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## **Kremlin's Program for Patriotic Education and Russian War Movies (2000 - 2010)**

(Ph.D. Dissertation)

From the very beginning, the author presents the central idea (or "metaphor", as she calls it sometimes) of the dissertation, regarding films "as double-sided mirrors that absorb political and cultural content from one side, with filmmakers filtering and elaborating the content between the two surfaces, and then transmitting the elaborated points to the audience." (page 5). Later on, she mentions she was inspired by an article by Barry Buzan (**America in Space: The International Relations of Star Trek and Battlestar Galactica** - 2010), wherein he argues that "*popular culture can be used as a mirror to reflect on how societies think of themselves*", but nevertheless the author of this dissertation distances herself from the mirror-stage theory, which is "*is not the basis for the approach of this dissertation*" (pag. 20) and feels the need of stressing that the work does not focus on how society, in particular Russian society, sees itself, "*because the present research is not interested in understanding that issue or how it is related to the present political environment*", but "*in using films as a medium/mirror to reflect how a certain institution acts and sees itself.*" I started my reference with those mentions about what it was meant to be the central axis of the work, the main contribution of the author to the research in the selected field, i. e. the double sided mirror metaphor. Unfortunately, this represents, by contrary, one of the weakest sides of the dissertation, because, on one hand, the idea is not original, being inspired by the mirror-stage theory and Buzan's considerations in a much higher measure than the author would like to admit, and on the other hand because of this motive remaining thin and superficial until the end of the work. Although we have the definition-to-be of this central idea already on the page 19 (it is supposed to mean that "*a film produced (? – maybe "realized" or "made"?) by a filmmaker has two surfaces: one which receives and absorbs political contents and ideas, in this case those indicated in the Patriotic Education programs.*" And in spite of the rather confusing formulation, we can suppose that the next passage is describing what is supposed to be the second face of the mirror: "*The film director takes what is expressed in Patriotic Education and decides how to translate it into a movie, in which way political contents are transmitted to*

*the audience.*” This explanation is practically not developed or scientifically and logically argued any more during the work, but more or less repeatedly presented in different words or phrases expressing practically the same, eventually projected into the structure of some of the eleven films chosen for analysis. I will not insist any more on this aspect, nevertheless it was important to mentioning it, because working more and getting more in depth in this concern would have made this work really exceptional. Nevertheless it is maybe the moment to stress that it still is very good and convincing, but for a little different reasons I am going to mention in short, after referring about a second darker point.

So another not so managed aspect of the dissertation is the analysis of chosen films that is almost utterly limited to their narrative dimension and of the messages they are bearing and sending, but does not refer too much about the film means as such: we have some (otherwise very interesting and often also profound and original) observations about the image composition and the acting style of the protagonists (not so much of the ones playing secondary roles though), but we don't have almost anything for example about camera, work with colors, montage style and so on – and all those elements are very important factors in the political, “educational” (with or without quotation marks) and manipulative role, presupposed task and more or less (official) mission of a movie picture or of a whole national cinema. I can assume the author is not specialized in film science, historian and / or theory, although aspects connected to it are really important within the context and the thematic of the work.

I repeat and stress that I started with those two not so brilliant aspects of this work, because otherwise I consider it as really convincing and very professional, be it within the – nevertheless large enough - limits imposed by those two above mentioned deficiencies. That means the work is presenting and arguing in an excellent way the chosen thematic, even without the rappel to the doubtful metaphor of the film as a double sided mirror or the more detailed and in-depth analysis of the specifically cinematographic dimensions of the chosen movies. Once again: this makes out of this dissertation a decently professional work, even a very good, but not exceptional one, which could potentially have been.

As structure, the work contains two theoretical chapters, an empirical part within the third one and conclusions.

The First Chapter presents the general approach of the work, which considers films to be a double-sided mirror (actually this is the weakest part of the chapter), and the meaning of film's educational and propagandistic roles, introducing and explaining the concept and the Russian definition of patriotism, as expressed in the two ‘Concepts’ adopted by Putin's regime in

2001, respectively 2003, analyzing both of the programs for Patriotic Education, concerning the 2001-2005, respectively 2006-2010 intervals (with an attempt to explain eventual changes that appeared in between), identifying and describing the main political priorities and attempting to explain why they have been selected for elaboration in films.

The Second Chapter is consecrated to explanations concerning the way the film analysis is made, by defining and describing seven common parameters:

- the protagonist as role model and hero
- war
- the soldier-figure
- the concepts of Fatherland and Motherland
- patriotism as a main value
- the enemy and the 'other'
- the memory of the past,

used for studying the selected movies:

**Brat** (2000) by Aleksei Balabanov<sup>15</sup>

**The Star** (2002) by Nikolai Lebedev

**Marsh Brosok** (2003) by Nikolai Stambula

**The Ninth Company** (2005) by Fedor Bondarchuk

**12** (2007) by Nikita Mikhalkov  
**The Admiral** (2008) by Andrey Kravchuk  
**We are from the Future** (2008) by Andrey Malyukov  
**We are from the Future 2** (2010) by Samokhvalov and Rostov  
**The Priest** (2009) by Vladimir Khotinenko  
**Brest Fortress** (2010), by Alexander Kott  
**Burnt by the Sun 2: Exodus and Citadel** (2010-2011)

Within the Third Chapter, films are individually analyzed according to the defined seven parameters, following their depiction into the story and whether the films accept the lines and priorities indicated by Patriotic Education programs and whether the filmmakers (and producers, I add – actually another small minus of the work is this confusion between director’s and producer’s tasks in “making” a film) featured the political priorities in a critical way, or if they accepted them as presented in the programs and translated them (directly) into their films, “*fulfilling the programs’ goal of having movies that serve as educational tools and patriotic propaganda*” (pag. 29) – one of the best and convincing parts of the work.

Even more interesting is what the author calls *the second part of this dissertation*, where a complex analysis is made, in order to find out whether the seven elements were main themes, were present but not dominant, strong features, or were marginal and depicted simply as a narrative framework within each of the chosen movie pictures. Actually what we have here is a real horizontal comparison across the eleven movies, to see how they differ, which parameters are dominant in which films and for what reasons and which films feature certain political priorities and ideas rather than others. I stress that this is the place where the author proves maybe the in the highest measure her complex education in the field, her professionalism and scientific skills. The same holds for another essential goal of the work, which consists in seeking to understand whether there are some continuities with Soviet war films in terms of content and film-narrative, if and how each of the parameters was depicted also in Soviet films and “*whether there are common traits and themes they share with films produced under the programs for Patriotic Education*” elaborated during Putin’s regime.

(As a personal mention, Maybe it is a little bit regrettable and even strange that the author did not develop this thematic even more than she did, getting a little bit more in-depth with the political connotations and parallels between today’s and Soviet Russia. Maybe – I don’t know, but I could eventually assume - that in the name of a certain or imaginary “political correctness”, she even seemed to avoid a lot of aspects that could have been politically (mis?)understood or interpreted, as at the moment she is talking

about Lenin and Stalin as being “*the two icons of the Soviet era*”, but immediately feeling like mentioning that “*it is not the place of this dissertation to define what kind of icons they represent.*” (page 36).)

Finally a mention about the excellent and professional work with the scientific sources and quotations the author did, choosing excellent and generally recognized and highly respected specialists to base and build the scientific and theoretical construction of her dissertation on. Let me remind at least Gillespie, Cones, Blum, Beumers, Anemone, Hayward, Iordanova, Lacan, but also evidently manipulative and propagandistic works by in the respective eras “politically consecrated” authors as Mikhalkov.

As a conclusion, and in spite of the negative aspects I even started my reference with, I strongly recommend this work.

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