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## The Political and Ideological Contexts of the Family Image and Family Education in Russian Post-Soviet and Contemporary Feature Films

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### Abstract

The research investigates the political and ideological contexts of the family image and family education in Russian post-Soviet and contemporary feature films. The transition from the Soviet era to the post-Soviet period brought significant changes in social values which were presented in the portrayal of families on screen. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market economy, there was a resurgence of traditional values, including a renewed emphasis on the nuclear family as a source of stability and security in an uncertain world. Overall, the ideological and cultural analyses of contemporary Russian feature films focused on the family image reveal a complex and multifaceted portrayal reflecting the ongoing evolution of Russian society and culture. These films provide insights into the tensions between tradition and modernity, individualism and collectivism, and the impact of political and social changes on family dynamics in Russia. Thus, the depiction of the family image and family education in Russian post-Soviet and contemporary feature films is shaped by a complex interplay of political, social, and ideological factors. Recently, there has been a resurgence of conservative values and an emphasis on traditional family structures as a bulwark against perceived Western influence and moral decay. This has been reflected in some Russian feature films promoting traditional gender roles and family values as essential to national identity and stability.

**Keywords:** family, family upbringing, media, media text, media culture, media education, post-Soviet feature films.

### 1. Introduction

The reflection of political and social ideologies in Russian feature films is an important aspect of cinema production. At different historical periods in Russia, cinema served as a platform for the expression and promotion of various ideologies, reflecting public sentiments, political changes, and cultural values. Many films used ideological pathos and symbolism to convey certain political or social ideas. This was expressed through characters, dialogue, script, or music. Russian film directors have often used various narrative techniques to convey their political and social beliefs. This can be expressed through allegories, metaphors, symbolism, and other artistic techniques. All these aspects should be thoroughly analysed and critically assessed at media education lessons: “The problem of socially responsible education of youth is of particular relevance at the present stage in connection with objective changes in the cultural and historical development of our country” (Mikhaleva, 2021: 268).

In different historical periods, Russian cinema has been used to promote certain ideological theories, be it communism in the Soviet period, nationalism in the post-Soviet period,

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or patriotism in modern Russia. Films could serve as a means of shaping public opinion and supporting political decisions. Many Russian films reflect historical events and periods, including the Soviet period, the Great Patriotic War, perestroika, and the fall of the USSR, as well as contemporary political events.

The depiction of family image and family education in Russian post-Soviet and contemporary feature films reflects the broader political and ideological contexts of the times. The transition from the Soviet era to the post-Soviet period brought significant changes in social values which were presented in the portrayal of families on screen.

Considering the crucial role of modern cinema as a factor in promoting family values among young people, we would like to emphasize the importance of developing in the younger generation critical skills and the ability to analyse present-day feature films about family and family education since “the emerging personality, faced with family problems, with the need to find an example or model of behaviour, is forced to look for ways solutions in the surrounding information field, including the film industry. It is necessary to understand the role of cinema in the youth environment, to develop media competence” (Obukhovski, 2021: 43).

## 2. Materials and methods

Russian and foreign scientific publications focused on family and family upbringing as reflected in Russian post-Soviet 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, 1995, 2001, 2016), including the critical approach offered by L. Masterman (Masterman, 1985).

## 3. Discussion

During the Soviet era, the state played a dominant role in shaping family structures and values in connection with “the political and ideological contexts of that time. In the earliest Soviet feature films, the audience’s attention was focused on collective values such as solidarity, mutual assistance, and responsibility. Soviet cinema often idealized relationships within the family, emphasizing love, trust, and mutual assistance between its members. Soviet feature films emphasized the importance of socially useful work or service” (Mikhaleva, Lozovitskaya, 2024: 313).

The idealized image of the Soviet family typically revolved around collective values where individuals were expected to prioritize the interests of the state over their own personal desires. Gender roles were often rigidly defined, with women portrayed as strong and self-sacrificing mothers and workers, while men were depicted as providers and protectors of the family and the state. This was revealed in the analysis of the working dynasties representation in the Soviet cinematography offered by O. Posukhova, L. Klimenko and S. Chelyshev: “Cinema increased opportunities for legitimizing the unique status of working dynasties. That was facilitated by both technical capabilities (dynamics of visual images, light, color, sound, etc.) and a mass audience. During the periods of Soviet societies, there was also a state order to produce films about the life of working dynasties.” (Posukhova et al., 2021).

Post-Soviet Russia witnessed a period of rapid social and economic transformations which had profound implications for family values. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market economy, there was a resurgence of traditional values, including a renewed emphasis on the nuclear family as a source of stability and security in the uncertain world. However, this period also saw the erosion of state support for social services, leading to increased economic hardships for many families and social inequalities: “During the period of “perestroika,” a series of sketches about working families was replaced by materials about family problems, the collapse of society, and the breakdown of values. Propaganda of material values and consumer practices led to changes in moral and ethical standards and images, cultural meanings” (Mishchenko, 2014: 78).

In Russian post-Soviet cinema, the image of the family developed in the context of political and ideological changes that took place in the country after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. The 1990s saw significant social, economic, and cultural transformations that impacted the way family was portrayed in films. In the 1990s, Russia experienced a crisis associated with the transition to a market economy and the collapse of the Soviet political system. This brought about

changes in family structure, increased social mobility and a variety of family models which were reflected in cinema.

Analysing modern Russian feature films, cinema art critic V.S. Malyshev concludes that a significant part of Russian film production of the last five years still carries depressive motives and forms in the viewer a one-sided negative impression of today's reality and prospects for the future: "For many Russians, the perestroika era turned into a loss of hope. The depressive trend turned out to be so tenacious that it migrated to Russian cinema of the 1990s, and even to the cinema of the new, 21st century. Films of this kind no longer aroused increased audience interest" (Malyshev, 2020: 8).

The post-Soviet crisis and social changes had a significant impact on the content and themes of Russian films about family and family education. Russia faced major economic, social, and cultural transformations which were reflected in cinema. Thus, Russian feature films about family after the break-up of the USSR often mirrored the economic difficulties that families faced. The films depicted job loss, financial problems, housing difficulties and other aspects of social inequality that affected family relationships: "A mother of many children, Polina Ovechkina (*Mama*, USSR, 1999) tries in vain to straighten out the broken destinies of her sons (one of them is a patient in a mental hospital, another is a drug addict and a pimp, the third one works for pennies in a mine, the fourth son is a contract sniper in a "hot spot"...). The touching and spiritual heroines of the film *Country of the Deaf* (Russia, 1998) by V. Todorovsky turn out to be powerless victims of mafia showdowns. The boy Sanya (*The Thief*, Russia, 1997) loses faith in goodness after his "father," the "war hero", turns out to be a cruel and unscrupulous criminal. When you watch this film, frames from S. Bondarchuk's *The Fate of Man* (Russia, 1959) involuntarily emerge in your memory, where a crying Andrei Sokolov tenderly hugs a street boy lamenting "Father, dear!" (Malyshev, 2020: 13). The evolution of the father's image was also thoroughly traced in the Soviet family from High Stalinism to the Thaw and Stagnation in the book "Cinemasaurus: Russian Film in Contemporary Context" (Condee et al., 2020).

According to the research findings of A.V. Korotkova, the image of the family promoted in mass media "largely determines the current models of family behaviour, actively participates in the formation of such a complex phenomenon as fashion, creates typical images-standards of the family which subsequently accompany people throughout their lives, having a significant impact on their worldviews. Through identification and projection, a person unconsciously imitates (the process of cloning) the images of family advertised by the media" (Korotkova, 2007: 3).

In this respect a critical analysis of modern Russian audiovisual media texts about family and family relationships seems important in the context of media education and presupposes the development of critical thinking among the audience: "Analysis of media texts based on the ability for media perception, close to "complex identification", the ability to analyse and synthesize the space and time aspects of a media text, understanding, interpretation (interpretation), involving comparison, abstraction, induction, deduction, synthesis, critical assessment of the author's concept in the context of the structure of the work, historical and cultural contexts (this expresses reasoned agreement or disagreement with the author's position of the creators of the media text, critical assessment of the moral, emotional, aesthetic, social significance of a media text, the ability to correlate emotional perception with a conceptual judgment, transfer this judgment to other genres/types of media culture, connect the media text with your experience and the experience of other people, etc.)" (Fedorov, 2007: 506).

I.O. Shevchenko provided a thorough sociological analysis of the image of the father in contemporary Russian-Chinese films. It turned out that the image of a father in feature films had a largely positive connotation and coincided with the qualities of a "good father". These are both universal human qualities (kindness, sincerity, honesty, openness) and characteristics that relate only to fathers: responsibility towards family and children, willingness to do everything to maintain home comfort, etc. (Shevchenko, 2015).

L.A. Gritsai and T.V. Leontjeva examined the audiovisual media texts about family in contemporaneous Russian animated films (Gritsai, 2013; Leontjeva, 2022). Since nowadays the transmission of family values, ideas about the family, its structure, functions is carried out not only by the parental family, but also constructed through exposure to the media, they emphasized the importance of analysing "the visual image of the family reflected in modern Russian animated cartoons for children and adolescent audiences, when long-term value guidelines are laid in

marriage and family relations, which determine the overall potential of personal development” (Leontjeva, 2022: 4).

According to V.V. Tyulyunova, contemporary families in Russian films face the following problems: “hardships of young families, challenges of deviant motherhood and fatherhood, orphanhood, and single-parent families. Critics highlighted some aspects in them: the family parental function, young people’s unpreparedness for marriage and having a child, children’s reluctance to live in orphanages, orphans’ lack of independence, their unpreparedness for adult life, the emotionality of children from single-parent families” (Tyulyunova, 2020: 134).

W. Douglas and B.M. Olson examined the portrayal of family relationships in domestic comedies on account of their popularity during the period 1950-1990 (Douglas, Olson, 1995).

On the other hand, T. Kubrak analysed the impact of feature films on adolescents focusing on the changes in young people’s attitudes after watching films (Kubrak, 2020).

The study by M.I. Kosinova and T. Solgi reveals family values in Iranian and Russian cinema. The authors emphasise that “in the modern cinema of these countries, we often encounter negative trends indicating the disintegration of the traditional family. The source of these trends is the negative influence of the West, and in particular, Western cinema” (Kosinova, Solgi, 2022).

The representations of the family in the family film, including the analysis of marital relationships, images of couples and families in adult and children’s films were thoroughly studied by some foreign scholars (Allen, 1999; An, 2017; Antunes, 2017; Babarskiene, Gaiduk, 2018; Bazalgette, Staples, 1995; Brown, 2012, 2013, 2017; Chopra-Gant, 2006; Garlen, Sandlin, 2017; Norton, 2021; Tanner et al., 2003; Wadsworth, 2015; Zurcher et al., 2018, 2020).

#### 4. Results

In the context of our study, the studies related to changes taking place in the state family policy are important indeed. Their key priorities highlighted the essence of the political and ideological concepts of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods and the historical epochs of the country. As the analysis shows, at different stages of the development of our country, the state ideology put forward certain objectives for family institutions and family education and determined the priorities of the state family policy, measures to support and strengthen family values.

Let us consider the main developing stages of the state family policy in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods using the models presented by A.V. Noskova (Noskova, 2013).

For example, the post-revolutionary model (1917-1926) highlighted the task of creating new and destroying old ideas about family relationships in general. The new family in the state of socialism under construction was supposed to become a model of new, equal relations where the main objective of the family structure was the socialist construction. At the same time, the state power assumed an active mediating function “in marital and child-parent relations. The active intervention of the state in private life, its desire to eradicate centuries-old family traditions in the first post-revolutionary decade gave rise, in our opinion, to an acute contradiction between the “traditional” and the “modern”: in behavioural attitudes towards marriage, the birth of children, the format of marital and gender relations” (Noskova, 2013: 156).

In the 1930s-1950s, the “Stalinist” model (1926-1953) was dominant in the context of family relations in our country. The main priorities during that period were strengthening the unshakable foundations of a strong Soviet family, protecting the institution of motherhood, banning abortion, and actively involving parents in the production through the expansion of preschool educational institutions which accepted children under the care of the state from a very early age. In general, the government measures regarding the family were aimed at strengthening ideological control over the family, the desire to “preserve traditional family values and at the same time promote modern models of family-gender relations” (Noskova, 2013: 156).

The next, the “Soviet social” model (1954-1991), was characterized by a more lenient attitude towards divorce and childbearing planning. Consequently, “together with other socio-economic determinants, the liberalization of family relations stimulated further transformation of the marital and reproductive behaviour of Soviet people” (Noskova, 2013: 156).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, in place of the previous models of the socialist period, the “post-Soviet” model (1992 – early 2000s) became dominant when the main priorities of the family policy concerned the family institution which existence was complicated by an acute socio-economic crisis, the devaluation of moral ideas about family well-being as the main goal of human well-being, and a

sharp decline in the birth rate. During these years, “a new paradigm of state family support was built on the ruins of the Soviet family social protection system” (Noskova, 2013: 158).

The so-called newest model (since the 2000s) is characterized by “active state support for families aimed at solving demographic problems, full support for young families, solving social issues, such as the placement of “children” orphans into families, assistance to families with disabled children, the ongoing fight against family poverty, prevention of family deviance, etc.” (Noskova, 2013: 159).

In the post-Soviet period, there were drastic changes in social values and norms which were reflected in films about family and family education. Liberation from the ideological constraints of the Soviet period led to a wider variety of family patterns and relationships. Many post-Soviet Russian feature films depicted the challenges faced by families during the transition period from the Soviet era to the present day. These films often explore themes of economic hardships, social instability, and the breakdown of traditional family structures in the face of rapid societal changes (*Voroshilov Sharpshooter*, Russia, 1999).

In Russian films focused on family and family education, the disintegration of traditional family values under the influence of modernization processes and Western culture became noticeable indeed. The feature films often addressed the themes of loneliness, infidelity, and other difficult aspects of family life. Due to the above-mentioned social and cultural changes in society, family values also changed. There began to appear Russian feature films that more openly discussed the diversity of family forms and types of relationships, including divorce, new marriages, etc. The examples of Russian feature films that reflect political and social changes include *American Daughter* (Russia, 1995), *The President and His Granddaughter* (Russia, 1999), and others.

Complex family relationships were also touched upon. Russian feature films were increasingly examining complicated and controversial aspects of family relationships, such as divorce, arranged marriages, domestic violence and other problems faced by modern families. “Fundamental changes, realized primarily at the level of state cultural policy, occurred only in the second decade of the 2000s. But even currently, the heroes are bright, decent, socially responsible and carry within them a depressive aura of “ungrateful fate”. So, for example, in the film *Arrhythmia* (Russia, 2017) by B. Khlebnikov, touching, honest, selflessly fulfilling his professional and human duty, emergency doctor Oleg (A. Yatsenko) appears as a failure in the main fields of life – at work and in the family” (Malyshev, 2020: 13).

Russian cinematography of the post-Soviet period reflected the processes of family adaptation to new social, economic, and cultural realities. The films drew attention to the challenges and obstacles that families faced in new society and how to overcome them. The examples of Russian feature films that mirror changing family values include *The Return* (Russia, 2003), *Leviathan* (Russia, 2014). These films showed the diversity of forms of family life and relationships in modern Russia, thus reflecting changes in family values and their adaptation to new realities.

Post-Soviet films about family also captured a considerable change in the roles of women and men. Women were more often portrayed as independent and self-sufficient individuals striving for career growth and self-realization, while men sometimes had difficulty adapting to new social realities. In Russian post-Soviet cinema, there was less emphasis on traditional gender roles in the family, such as women as housewives and men as breadwinners. Films more often portrayed women and men as equal partners sharing responsibility for family responsibilities.

With the increase in the number of immigration processes in post-Soviet Russia, Russian feature films about family relationships began to reflect issues related to migration, adaptation to new cultural environments and finding one’s place in society. Examples of Russian feature films about family and family education, mainly dramas and melodramas, that reflect the post-Soviet crisis and social changes include *Brother* (Russia, 1997), *Night Fun* (Russia, 1991), *You’re One and Only Mine* (Russia, 1993), *Everything Will Be All Right* (Russia, 1995). The films addressed complex aspects of family life and social reality in Russia, reflecting new challenges and trends.

There was a focus on individual stories: Russian post-Soviet cinema began to explore individual family stories. The films raised issues of personal development, self-identification and overcoming family conflicts.

There is a significant exploration of gender roles in contemporary Russian films focused on family and family relationships, reflecting shifting attitudes towards gender equality and women’s

rights. Some feature films challenge traditional gender roles by portraying female characters as independent and assertive, while others reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.

There began to appear Russian feature films with the emphasis on women emancipation, women's desire for self-realization outside the family and career growth, which was reflected in family dramas and comedies. The evolution of the role of women in the family and society in modern Russian cinema reflects a wide range of changes that have occurred in Russian society over the past decades. Changes in ideas about the role of women in the family and society in Russian feature films can be presented as follows.

In Soviet cinema, women were often portrayed in the role of a "new woman", active, efficient, and independent from men. A typical Soviet woman was presented as a worker, a builder of communism, a factory worker, a doctor, a teacher, or any other professional worker. This reflected the ideology of gender equality and the socialist system. Family relationships were often idealized: a woman and a man were equal partners, raising children together and solving family problems.

In the Russian cinema of the post-Soviet period (after 1991), the role of women in the family and society began to change. Films were increasingly emphasizing the diversity of life situations women faced, from career advancement to family difficulties and relationship violence. Films began to focus on women's emancipation, self-realization, and the fight for their rights, including the right to education, work, and freedom of choice in their personal lives (*The Envy of Gods*, Russia, 2000; *March of the Slav*, Russia, 2003, *I'll Be Around*, Russia, 2012).

In modern Russian cinema (feature films released after 2000s), the role of women has become more diverse and multifaceted. Contemporary feature films reflect the complex aspects of women's lives in modern society, from balancing family and professional responsibilities to combating gender stereotypes and discrimination. Some films emphasize the importance of support and solidarity among women, the formation of networks of mutual aid and emotional support.

The portrayal of fathers in modern Russian feature films also reflects a diverse range of perspectives, influenced by societal changes, cultural values, and cinematic trends. Some films depict fathers adhering to traditional roles as the head of the family, providing guidance, discipline, and support to their children (*Father*, Russia, 2007). These characters often embody the qualities of authority, strength, and stoicism, showing conventional notions of masculinity and paternal responsibility. Given Russia's history, some films explore the legacy of Soviet-era fathers portrayed as heroic figures sacrificing personal fulfilment for the greater good of society or as flawed individuals grappling with the pressures of state ideology and personal aspirations.

In contrast, there are films that address absentee fathers, either physically or emotionally (*Compensation*, Russia, 2010; *Stirlitz's Wife*, Russia, 2012). These narratives examine the impact of paternal absence on familial dynamics, with protagonists navigating feelings of abandonment, resentment, or longing for paternal presence. Some films focus on the complexities of father-daughter relationships, depicting fathers as protective yet sometimes overbearing figures who struggle to reconcile their traditional values with their offspring's desires for independence and self-expression. Similarly, some films delve into the relationships between fathers and sons, exploring the themes of legacy, masculinity, and intergenerational conflict. These narratives often present the challenges of communication and understanding between the younger and the older generations (*Son*, Russia, 2014; *Van Goghs*, Russia, 2018; *Dad*, Russia, 2020).

A common narrative arc involves fathers seeking redemption or reconciliation with their children after past mistakes or estrangement. These stories often emphasize the transformative power of forgiveness, empathy, and familial bonds. Some contemporary films portray fathers navigating the complexities of modern life, balancing career demands, personal aspirations, and familial responsibilities. These characters may challenge traditional gender roles by actively participating in childcare and domestic duties (*Daddy's Daughters*, Russia, 2007-2013). Other films featuring single fathers offer nuanced portrayals of masculinity and parenthood, highlighting the unique challenges and triumphs of raising children alone. These narratives challenge stereotypes and celebrate the resilience of single-parent families. For instance, the film *Ice 2* (Russia, 2020) conveys the difficulties of raising a daughter by a single father. Overall, the depiction of fathers in modern Russian feature films reflects a rich tapestry of experiences, emotions, and cultural influences, capturing the complexities of fatherhood in contemporary society.

Analysing present-day Russian feature films through an ideological and cultural lens regarding the family image reveals portrayals of both traditional values and the impact of societal changes. Some contemporary Russian films evoke nostalgia for the stability and unity of the Soviet epoch, presenting

idealized images of family life during that time: “Russian cinema at the turn of the 20th-21st centuries also constructed (consciously and unconsciously) nostalgia for the Soviet, but at the same time it was also busy with the opposite work – demythologizing nostalgic sentiments” (Nemchenko, 2016: 109). These films may highlight traditional gender roles and emphasize the importance of collective values and state support for families (*The Eighties*, Russia, 2016).

Conversely, other films criticize the legacy of the Soviet social system, portraying dysfunctional or oppressive family structures that resulted from the strict adherence to ideological principles. These films explore themes of individualism, rebellion against authority, and the desire for personal fulfilment outside of traditional family roles.

Russian feature films touched upon various political and social ideologies that influenced the idea of family. For example, in the 2000s, there was an emphasis on traditional family values and patriotism.

The political climate in Russia, characterized by a resurgence of conservative values influences the portrayal of family in Russian film production. Some films promote traditional family values as essential to national identity and stability, while others criticize the government’s promotion of a narrow definition of family.

In contemporary Russian feature films, the family image portrayal mirrors these complex political and ideological transformations. On the one hand, there is often nostalgia for the stability and unity of the Soviet era, with some films idealizing the traditional family values of that time. There is also a recognition of the need to adapt to changing social realities, with feature films exploring such themes as individualism, gender equality, and the challenges of modern parenthood.

Additionally, the political climate in Russia has influenced the portrayal of family in modern film production. Recently, there has been a resurgence of conservative values and an emphasis on traditional family structures as a bulwark against perceived Western influence and moral decay. This has been shown in some Russian feature films which promote traditional gender roles and family values as essential to national identity and stability (*Bless the Woman*, Russia, 2003).

Overall, the depiction of the family image and family education in Russian post-Soviet and contemporary feature films is shaped by a complex interplay of political, social, and ideological factors, reflecting the ongoing evolution of Russian society and culture.

Contemporary Russian feature films also capture the influence of some global trends and cultural exchanges, with some films adopting narrative structures, themes, and visual styles from Western cinema. This can result in a more diverse and cosmopolitan portrayal of family life in Russia, challenging traditional narratives and stereotypes.

## 5. Conclusion

At different historical periods in Russia, feature films served as a platform for the expression and promotion of ideological ideas, reflected public sentiment, political changes, and cultural values: “the theme of family and family education has always been and continues to be one of the central in the cinema. The transformational processes taking place in society could not but influence the reflection of this topic in Russian media culture of different historical periods” (Chelysheva, Mikhaleva, 2022: 549).

Content analysis of feature films of the post-Soviet and modern period, presenting the family image, allowed us to formulate the following conclusions:

- The transition from the Soviet era to the post-Soviet period brought significant changes in social values which were presented in the portrayal of families on screen.
- With the break-up of the Soviet Union and the transition to a market economy, there was a resurgence of traditional values, including a renewed emphasis on the nuclear family as a source of stability and security in an uncertain world.
- Post-Soviet films about family also captured a considerable change in the roles of women and men. Women were more often portrayed as independent and self-sufficient individuals striving for career growth and self-realization, while men sometimes had difficulty adapting to new social realities.
- There is a focus on individual stories: Russian post-Soviet cinema began to explore individual family stories and the dynamics of relationships more actively within the family. The films raised the issues of personal development, self-identification and overcoming family conflicts.

– The political climate in Russia, characterized by a resurgence of conservative values influences the portrayal of family in Russian film production. Some films promote traditional family values as essential to national identity and stability, while others criticize the government's promotion of a narrow definition of family.

– Contemporary Russian feature films also reflect the influence of global trends and cultural exchanges, with some films adopting narrative structures, themes, and visual styles from Western cinema. This can result in a more diverse and cosmopolitan portrayal of family life in Russia, challenging traditional narratives and stereotypes.

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