitution, lexicon, mime, gestures: *the charming Russian/Slavic hanger-on who suddenly arrives in Holland. “The very first appearance of the main character (Sergey Makovetsky) is polysemantic: he goes upstairs to European Bob's place wearing a shabby ushanka and a joyful smile, which symbolizes not only the famous “heartfulness”, but also the notorious “subconsciousness of the West” (Tsyrkun, 2008).*

The vocabulary of the characters is simple; to put it more precisely it is reduced to a minimum. Most of the time the characters keep silent as they don't speak the languages of each other. But at the same time their dialogue is rich with the expressive mimics and gestures.

Significant change in the characters' life: *the year of 200... . The measured life of a Dutch script writer named Bob is shattered by the unexpected visit of uninvited, but persistent Russian guest, who came to settle in the flat of his casual European acquaintance...*

Incipient problem: *social, cultural and language barriers prevent the Russian and the European to find common language.*

Search for solutions to the problem: *the European is trying to get rid of the “barbarian”...*

Problem solution: *having left his home, the European sets off for Russia (or rather for some Slavic country) right after the exiled “barbarian”...*

A. Silverblatt (Silverblatt, 2001, pp.80-81) worked out a line of questions for critical analysis of media texts in historical, cultural and structural contexts. Let us try and apply his method to the analysis of *Duska*:

A. Historical context

1. *What does the media text tell us about the period of its creation?*

a) *when did the premiere of this media text took place?*

The premiere of the film took place in 2007 in Europe and in Russia.

b) *how did the events of those days influenced the media text?*

No concrete political events had direct influence on the process of the creation of *Duska*; rather the stereotyped Western ideas about the “mysterious Slavic soul” were transformed in the film in a parable-like form.

c) *how does the media text comment on the events of the day?*

I agree that “no matter how J. Stelling denied it... the film has a certain political implication. Certainly, the artist is sorting out his relationships only with himself. However he isn't living in vacuum. And if Stelling was suddenly attracted from the mysteries of Dutch soul (“The Flying Dutchman”, “The Illusionist”, “The Pointsman”) to the mysteries of Russian “duska”, then the spirit of the time is like that. “ (Lyubarskaya, 2007).

2. *Does the knowledge of historical events help to understand the media text?*

a) *media texts created during a certain historical period:*

- *what events took place at the time of the creation of the given work?*

The scenario of the film was planned and written in 2002-2006, in 2004 the Westernized "orange opposition" won in the Ukraine which led to the first Russian-Ukrainian "gas crisis" in 2006. In the same year the vice-president of the USA of that time R. Chaney accused Russia of using its natural resources as means of pressure in foreign policy, and of violation of human rights. In this period Russia was criticizing policies of the USA and the European Union as well (for example, concerning the Kosovo problem).

- *how does the understanding of these events enrich our comprehension of the media text?*

It is reasonable that the understanding of historical and political context helps to understand the peculiarities of the plot of the film as well as its conception. Although even if a person isn't familiar with the historical and political context of the first half of the 2000s, he can gain an understanding of the plot of *Duska* with no difficulties, because it is built up on the traditional Western stereotypes of the perception of the image of the Russians (ridiculous appearance, poverty, gluttony, obtrusiveness, unceremoniousness, total absence of knowledge of foreign languages, etc.).

- *what are the real historical references?*

This film contains no real historical references.

- *are there any historical references in the media text?*

The film is not based on real facts, the historical references are indirect, the ironic grotesque in the interpretation of the events is clearly felt, however the above mentioned tendencies of making play with Western stereotypes of the "image of Russia" are quite transparent.

- *how does the understanding of these historical references affect your understanding of the media text?*

There is no doubt that the understanding of the historical references (though veiled and grotesque) contributes to the understanding of any media text, including *Duska*.

B. Cultural context

1. Media and popular culture: how does the media text reflect, strengthen suggest or form cultural: a) relationships; b) values; c) behavior; d) concern; e) myths.

Reflecting (though in an ironical way) the stereotypes of the attitude of the West toward Russia, the film by J. Stelling created the image of politically incorrect, absurd, barbaric, poor, uneducated and obtrusive Russia, which is knocking at the "Western gates" – the country in cold climate (which symbolizes *Duska's* ushanka), with poor population and bad morals and manners...

2. *World view: what world is represented in the media text?*

a) *What is the culture of this world?*

As a whole (though philosophically and ironically, I repeat myself) in *Duska* the image of Russia is that of the "enemy at the gate".

- *people?*

People in this world are divided into an interconnected pair: the Russian "enemy at the gate" who is "infinitely meek and monstrously obtrusive at the same time, who acts such world-weariness when being turned out that any citizen of the EU is obliged to fall down from the second floor in a fit of humanism" (Kulikov, 2007) and "the suffering European intellectual conformist". One cannot but admit that in his role of *Duska* S. Makovetsky succeeded in the creation of "an image of a very repugnant, but at the same time a very touching creature, which is impossible to live with but which is also impossible to forget. *Duska* is very faithful, frank, ingenuous, but on the other hand he is incredibly odd, stupid, clumsy, he's like a pimple on a chin, and it can't be helped, but when he disappears, Bob realizes that this emptiness cannot be filled, that *Duska* was a provocateur who aroused in him the feelings of which he could never learn" (Solntseva, 2007).

- *ideology?*

One can agree that "the tragedy of a small man" is not Stelling's theme. It is rather a drama of lack of spirituality of a European intellectual" (Ryabchikova, 2007). On the other hand "this story is told with true love which is inseparable from hate, when you clearly see the vices and drawbacks of your object of love but regardless of anything you realize that all the same you cannot escape it, and you have to accept it as it is, for it is already a part of you" (Tsirkun, 2008).

b) *What do we know about the people of this world?*

- are the characters represented in a stereotyped manner? What does this representation tell us about the cultural stereotype of the given group?

On the whole the characters of *Duska* are represented in a stereotyped manner which is characteristic of the Western perception of the image of Russia, however it is colored by the performance of talented actors. For instance the work of Sergey Makovetsky "who fills the empty speculative image of *Duska* with cruelty, stupidity, as well as with touching nature; with slavish subordination and despotism" (Ryabchikova, 2007).

c) *What world view does this world represent, optimistic or pessimistic?*

The authors of "*Duska*" represent the image of Russia in rather a pessimistic way, though relative optimism is manifested perhaps in the fact that the speechless dialogue of the "barbarian" and the "European" is a sort of symbol of inevitability of their co-existence.

- are the characters of this media text happy?

Alas, there are no happy characters in this film, all of them are unhappy anyway...

- do the characters of this media text have a chance to be happy?

The authors make it clear that only individual moments of life can be happy (for example the European had such moments when a beautiful usherette came to his place, but even then they were interrupted by the tactless *Duska*)...

d) *Are the characters able to control their own destiny?*

Only to some extent, because a person (according to J. Stelling) is not in his power to control his fate...

e) *What is the hierarchy of values according to the given world view?*

- what values can be found in this media text?

According to the author's conception of the film one of the world's main values are the elusive emotional harmony and mutual understanding.

- what values are personified in the characters?

It's not easy to convey in words what "*Bob* is searching for and what *Duska* is giving to him, though of course one can shift the blame on the European longing for communality, catholicity and emotional openness, which their souls wish for but which their bodies cannot stand... However there's much more than this in the remarkable duet of Bervoets and Makovetsky, it is contained in the numerous details, in the small nuances, to which the contemporary cinema, especially Russian, became disaccustomed. This is the richness of meanings of the whole cinematographic texture, when every item has its role; this is also the ability to convey the state of one's soul, or emotion, which is changeable like ripples on the water, not only with gestures, but also with a subtle movement of facial muscles. On the whole all this is the result of the efforts of a serious artist, who has the courage to shoot the stories which he himself considers to be important" (Solntseva, 2007).

Conclusions. The analyze the Western films of the modern period about Russian world and Russian characters - in terms of their ideology, social and cultural context (examples - the films of S.Spielberg's and J.Stelling) give us the conclusions: the cold war stereotypes are very strong even in the modern times. The Russian image on the Western Screen is still "alien", "different", "hostile"...

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Filmography

Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull. USA, 2008. Director Steven Spielberg. Screenwriters: David Koepp, George Lucas. Actors: Harrison Ford, Cate Blanchett, Karen Allen and others. Action.

Duska. Holland, 2007. Director Jos Stelling. Screenwriters: Hans Heesen, Jos Stelling. Ators: Sergey Makovetsky, Gene Bervoets, Sylvia Hoeks and others. Drama.

УДК 008

Образ России на современном западном экране (на примере анализа фильмов С.Спилберга и Й.Стеллинга)

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Аннотация. В статье анализируются современные западные фильмы о России и русских символов – с точки зрения их идеологии, социального и культурного контекста. В качестве примеров используются – фильмы Стивене Спилберга и Йоса Стеллинга.

Ключевые слова: медиа, фильм, медиатекст, анализ, кино, политика, идеология.