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Portrayals of Families and Family Upbringing in Russian Films: Prospects for Film and Media Education

Irina Chelysheva ^{a,*}, Galina Mikhaleva ^a

^a Rostov State University of Economics, Russian Federation

Abstract

The research looks into a comprehensive analysis of the family portrayals in Russian feature films in terms of media education. This opens up a whole range of scientific research objectives that would allow such an analysis to be carried out: to define the family portrayals and their role in Russian feature films; to study philosophical and anthropological approaches to family and family upbringing in Soviet and Russian feature films; to determine the main genres of media texts in which the topic is reflected; to state media education objectives at each specific historical stage; to trace the transformational alterations in the family image created in Russian feature films; to consider social, cultural and political contexts of the theme including the media texts authors' concepts of interpreting the topic in Soviet and Russian feature films; to define the typical family patterns presented in audiovisual texts; to specify media education goals at each historical stage; to predict further representation of the topic under study in Russian films of different genres. Moreover, it is essential that the research into the topic of family and familial relationships in Russian films should mainly focus on analysing the opportunities of studying such audiovisual texts that are an effective means of influencing various audiences, especially children and young people, in the context of media education.

Keywords: family, family upbringing, media, media text, media culture, media education, feature films.

1. Introduction

The social institution of family is an important factor in the well-being of modern man representing the foundation for building a society of the future. Working with a modern family and promoting family values are important aspects of contemporary education. This task becomes especially relevant in modern society, where genuine family values are often levelled out, and the significance of family unity fades into the background.

The desire for material well-being, building a career, promoting images of instant success and individualism in mass media have become a dangerous tendency that leads to the devaluation of family traditions and the inability of young people to build family relationships.

In many ways, the psychological well-being of a family is also influenced by the position of adults – parents and teachers. A fair attitude of teachers and parents towards children, presenting necessary and adequate requirements to them, and, at the same time, respect, tact, and delicacy in the attitude of family members towards each other, all these factors play a crucial role in the development of personality. If, for example, values based on goodwill, mutual care, and responsibility for each other have been established in a family, then everyone feels quite confident.

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: ivchelysheva@yandex.ru (I. Chelysheva)

Supportive emotional well-being and a state of security stimulate the fullest self-expression of family members and create a favourable atmosphere for the development of the younger generation. Mutual assistance, care, family comfort, responsibility and trust – all these values are enduring in family relationships. Conversely, tense relationships often lead not only to conflict situations, but also contribute to isolation and mutual distrust. And family upbringing should become one of the key tasks of modern education.

The portrayals of family and family upbringing have always been one of the central themes in film industry and film production in Russia and abroad. This topic has been frequently referred to in media culture of different historical periods due to various social policies and transformations. Mass media culture that increasingly influences all spheres of our contemporary world, thus determining the value orientations and life guidelines, attaches a special significance to the theme of family and family upbringing.

Since the attitude towards family and family values is changing drastically in modern society the analysis of these transformations becomes urgent, especially taking into consideration that the best family traditions should be preserved as being one of the most crucial challenges of contemporary world.

Moreover, films or audiovisual media texts are an effective means of influencing various audiences, especially children and young people because of their age and a high degree of media contacts. Therefore, the analysis of family and family upbringing transformations in Soviet and Russian cinematography is really in demand today.

We are firmly convinced that a comprehensive interdisciplinary research analysis of family issues should be carried out in close connection with social, cultural, and political aspects characterizing certain historical periods. In addition, the dominant genres of Russian feature films, in which the theme under study is reflected, should be determined. Also, the main objectives of media education at each specific historical stage ought to be considered and portrayals of families and family upbringing are to be assessed in terms of presenting the most typical patterns.

2. Materials and methods

Russian and foreign scientific publications focused on family and family upbringing as reflected in feature films are the materials of the study. Besides, the additional research methods are used: analysis and synthesis of articles and monographs on the research theme, generalization and classification.

We also applied the methodologies developed by C. Bazalgette ([Bazalgette, 1992](#)), A. Silverblatt ([Silverblatt, 2001](#)), and U. Eco ([Eco, 1998](#)) including the theoretical approaches offered by O.V. Aronson ([Aronson, 2007](#)).

3. Discussion

The issues of family and family upbringing have invariably remained vital for many years. Some Russian authors ([Buruhina, 2014](#); [Lesgaft, 1988](#); [Nemova, Mardakhaev, 2014](#)) analysed certain aspects of family upbringing. However, these studies were not related to media culture and media education.

During the Soviet era, the family topic in media texts was united by a common political ideology aimed at solving the tasks of constructing ideal socialist future life. Different issues of this problem were discussed in several works of that period ([Baranov, 1979](#); [Gromov, 1982](#); [Usov, 1980](#); [Rybak, 1980](#); [1978](#)).

Certain family issues portrayed in Soviet and Russian audiovisual texts of different genres were analysed in some Russian and foreign publications ([Callister et al., 2007](#); [Cantor, Riddle, 2014](#); [Chelysheva, 2014](#); [Fedorov et al., 2018](#); [Fedorov et al., 2019](#); [Fedorov et al., 2020](#); [Gritsai, 2013](#); [Masterman, 1985](#); [Orange, Flynn, 2005](#); [Tuchkova, 2012](#); [Tyulyunova, 2020](#)) in the post-Soviet historical period.

In particular, the topic of family violence in feature films and their impact on younger audiences is dealt with in researches carried out by some Russian and foreign media experts ([Chelysheva, 2013](#); [Fedorov, 2018](#), [Fedorov, 2020](#); [Hornbeck, 2016](#)). Also, the interconnection between popular media culture and promoting aesthetic education was examined by O.A. Baranov and S.N. Penzin ([Baranov, Penzin, 2006](#)).

V.V. Tuchkova devoted her research to the reflection of family values in Russian mass media ([Tuchkova, 2012](#)).

The phenomena of family and family upbringing in Russian audiovisual texts using the example of animation were analysed by L.A. Gritsai (Gritsai, 2013). The analysis of crisis phenomena in the family and their reflection in Russian media texts was provided by O.V. Smirnova and T.I. Frolov (Smirnova, Frolova, 2011).

Portrayals of families and family upbringing in Russian feature films were thoroughly examined from a sociological perspective by O.L. Lebed and A.B. Sinelnikov (Lebed, Sinelnikov 2013).

The family image and cultural identity as reflected in the cinematography of Central Asia were described by G.O. Abikeeva (Abikeeva, 2010). The issues of family upbringing in the context of film and media education were also studied by I.V. Chelysheva (Chelysheva, 2013; Chelysheva, 2014; Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2022).

The basic principles of critical analysis of media texts and fostering critical autonomy were defined by British media expert L. Masterman (Masterman, 1985). B. Duncan, N. Andersen, J. Pungente, and O'Malley (Andersen et al., 1999; Duncan, 1989; Pungente, O'Malley, 1999) studied the evolution of foreign media education till the present day. B. Duncan examined the aesthetic and developmental potential of screen production (Duncan, 1989). A. Caron studied practical media education for children and youth (Caron, Caronia, 2007). N.C. Staricek provided a profound textual analysis of modern families and gender in sitcoms (Staricek, 2011).

A variety of research topics examined by foreign scholars touched upon varied aspects of family images presented in mass media. For instance, W. Douglas and B.M. Olson analysed the portrayals of family relationships in comedies created during 1950–1990 (Douglas, Olson, 1995). As part of the analysis, they compared spousal and parent-child relationships represented in the movies.

S. Bruzzi gave a detailed perspective on the Hollywood portrayals of fathers and discussed Hollywood films from many genres presenting dads (Bruzzi, 2005). In her book she adopted a multi-faceted theoretical approach to studying fatherhood and masculinity in post-war American movies using psychoanalysis and social studies.

F. Antunes analysed the child's place in contemporary family culture on the basis of Hollywood family films of the 1990s concentrating on the issues of parenting culture, adolescence and creating a new childhood ideal in American family movies (Antunes, 2017).

Research by R.H. Fulmer was devoted to examining a family-life-cycle view of emerging adulthood (Fulmer, 2017) in the film "Rebel without a Cause" (1995).

L.R. Tanner, S.A. Haddock, T.S. Zimmerman and L.K. Lund defined the images of and family couples in Disney animated films (Tanner et al., 2003). They analysed twenty-six Disney feature-length animated films to identify "four overarching themes: a) family relationships are a strong priority, b) families are diverse, but the diversity is often simplified, c) fathers are elevated, while mothers are marginalized, and d) couple relationships are created by "love at first sight", are easily maintained, and are often characterized by gender-based power differentials" (Tanner et al., 2003: 355).

Similar research by J.D. Zurcher, S.M. Webb and T. Robinson examined the portrayals of families in Disney cartoons. They studied the qualities of family demographics, structure, and function in 85 Disney animated films from 1937–2018 to find out that "over 75 % of all Disney animated films depicted warm and supportive familial interactions, with 78.8 % of the films illustrating a positive relationship between the protagonist and his/her family" (Zurcher et al., 2018).

The portrayals of the American family in contemporary Hollywood cinematography were studied by C. Jenkins. The author focused on "assessing recent cinematic representations of the family in terms of cultural politics and representations of gender, sexuality, race and class" (Jenkins, 2015). The family portrayals in the American horror film were analysed by A. Sells (Sells, 2016).

E. Levy closely studied the family and family-related values reflected in modern mainstream US cinematography and the American family dream in films from the late 1960s to the present time: "The study analyses variations and consistencies in the narrative ideological and cinematic conventions of family films, and their interplay with the social and political contexts in which they are made and viewed" (Levy, 1991: 187).

A. Lloyd provided the analysis of the diasporic family in present-day European cinematography (Lloyd, 2014). The family representations in the postwar British amateur films covering 1948–1961 were researched by M. Kerry. The author considered the social and historical contexts in which the home-made films were created and analysed "how the amateur cine hobby ideologically constructed family, community and national identity in postwar Britain" (Kerry, 2016: 1). The portrayals of the postwar British family in amateur films were also examined by R. Shand (Shand, 2015).

B. Kümmerling-Meibauer proposed new perspectives in children's film studies emphasising the crucial role of these films in fostering children's media literacy "due to the fact that children come to recognize and understand the typical features of films by means of a gradual process which takes a substantial amount of time" (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013: 39).

4. Results

The findings of the study enabled us to identify a striking contradiction between a relatively detailed scientific research of family upbringing in publications written by scholars of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods (Lesgaft, 1988; Levshina, 1989; Mardakhaev, 2014; Nemova, Buruhina, 2014; Rabinovich, 1991) and lack of analysis of the topic in media studies. The only exceptions are the studies carried out by some Russian researchers (Chelysheva, 2013; Chelysheva, 2014; Penzin, 1986; Khilko, 2011).

R. Petani, and M.K. Brcic analysed the interrelationship of family environment, communication and media education (Petani, Brcic, 2014).

Until now, neither Russian nor foreign science has presented a full-scale analysis of the portrayals of family and family upbringing in Russian feature films in the context of media education. At the same time, this analysis, as we see it, is an important and pressing issue in the contemporary researches.

Thus, it seems promising to us to identify under what conditions such a holistic description can be given, the major features revealed, the place and significance of the theme of family in Soviet and Russian films determined. This will require a comprehensive analysis of the family portrayals in Russian feature films in terms of media education. The analysis should include the study of the role of the family image, its representation at different stages of historical development in the context of pedagogical, psychological, and cultural approaches.

This opens up a whole range of scientific research objectives that would allow such an analysis to be carried out: to identify cultural, pedagogical, and psychological aspects of the topic; to determine the main genres of media texts in which the topic is reflected; to analyse the social, cultural, and political contexts of the theme, including the author's interpretations of this topic in Soviet, Russian and Western feature films; to state the media education objectives at each specific historical stage; to describe the typical patterns of family and family upbringing portrayed in media texts.

Specific areas of research on the topic of family and family upbringing in Russian films may concern the following key aspects: a hermeneutical analysis of Soviet and Russian comedies on the topic of family and family upbringing; the analysis of philosophical and anthropological approaches to family and family upbringing in Soviet and Russian feature films; media education opportunities of feature films about family and family upbringing.

Unfortunately, today's schools do not always pay enough attention to family upbringing. Often, issues of family and family relationships are not of a systematic nature and are discussed sporadically at some rare educational events and class meetings though the sphere of family relationships, their correct construction is an extremely important task that the child's parents are called upon to solve. Thus, films about family and family relationships can provide effective assistance in this regard.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that the portrayals of family and family upbringing in Soviet and Russian feature films still remain open in Russian and foreign scientific researches. We also failed to find the results of a comprehensive analysis of the identified theme, defining the main patterns of this process and trends characteristic of media texts representing the topic under study, to say nothing of some promising models of media education based on audiovisual media texts focused on family and family education. Beyond the scope of existing research, there are still numerous questions of a comprehensive study of this theme, including pedagogical, cultural, and psychological aspects, as well as the presentation of a holistic characteristic of family and family education represented in Soviet, and later in Russian, feature films in the context of potential prospects for media education and media studies.

In our opinion, a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the studied theme should be implemented. In addition, it seems promising to us to identify the main genres of Russian feature films which represent family and family education, as well as to specify the goals and objectives of media education at each specific historical stage.

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