

Nazi Feature Films on the Russian Topic: Hermeneutic Analysis

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Abstract

In this article the author made an attempt to perform a hermeneutic analysis (investigation of media texts interpretation, cultural and historical factors influencing the views of the agency / author of a media text and the audience) of specific examples of Nazi feature films. The hermeneutic analysis of a media text comprehension involves a comparison with a historical, cultural tradition and reality; insight into its logic; comparison of media images in historical and cultural contexts combined with the historical, hermeneutical analyses of the structural, plot, ethical, ideological and iconographic / visual analyses of media stereotypes and media text characters.

Keywords: Nazi; German films; Russian topic; hermeneutic analysis; screen; media studies; film studies.

Introduction

The media texts under analysis have been disregarded by Russian culture experts, political scientists, historians and film experts for many decades. In the Soviet period it was not done to mention whatever feature films on the subject of Russia were shot in the Nazi Germany. Even N. Nusinova in her complete monograph devoted to the 1918-1930 Russian cinema abroad published in the 21st century avoids this topic [Nusinova, 2003]. It seems rather odd since the cinema of the Third Reich had a famous actress Olga Chekhova (1897-1980), producer Victor Turzhansky (1891-1976), actors Nikolay Kolin (1878-1966), Boris Alekin (1904-1942), etc. A. Vasilchenko, a well-known analyst of Nazi history, also neglected the Russian theme in German films of the period in his book about the Nazi cinema [Vasilchenko, 2010].

Materials and methods

In our earlier works [Fedorov, 2008; 2011; 2012, etc.] we referred to the *hermeneutic analysis of media texts* many times [Eko, 1998; 2005; Eco, 1976; Silverblatt, 2001, pp.80-81]. This time we shall take audiovisual media texts of the Nazi cinema on the theme of Russia as an example. The analysis of these media texts, in our opinion, is especially important for media education of future historians, culture experts, art critics, social scientists, philologists, psychologists and teachers.

Discussion and results

Hermeneutic Analysis of Audiovisual Media Texts of the Nazi Cinema on the Theme of Russia: Setting; Historical, Cultural, Political and Ideological Contexts

A. Historical Context

a) *Setting.* As a rule, the scene is laid in the remote past (*The Favorite of the Empress, Cadets, The Citadel of Warsaw, The Postman, It Was a Gay Ballnight*) and the recent past (*Double-Agent Asew, Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves*), though the modern period cannot be excluded (*G.P.U. / The Red Terror*); Germany, Russia and other countries;

b) *when did the premier take place?* The films under analysis were created and shown on the western screen in the second half of the 1930s - in the early 1940s. On average one or two films on the theme of Russia were made per year in Nazi Germany.

c) how did the events of that time affect the media texts? d) what events occurred when the media texts were being created? How did the media texts comment on the events? How does the awareness of the historical background contribute to the comprehension of the media texts?

The appearance of these media texts was certainly caused by real events which took place in the 1930s – 1940s. When Hitler came to power the tendency of the Third Reich-USSR confrontation became apparent. That is why there were two conceptions of reflecting "the Russian world" in the Nazi cinematography: tsarist Russia, emigrant Russia could get a positive film interpretation (*The Favorite of the Empress, It Was a Gay Ballnight, From Midnight, etc.*), whereas Bolshevism and Soviet Russia would always look negative on the screen (*Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves, G.P.U. / The Red Terror*). It should also be noted that after the German intervention on the USSR in 1941 both tsarist and emigrant Russia ceased to interest the cinematography of the Third Reich and was at best on the fringes of plots (for example, in the form of episodes with Russians) whereas the Nazi film, *G.P.U. / The Red Terror* shown in 1942 actively exposed "bolshevist spies' schemes"... Besides unlike the Soviet cinematography where from 1941 to 1942 there were shot over 70 short (including novels in "Battle Film Collections") and full-length films which directly reflected the events of the war with Germany, the Nazi cinema relied on reported war chronicles.

B. Ideological, Political Contexts.

How do media texts reflect, strengthen, instill or form this or that ideology?

One cannot but feel an obvious propagandistic message aimed at persuading the audience that:

- Russia used to be great when it was an empire where culture flourished (a comedy about the life of Russian aristocracy in the epoch of Empress Elisabeth - *The Favorite of the Empress*, a musical melodrama about the life of P.I. Tchaikovsky - *It Was a Gay Ballnight*);

- at the same time the imperial policy of Russia could be dangerous for other European countries (*The Citadel of Warsaw, Cadets*);

- after 1917 one can express sympathy only with Russians who suffered from Bolsheviks and those who emigrated to the West (*Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves, From Midnight, etc.*);

Bolsheviks practice mass terror both towards representatives of aristocracy and civilian population, their aim is to turn Russian people into slaves (*Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves, G.P.U. / The Red Terror*);

- armed resistance to Bolsheviks is justified and indispensable (*Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves, G.P.U. / The Red Terror*).

In whole, the ideological and political contexts of the world outlook presented in Nazi feature films on the theme of Russia may be outlined in the following way (Table 1):

Table 1. Ideology and Political Context of the Outlook Represented in Nazi Feature Films on the Theme of Russia

Key Questions	Representation of the Russian Past World	Representation of the Soviet World
<i>What is the ideology of this world?</i>	Monarchist ideology	Communist aggressive ideology
<i>What outlook does this world present - optimistic or pessimistic?</i>	Optimistic world outlook prevails, though, in some cases there can be different variants	Mostly self-confident and optimistic; pessimism takes place only the negative end for Bolshevik characters

What is the hierarchy of values according to this outlook?	Patriotism - monarchy - culture - nation - family - love.	Communism - Bolshevism – aggression - inhumane treatment of victims, dismissive attitude to the inferior
What values can be found in this media text? What values dominate in the end?	Patriotic, monarchist, family values.	Communist, Bolshevik values
What does it mean to be a success in this world? What person succeeds in this world? What conduct is rewarded in this world? To what extent is it stereotyped?	It means to be a monarchist, patriot, a good family man. In this aspect positive characters are stereotyped, though they may possess some individual traits (beauty, humor, musical talent)	It means to be a bolshevist – communist who is cruel to his victims. In this aspect characters are stereotyped, though they may possess some individual traits (slyness, stupidity, cowardice)

C. Cultural Context

How do media texts reflect, strengthen, or form cultural: relations, values, and myths?

Being a product of mass/pop culture Nazi films on the subject of Russia are based on folk and mythological sources including the traditional notion of the Western world about the "mysterious Russian soul". In this respect it is interesting to analyze Karl Anton's (1898-1979) film *Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves* (1937) in which the myth about the rebellious *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) brilliantly created by Sergei Eisenstein was apparently used.

And it is not accidental since as late as 1933 the then head of the Culture Department minister J. Goebbels said about the film *Battleship Potemkin* at the meeting with German filmmakers: "This is a wonderful film. From the cinematographic point of view it is unmatched. The one who has no firm political convictions could have become a Bolshevik after watching the film. It also proves that one can easily suggest some tendency in a masterpiece. Even the worst ideas can be propagandized with artistic means" [Vasilchenko, 2010, p. 5]. Thus it was a government order in its way to create a Nazi analog of S. Eisenstein's film. And in 1937 this order was completed by K. Anton. In the film *Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves* the seaman as well as in S. Einstein's film stirred up a rebellion on shipboard. But this event was given with a reversed sign, i.e. the rebellion aboard the *Battleship "Sebastopol"* is fomented by malicious and fierce Bolsheviks who slaughter noble officers, priests, rape women, burn orthodox icons... But, God be thanked, there is a Russian officer, Count Konstantin Volkov who gathers true seamen devoted to Russia. He disarms the rebels and frees the captives. At the end of the film Count Volkov pronounces a conceptual phrase of the film *Battleship "Sebastopol"*: "This calamity doesn't concern only Russia. The enemies of civilization must be destroyed. The struggle is pursued!" Then his thought is supported by one of his companions-in-arms: "Peoples don't see this danger yet..."

D. Genre Modifications: generally – a drama and melodrama. At the same time, not only Russian but also German actors were involved in the film.

F. Basic Drama Stereotypes of the Media Texts:

- love adventures of Russian aristocrats;
- sufferings of Russian emigrants who fled from Bolsheviks;
- Bolsheviks' destruction of a peaceful, tranquil and happy life of people; their occupation of the ship, city, mass communist terror (executions, tortures, etc.) towards the civilian population including women; the struggle of the best representatives of the Russian people with Bolsheviks.

In particular, in the film *G.P.U. / The Red Terror* directed by Karl Ritter (1888-1977) - one of the most famous Nazi filmmakers and a member of the national-socialist party since 192, the major positive characters - Irina and Peter get into an underground prison situated in the building of ... the Soviet consulate in Rotterdam. Their story would have had a tragic end if it had not happened in May, 1940. It was at this point that the Nazi army started their occupation of Holland. So, taking the advantage of the bombing and panic of Soviet "diplomats" Peter kills the torturer-Cheka officer, frees Irina from the cell who is more dead than alive, helps her get out into the street where Wehrmacht tanks are already rolling over it. Here is freedom, light, and a triumph of justice...

Techniques of reality representation (iconography) - setting, conditions of life, etc.

Simple dwellings and conditions of life of "ordinary" characters (of course if they are not in Soviet prison cells); luxurious apartments of the Russian aristocracy. Everyday life of Bolsheviks is shown with somewhat grotesque but in whole it is also verisimilar (there are portraits of leaders on the walls, etc.).

Typology of characters (their values, ideas, ethics, clothing, constitution, vocabulary, mime, gestures)

Character's age: 18-60 (men), 18-30 (women).

Character's race: white.

Character's appearance, clothes, constitution:

a) Russian characters of the tsarist time as well as the characters who emigrated from the Bolshevik regime to the west are dressed depending on their social status: luxury of the imperial palace (*The Favorite of the Empress*), modesty of the postmaster (*The Postman*), etc. The appearance of these characters is attractive as a rule, especially it concerns the representatives of aristocracy;

b) Bolshevik characters are normally dressed in a uniform with attributes of the time (a leather jacket, cartridge belts, a Mauser, etc.); they are robust though sometimes may have a commonplace physical constitution; in most cases they are physiognomically disagreeable.

c) victims of the Bolshevik terror are dressed in accordance with their social standing; their constitutions vary in a wide range and depend on the context of a certain film; female characters are rather attractive as a rule;

Educational attainment: higher education (officers, aristocrats), secondary education, illiterate people.

Social standing, profession: the social standing of Russian and Soviet characters (aristocrats, officers, emigrants, ordinary people, Bolsheviks, etc.) varies considerably depending on definite film plots.

Marital status of characters also depends on the film plots.

Character traits: cruelty, meanness, sexual concern, tenacity of purpose, hostility, slyness, power (Bolshevik characters); nobleness, power, purposefulness, courage (positive characters - aristocrats, emigrants, the intelligentsia, etc.). Bolshevik characters are shown as malicious, rude and cruel fanatics with a primitive speech, active gesticulation and rough voice timbres. Positive characters, on the contrary, are gallant and soft-voiced. In whole the characters of all Nazi media texts on the subject of Russia are given only in an outline without a psychological insight.

Value orientations (ideological, religious, others) of a character: in the films about Bolsheviks (*Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves, G.P.U. / The Red Terror*) communist values together with atheism, terror and violence are clearly revealed. The values of positive characters are close to "all-European" ones.

Conduct of a character, his strategy of conflict resolution: the characters' behavior is motive by the development of the above-mentioned stereotyped media text plots. Bolshevik characters in most cases behave cruelly and mercilessly but their victims either suffer from a feeling of doom and

dread or show determination to stand up to the end. The actions of Russian characters from Nazi films about the time before 1917 depend on certain plots and genres and can vary in a wide range - both negative (Russian characters in the war drama *Cadets*) and positive (P.I Tchaikovsky in the musical melodrama *It Was a Gay Ballnight*)

Significant changes in the media text plot and characters' lives, the incipient problem, search for solutions to the problem

In the films with Bolshevik characters a peaceful and happy life of positive characters is broken by aggressive actions of revolutionary seamen, Cheka officials and other negative personalities. The incipient problem: as a result of Bolshevik extreme violence the lives of positive characters are under threat. And there is only solution to the problem, i.e. struggle against Bolshevism. In the films about the time before 1917 (for instance, films about the life of Russian emigrants) the plots are more varied and are not so much stereotyped.

Conclusions

Thus we made an attempt to perform a hermeneutic analysis (investigation of media texts interpretation, cultural and historical factors influencing the views of the agency / author of a media text and the audience) of specific examples of Nazi feature films. At the same time we mean that the hermeneutic analysis of a media text comprehension involves a comparison with a historical, cultural tradition and reality; insight into its logic; comparison of media images in historical and cultural contexts combined with the historical, hermeneutical analyses of the structural, plot, ethical, ideological and iconographic / visual analyses of media stereotypes and media text characters.

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Selected Filmography

Double-Agent Asew / Lockspitzel Asew. Germany, 1935. Film director: Phil Jutzi. Script writer: At. Timann. Cast of actors: Fritz Rasp, Olga Chekhova, Hilde von Stolz and others.

The Favorite of the Empress / Der Favorit der Kaiserin. Germany, 1936. Film director: Werner Hochbaum. Script writers: Charles Amberg, Hans Martin Cremer and others. Cast of actors: Olga Chekhova, Anton Pointner, Heinz von Cleve, Ada Chekhova and others.

Battleship "Sebastopol" - White Slaves / Panzerkreuzer "Sebastopol" - Weisse sklaven. Germany, 1937. Film director: Karl Anton. Script writers: Charlie Roellinghoff, Karl Anton, Arthur Pohl, Felix von Eckardt. Cast of actors: Camilla Horn, Karl John, Werner Hinz, Theodor Loos, Fritz Kampers and others.

The Citadel of Warsaw / Die Warschauer Zitadelle. Germany, 1937. Film director: Fritz Peter Buch. Script writers: Gabriela Zapolska, Fritz Peter Buch. Cast of actors: Lucie Hoflich, Werner Hinz and Claire Winter.

From Midnight / Ab Mitternacht. Germany, 1938. Film director: Carl Hoffmann. Script writers: Joseph Kessel, I. Ermoljev. Cast of actors: Gina Falckenberg, Peter Voss, Rene Deltgen, N. Kolin and others.

It Was a Gay Ballnight / Es war eine rauschende Ballnacht. Germany, 1939. Film director: Carl Froelich. Script writers: Jean Victor, Jean Victor and others. Cast of actors: Zarah Leander, Aribert Wäscher, Hans Stuwe and others.

The Trip to Tilsit / Die Reise nach Tilsit. Germany, 1939. Film director: Veit Harlan. Script writers: Curt Johannes Braun, Veit Harlan, Hermann Sudermann. Cast of actors: Anna Dammann, Frits van Dongen, Heiner Dugal and others.



Cadets / Kadetten. Germany, 1939. Film director: Karl Ritter. Script writers: Felix Lutzkendorf, Karl Ritter. Cast of actors: Mathias Wieman, Carsta Lock, Andrews Engelmann and others.

The Postman / Der Postmeister. Germany, 1940. Film director: Gustav Ucicky. Script writer: Gerhard Menzel (based on A.S. Pushkin's story "The Postmaster"). Cast of actors: Heinrich George, Hilde Krahl, Siegfried Breuer and others.

G.P.U. / The Red Terror. Germany, 1942. Film director: Karl Ritter. Script writers: Andrews Engelmann, Felix Lutzkendorf, Karl Ritter. Cast of actors: Laura Solari, Will Quadflieg, Marina von Ditmar and others.