Hermeneutic Analysis of Soviet Feature Films of 1941-1942 on the Military Theme

Alexander Fedorov

Anton Chekhov Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute, Russian Federation
Professor, Doctor (Pedagogy)
E-mail: mediashkola@rambler.ru

Abstract. In the article the author performs a hermeneutic analysis of the cultural context (i.e. investigation of media texts interpretation, cultural and historical factors influencing the views of the agency / author of a media text and the audience) of Soviet feature military films of 1941-1942. The author bears in mind 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.

Keywords: media text; analysis; media culture; media education; media competence; Soviet movies of 1941-1942 about the war.

Introduction. 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 media texts of Soviet feature films on the military theme made after the German aggression against the USSR in the second half of 1941 - 1942 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.

Technology of the media text hermeneutic analysis of soviet feature films of 1941-1942 on the military theme Setting; historical, cultural, political and ideological contexts

A. Historical Context
What does the media text tell us about the time when it was created?

a) setting: June, 1941 - December, 1942; USSR, other countries.
b) when did the premier take place?
The analyzed films were created during the most difficult period for the USSR when the country was at war with Germany (the second half of 1942 and 1942), in the same years they were shown.
c) how did the events of that time affect the media texts?
The real historical events which took place during the pre-war period destroyed the virtual stereotypes of "wars with small losses and in the enemy's territory" which dominated in "defensive" films of the second half of the 1930s (If Tomorrow Brings War, The Motherland Calls, Tankmen and others). None of the Soviet films shot during the two years after 22 June 1941 showed the war in the enemy's territory (except for bombings of German cities and guerrilla warfare). Moreover, contrary to the stereotypes of military-utopian films of the second half of the 1930s Lubov Orlova's heroine says in War Collection of Films №4 (1941) that "we know that the victory will be hard".
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?

Not only Germany (that had conquered the greater part of Europe by then) and the USSR were involved in the world war of 1941-1942 but also Great Britain, Japan, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and the USA. At the same time, Soviet audiovisual media texts of 1941-1942, contrary to the hardest realities of the war (millions of killed, wounded and captured Soviet citizens, Nazi occupation of vast territories of the USSR, etc.), commented (especially in War Collection of Films №1-5, 1941) on the current events in the most positive tone.

Evacuation and intensive development of the Soviet armaments industry, military re-equipment of many plants at the cost of incredible toil of manpower resources and defense of frontline towns were extremely important for the period of 1941-1942. This historical context found reflection in films of that epoch (To You, Front; The Unconquerable).

B. Ideological, Political Contexts.

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

With the dominating communist ideology and allusions to fidelity to Stalin and the party (War Collection of Films №1: We'll Knock the Enemy Soon, Be Sure! The Party and Stalin Call Us to Protect Our Motherland! For the Motherland! For Stalin!) one can detect an adaptation of the communist ideology to patriotic slogans, an ideological orientation towards historical examples of military valor (Alexander Nevsky, Suvorov, Chapaev), and, on the other hand, a reminder of defeated foreign conquerors in Soviet films of 1941-1942. For example, in War Collection of Films №1 caricatured Hitler is warned about the inevitable defeat from the Russian army by a German knight who got out of Lake Chudskoe, Napoleon and a keiser general of 1918; and in War Collection of Films №2 Buonaparte sends a telegram to Hitler that runs: "Not advised. I tried and failed".

But the main thing is that one can easily become aware of the anti-Nazi message aimed to convince the audience that:

- Germans resort to mass terrorism against the civilian population and seek to enslave Russians and the Slavs (a short story "100 for One" from War Collection of Films №2, some stories from War Collection of Films №12, etc.);
- retaliatory terrorism against the German invaders is justified and required for the victory in the war (a short story "A Meeting" from War Collection of Films №2, a short story "A Feast in Zhirmunka" from War Collection of Films №6) in which an elderly woman poisoned the German occupants, a war collection of films "Young Partisans", a short story "At the Old Nurse's" from War Collection of Films №2, a short story "The Lighthouse" from War Collection of Films №9, a short story "Vanka" from War Collection of Films №9;
- one ought to be on the alert as Nazi agents and saboteurs may operate alongside and they must be exposed and annihilated ("The Secretary of the District Committee ", a short story "At the Old Nurse's" from War Collection of Films №2, War Collection of Films №4, a short story "One Night" in War Collection of Films "Our Girls");
- USSR is not alone in its struggle against Nazi Germany. This statement is very obviously reflected in War Collection of Films №4 when the reanimated character of the film "Volga-Volga" - postwoman Dunya gives the following inflammatory speech which was quite impossible to imagine before June 22, 1941: "The leading powerful nations of the world - America and England are with us! The mighty British fleet is fighting against Hitler with us!" A more radical voice-over text can be heard in War Collection of Films №5: "The two greatest democratic states of the world rose in defense of the mankind against fascism - USSR and Great Britain!"

The same goes with the plots of films about the struggle of eastern-European partisans (a short story "100 for One" from War Collection of Films №2, a short story "At Seven Sharp" from War Collection of Films №7, a short story "A Night at Belgrade" from War Collection of Films №8, a short story "Blue Cliffs" from War Collection of Films №9, "Yan the Elusive"). Here one should give credit to the efficient reaction of the Soviet film production industry to the current political situation. In the short stories "Block 14" (War Collection of Films №9, March, 1942) and "The Priceless Head" (War Collection of Films №10, 1942) the authors sympathize with the Polish anti-Nazi Resistance movement that was inspired, if the authors are to be trusted, by the support of "the Red Army and Stalin, the leader of working people". In the story "The Priceless Head" the authors also sympathetically show a character from a Jewish ghetto in Warsaw...
We would remind you that two decades ago (1920-1940) Poland was regarded both in the realistic politics and in the then mediatexts (the press, radio, and cinema) as one of the chief opponents of the USSR. And the territorial division that took place in September, 1939, according to a collusive treaty between Germany and the USSR inspired, for example, an extremely significant film "The Wind from the East" directed by A. Room (1940) that described the Polish establishment as malicious and cruel oppressors of common people of Western Ukraine who enthusiastically welcomed the Soviet troops at the end of the film...

Moreover, though not only German but also Italian, Rumanian, Hungarian and Slovakian divisions fought against the Soviet Army in real life the Kremlin apparently considered it politically important to inform a general audience about the existing resistance even in these countries allied with the Nazi regime. A short story "Young Wine" from War Collection of Films №10 (1942) describing the activity of Rumanian partisans is an example of the fact.

In whole the ideological and political world outlook contexts depicted in Soviet feature film media texts of 1941-1942 on the military theme can be represented in the following way (Table 1):

Table 1. Ideology and political context of the outlook represented in soviet feature films of 1941-1942 on the military theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key questions to media texts</th>
<th>Representation of the USSR world</th>
<th>Representation of the enemy's world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the ideology of this world?</strong></td>
<td>Communist ideology in Stalin's interpretation</td>
<td>Imperialistic / Nazi aggressive ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What outlook does this world present - optimistic or pessimistic?</strong></td>
<td>Optimistic throughout the action (a typical phrase from War Collection of Films №2 addressing the enemy: &quot;You won't eat our lard, bastards! And you won't eat our bread either!&quot;)</td>
<td>Presumptuous -optimistic, pessimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the hierarchy of values according to this outlook?</strong></td>
<td>Patriotism - communist party - Stalin - people - hatred for the enemy - family</td>
<td>Aggression - imperialism / Nazism - enrichment; Aggression – cruel treatment of enemies - scornful of the inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What values can be found in this media text? What values dominate in the end?</strong></td>
<td>Patriotic, communist values (during the whole action)</td>
<td>Imperialistic, Nazi values, fear of death (the latter especially prevails in media texts of 1942)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>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?</strong></td>
<td>It means to be a communist, Leninist-Stalinist, a patriot, a brave soldier who has no mercy on the enemy, a good family man. These are common stereotypes for positive characters who can also possess some individual traits (humor, vocal talent)</td>
<td>It means to be an imperialist/Nazi, a professional warrior who has no mercy on the enemy. These are common stereotypes for characters who can also possess some individual traits (wit, calculation, ruse, stupidity, cowardice, irony, sarcasm)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C. Cultural Context. How do media texts reflect, strengthen, or form the cultural context: relations, values, and myths?

Mass culture media texts were a success due to multiple factors. These include: reference to folk and mythological sources; constancy of metaphors; successive introduction of the most durable plot schemes; synthesis of the natural and the supernatural; appeal not to the rational but to the emotional through identification (imagined transformation into personages, immersion in the text atmosphere), "the magic power" of the characters, standardization (replication, unification, adaptation) of ideas, situations, characters, etc., mosaic and serial character, compensation (illusive realization of cherished but unfulfilled wishes), a happy end, use of the rhythmic text organization where, for example, the audience's emotions are affected by the order of the frames change alongside with the plot; intuitive prediction of the audience's subconscious wishes, etc.

And here the Soviet films on the military theme of 1941-1942, a product of the mass/pop culture also rely on folk and mythological sources. In this connection both Alexander Nevsky, and Napoleon, and Chapaev with Shveik are referred to in War collections of films, in the first place, not as characters of historical and/or literary origin but as folk-mythological figures familiar to the public at large.

Practically all Soviet films of 1941-1942 on the military topic are characterized by serial character (for example, a prequel to a story about heroic Rybkin in War Collection of Films №3 of 1941 and its further basic variant "Antosha Rybkin" shot in 1942 is a sequel of 1941 - "Chapaev is with Us"), standardization of ideas, situations, characters, etc. The compensatory factor ofcherished dreams realization become apparent in the majority of Soviet films of 1941-1942 where regardless of the real situation at the front positive characters would beat the Hitlerites.

D. Genre Modifications: drama (64 films), detective (2 films). Taking into account the genres of feature short stories of War Collections of Films they shot 33 dramas, 7 comedies and 1 detective in 1941; 31 drama, 3 comedies and 1 detective in 1942. The overwhelming majority of these films were short due to the understandable necessity for fast response to current events. For instance, in 1941 only one feature film on the war theme with a length time longer than 60 minutes was created, but in 1942 there were five films.

Though the best scriptwriters, film makers and actors of that time (see the filmography) were involved in creating of films on the war theme in 1941-1942 the stylistics of such films did not differ much from the film stylistics of the previous decade except for more realistic representation of military life.

The dramatic stereotype: Nazis destroy a peaceful, tranquil and happy life of people; after occupying a town or a village they start a mass terror (shootings, executions, tortures, etc.) against the civilian population including women and children, drive away Russian people as captives to work in Germany, etc. The nation rises to fight with the enemies: in the regular army, in partisan detachments, clandestine organizations (subversive acts of partisans and spies, shootings of Nazis, etc.). At the same time, spies, saboteurs and traitor of the country are unmasked...

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

Simple dwellings, offices and households of Soviet characters; apparently a more prosperous standard of life of German characters, unified Soviet and German military facilities, equipment.

Life of Soviet people (mainly, military men) and/or partisans from Eastern European countries is shown as a rule conditionally truly and always positively; a well-to-do mode of life of German characters in Germany is depicted with some grotesque but in general it is also quite true; the lifestyle of German characters at the front or in the occupied Russian territories is rather poor (in particular, in winter when Germans get frozen from extreme cold).

Details: Soviet war losses and especially the losses in civilian population - in films shot in 1942 are shown with moderation. In films of 1942 heavy human losses of the USSR are no longer concealed, on the contrary, casual episodes of documentary films about Nazi victims call for ruthless revenge on the hated enemy. The films soundtracks contain both encouraging marching 'offensive' songs ("Rise, our vast country...") and lyric melodies.

Generally, the representation of reality in Soviet feature films of 1941-1942 on the war topic can be presented as in Table 2.
Table 2. Typical iconographic setting codes in soviet feature films of 1941-1942 on the military theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes of typical setting in media texts</th>
<th>Visual characteristics of these codes realization in media texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling place of the enemy</td>
<td>Looks more prosperous than dwelling places of Soviet characters, but according to the plot this treasure is ill-gotten.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling place of the Soviet character</td>
<td>Poor but of good quality. The officers' quarters are nearly equal to the dwelling conditions of German burghers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army premises (headquarters, dugouts, etc.), trenches</td>
<td>Functional furniture - tables, chairs/armchairs, etc. In the Soviet variant everything is of good quality but very simple (though, the portraits of leaders on the walls are obligatory). The interior in the enemy premises is similar but grim (if the premises are located in Germany), dirty, untidy (if the premises are located in the front-line area and in the occupied territories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aircraft, tank, ship</td>
<td>Only functional articles of furniture - a cabin, levers and control device, weapons, partitions, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**Male Characters**

**Character's age:** 10-70 years old (though sometimes very small children are in picture)

**Character's race:** white.

**Character's appearance, clothes, constitution:**

- **a) military men:** Soviet characters are dressed in a uniform of good quality and are, as a rule, very robust; Nazis, on the contrary, are very feeble and look battered in most cases (especially in films with the winter nature of 1942), for example, they can go with woman's shawls or scarves tied round their heads; in whole, two basic variants of Nazi constitution are underlined - either overweight or, vice versa, thinness; foreign partisans (Polish, Yugoslavian, Czech, Rumanian) are dressed in accordance with the European "middle-class" fashion of the early 1940s;

- **b) civilian population:** Soviet characters are modestly dressed (especially the rural community), the Germans look obviously richer; the constitution both of Soviet and German characters varies and depends on the film context; at the same time, physiognomically the enemy characters unlike the Soviet characters look disagreeable.

**Educational attainment:** higher education (officers), secondary and elementary education, more rarely - higher (civilian population, soldiers).

**Social standing, profession:** the social status of Soviet characters is approximately similar (though the living conditions of commanding officers are much more comfortable); the social status of foreign characters is different; a wide range of professions dominating with military men.

**Character's marital status:** has no special significance, both positive and negative characters can be either married or single.

**Character traits:** power, quick wit, activity, loyalty, optimism, bravery, tenacity of purpose (Soviet characters, characters of the countries conquered by Nazis), hostility, slyness, cruelty, cowardice, meanness, purposefulness (German characters). Soviet characters are honest fighters for their Motherland and communist ideas with businesslike or pathos vocabulary, reserved gestures and mime. German characters (soldiers, officers, spies) are shown as malicious, rude and cruel fanatics with primitive vocabulary, active gesticulation and annoying timbres of their shrill yells. However, already in films made in 1942 the Nazis were depicted sometimes as vicious but clever enemies as for example in the following short stories: "Spiders" and "102nd Kilometer" from War Collection of Films №11 or in the film about pilots "The Way to the Stars" directed by E. Pentslin. N. Okhlopkov and M. Strauch in War Collections of Films №7 and №11 "went beyond the scope of caricature. N. Okhlopkov played a German officer with a monocle who went into ecstasies
at seeing a harmonium. He enchanted a Dutch family with his courtliness of conduct, gentle modulations of his baritone in order to efficiently rob their house the following day. The story was called "The White Crow". M. Strauch played a philosopher-killer dressed in a white overall with a syringe in his hand in the story "Spiders". These were expressive figures: they were not characters yet but they were no longer simple caricatures [Zak, 1975, p. 41].

However, generally speaking, the characters of the personages - both Soviet and German - are given only in outline without a deep psychological insight. Enemy characters speak Russian (for the viewer's convenience) but sometimes with a German accent. In rare instances one can hear some German remarks.

**Character's value orientations (ideological, religious, others):** patriotic, communist values (Soviet characters), imperialist, Nazi values (German characters), religious values, as a rule, go beyond the scope of media texts.

**Conduct of a character, his strategy of conflict resolution:** acts of characters are determined by the development of the media text plot. Soviet characters demonstrate their best professional/military qualities, brilliantly work out and realize plans for enemy liquidation. German characters either stand on the defensive or attack but all the time suffer a defeat. Cruelty and ruthlessness towards even civilian population dominate in Nazis' behavior. In films shot in 1942 Wehrmacht soldiers and officers do not conceal their despair and lack of fighting spirit.

**Female Characters**

- **Character's age:** 10-70 years old (though sometimes very small girls are in picture).
- **Character's race:** white.
- **Character's appearance, clothes, constitution:** Soviet characters, as a rule, have average constitution, are dressed in plain civilian attire, more rarely - in military uniform. Foreign characters can be divided into two distinct categories - women of the countries occupied by Nazis are shown with compassion, but the German women are always negative characters (the latter are obviously more richly dressed but are physiognomically repulsive)

**Educational attainment:** secondary and elementary education.

**Social standing, profession:** the social status of Soviet characters is approximately alike; the social status of foreign characters differs; women-workers of various professions are represented, more rarely - nurses, women-partisans.

- **Character's marital status:** women over 18 are usually married.
- **Character traits:** power, quick wit, activity, loyalty, optimism, bravery, firmness of purpose (Soviet characters, characters of the countries conquered by Nazis), hostility, slyness, cruelt, cowardice, meanness, purposefulness (German characters).

**Character's value orientations (ideological, religious, others):** patriotic, communist values (Soviet characters), bourgeois, Nazi values (German characters), religious values, as a rule, go beyond the scope of media texts, however, sometimes they are emphasized (an elderly peasant woman in "A Feast in Zhirmunka")

**Conduct of a character, his strategy of conflict resolution:** characters' behaviour is determined by the plot of a media text. Soviet characters demonstrate their best professional/military qualities, their ability to drastically resolve conflicts.

**Significant changes in the media text plot and characters' lives, the incipient problem**

Positive Soviet characters either live a peaceful life in the beginning (it takes the minimum film time) or immediately find themselves in the wartime and do their best to repel the Nazi aggression. Negative characters commit aggression/crime and despite some local initial successes they inevitable suffer defeat at the end of the film. Their remarks are often full of pessimism.

**Details:** a German ace (ironically played by N. Volkov) from "The Way to the Stars" grumbles at seeing their fresh reinforcement: "How old are you? - Forty-three, - And you? - Forty-five, - I need pilots but not bats". It is also he who says another sarcastic phrase: "Can't sleep, lieutenant? Then think of the Russian pilot who will shoot you down"...

**Incipient problem, search for solutions to the problem**

**Incipient problem:** violation of the law - the life of positive characters is under threat because of the Hitler aggression. The only solution is the armed struggle of positive characters against the enemy aggression.
Solution to the problem: liquidation/capture of aggressors, victory of Soviet soldiers/partisans.

Conclusions. Thus we performed 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 Soviet feature films of 1941-1942 on the military theme. 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.

References:

Filmography:
Part 1. War Collections of Films (1941-1942)

Three short films: "A Meeting with Maxim", "A Dream Come True", "Three Men in a Shell Hole".

Three short films: "A Meeting", "One Among Many", "At the Old Nurse's, "100 for One", "An Accident at the Telegraph".

Three short films: "English Anti-Aircraft Gunners" (British Newsreel), "Courage", "Antosha Rybkin".

Three short films: "British Fleet" (British Newsreel), "A Patriot Woman", "The Order Is Executed".

Two documentary short films: "London Does Not Give Up" (British Newsreel), "Our Moscow".

Three short films: "Women of the Air Fleet" (Newsreel), "Hatred", "A Feast in Zhirmunka".


Two short films: "A Night over Belgrade", "Three Tankmen".


Three short stories: "Block 14", "Blue Cliffs", "The Lighthouse".


Two short films: "The Priceless Head", "Young Wine".


Four short films: "In the Circle of Hate", "Spiders", "102nd Kilometer", "The Career of Lt. Gopp".


Two short films: "The Son of a Soldier", "Vanka".


Two short films: "Tonya", "One Night" (was not released).


Two short films: "Forest Brothers", "Dad's Death".


Two short films: "Levko", "Teacher Kartashova".

Part 2. Other soviet feature films of 1941-1942 on the war theme

1941
In the Sentry Box
In the Black Mountains
Blood for Blood
Mother
Sea Hawk
Герменевтический анализ советских фильмов 1941–1942 годов на военную тему

Александр Федоров

Таганрогский государственный педагогический институт имени А.П. Чехова, Россия
Доктор педагогических наук, профессор
E-mail: mediashkola@rambler.ru

Аннотация. В статье автор делает герменевтический анализ культурного контекста советских фильмов на военную тему 1941-1942 годов. Автор имеет в виду, что герменевтический анализ понимания медиатекстов включает сравнение с исторической, культурной традицией и действительностью; понимание его логики, сравнение медиатекстов в историческом и культурном контексте в сочетании с историческим, структурным, сюжетным, этическим, идеологическим и иконографическим/визуальным анализом медиийных стереотипов и персонажей медиатекста.

Ключевые слова: медиатекст; анализ; медиаобразование; компетентность; советские фильмы 1941-1942 годов о войне.