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Images of Family and Family Education in Russian Feature Films of the 1920s and the early 1930s

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis and characterization of the image of family and family education in young Soviet feature films. Beginning with the first years of Soviet power, cinema acquired a pronounced propaganda and agitation significance. These features influenced the content of silent feature films of that time. In the process of the country's "cinematization", cinema became a mouthpiece of the state policy, and the main objective was to create films that would contribute to the new type of person. Family themes in feature films are not central and act as accompaniment in film stories about the revolution, reviving industry, etc. One of the central conflicts in the film industry of those years is the conflict between the old and new world order, the fight against religious and bourgeois remnants. In the 1920s and 1930s, the attitude towards the family in young Soviet Russia was ambiguous. It was believed that traditional values of the family life were outdated and should be replaced by public education. The family as a union of a man and a woman had also lost its value, as many public and government figures believed. The family could be completely replaced by a collective, which, under the leadership of the state, could educate, teach and form the necessary qualities. A hermeneutic analysis of Soviet feature films of this period allows us to identify the main trends in family issues, some educational models in feature films in the context of an appeal to the socio-cultural and ideological contexts of that time.

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

1. Introduction

Film production at every stage of its development reflects the main events taking place in society. Being a transmitter of social, political and cultural transformations, the art of cinematography has always been an important source of society's ideas about socio-cultural development. The important role of studying film production is due to the fact that "the film reality created by film authors (screenwriters, directors, cameramen, actors, editors, etc.) encodes ideological and cultural orders of society in artistic images, as well as the author's ideas about the world around them and transmits them to the viewer, reinforcing certain models of behaviour, stereotypes of thinking and moral and aesthetic standards. Thus, cinema implements the functions of documenting and constructing reality, being not just a reflection of current processes, but rather their projection, including reflection and generalization of the problem under consideration (Mazur, 2017: 374).

Considering the images of family and family education models presented in the Soviet cinema of the 1920s and early 1930s, we will turn to the characteristics of the socio-cultural

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context, the analysis of social processes that took place in the 1920s and early 1930s in the context of media education. Speaking of the emerging of ideas about the family of a new formation in Soviet cinema (1920–1934 of the twentieth century) (Chelysheva, 2024), we will present an attempt to determine the role of the family in Soviet feature films of this period, the specifics of the representation of family images on the Soviet screen of those years by carrying out a hermeneutic analysis of Soviet audiovisual cinema media culture.

2. Materials and methods

The main material of our research is Soviet feature films of the 1920s – early 1930s analysed in the context of representing family images and models of family education.

The purpose of this study is to carry out a hermeneutic analysis of Soviet feature films of the period under consideration in terms of identifying the major patterns, characteristic features, trends of media texts of different genres, and key media education approaches. The main methods are comparison, analysis and synthesis of the obtained data, generalization and typification based on the material of feature films of the period under analysis, including the ideological and socio-cultural contexts, analysis of stereotypes, genre specifics, the dominant themes related to family education presented on the Soviet screen in those years.

In our study, we analysed Russian (Fedorov et al., 2014; Fedorov, 2015; Fedorov, 2016; Fedorov, Chelysheva, 2002; Levitskaya et al., 2017; Polivanova, Shakarova, 2016; Posukhova et al., 2021; Toropova, 2017; Zhbankova, 2019) and foreign scientific findings (Bahun, Haynes, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 1979; Gradinaru, 2017; Kenez, 1992; Lloyd, 2014; Papazian, 2023; Pedrosa, Camara, 2019; Potter, 2022; Robertson, 2010; Shlapentokh, 1993; Smith, 2014; Todd, 2023; Youngblood, 1992) devoted to family and family education in the mirror of Soviet feature films (1920s – early 1930s).

3. Discussion

The issues of family and family education, presented on the Soviet screen, are analysed today in many studies of a pedagogical, psychological, cultural, historical, and political nature.

This includes the historiographic analysis of feature films of the period under consideration presented in Russian research findings (Mazuritskaya, 2016; Usenko, 2009; Yudin, 2000). The sociological analysis of the processes that took place in the young Soviet cinema is carried out by some Russian scholars too (Bikkinina, 2017; Krylova, 2014; Levchenko, 2023).

The cultural and art history analysis of the family issues in the cinema of the period under consideration is partially presented in other Russian scientific papers (Gozhanskaya, 2005; Kirillova, 2015; Khanzhov, 2018; Mazur, 2017; Petrova, 2021; Salny, 2023; Zharkova, 2022).

The overwhelming majority of authors note the significant influence of cinema on the viewing audience of those years. “Already silent cinema demonstrates its capabilities; the power of the image’s impact here is increased by close-ups and editing. With the advent of sound and the further professionalization of cinema art in the 1920s, the possibilities of creating a full-fledged cinematic illusion increase” (Gozhanskaya 2005).

M.A. Mazuritskaya, examining the influence of cinema on the system of value orientations of the audience in that period, emphasizes: “propaganda among the population and young people in particular developed precisely through cinema, which was only just gaining momentum, but was already a popular “novelty”, a mass form of leisure. In the USSR, under the established regime, showing stories on the screen was perceived as a powerful tool for propaganda and the formation of the necessary attitudes (Mazuritskaya, 2016: 15).

Psychological and pedagogical aspects of reflecting the family image in feature films of this period are presented in some Russian researches (Nusinova, 2003; Mikhaleva, Chelysheva 2024; Smagina, 2018; Yalozina, 2023; Zhuravleva, 2023). For example, N.I. Nusinova, providing an analysis of this period, emphasizes: “From the moment Soviet cinema emerged, its creators were obsessed with the idea of creating a new person, worthy of living in the new, communist world, and such an artificial person was first and foremost created by cinematography” (Nusinova, 2003).

If the first Russian films of the pre-revolutionary period were intended mainly for “people who do not need to think about their daily bread every hour, who have few problems in life, and the main shocks are love, betrayal of a loved one, office intrigue, etc. These are people of average income (from the point of view of Russian society as a whole). In the social hierarchy, they occupy a step above

peasants, workers and servants, but below the rich, large entrepreneurs and high-ranking officials” (Usenko, 2009: 20), then the films of the Soviet period were aimed at a mass audience.

As for the film production in those years, the key criteria for a good Soviet film were loyalty to ideology, mass appeal, and accessibility to a wide audience. These characteristics determined the usefulness of films in terms of solving state problems aimed at using cinematography as one of the leading official mouthpieces of propaganda and agitation. For example, the study by N.B. Kirillova states: “The revolutionary cinema of the 1920s attempted to put the colossal potential of uncontrolled meanings to the service of worldview and ideology. The masters of cinema (Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko) created politically engaged, ideological cinema, which, through class slogans and concepts, attempted to concretize the general humanistic pathos of the struggle for truth and justice, which is always present in politically concerned art” (Kirillova, 2015: 76).

One of the essential objectives associated with young Soviet cinema was creating films for children. E.A. Yalozina, providing an analysis of this period in the context of using cinema as a factor in spiritual and moral education, notes that “the period of Soviet children’s and school cinema in the 1920s was accompanied by difficulties of a creative, logistical, and financial nature. At the same time, the influence of the bourgeois and pre-revolutionary system of moral values was overcome, but advanced technologies and methodological experience of the West in using cinema in education were not ignored and were borrowed. In order to effectively develop the children’s film industry, administrative resources were actively used” (Yalozina, 2023: 134).

4. Results

Analysing the historical, ideological and socio-cultural contexts of feature films of the period under consideration, we can state that from the first years of the advent of Soviet power, interest in cinema as an important factor in influencing people began to actively develop. This is evidenced by a number of state directives and documents aimed at increasing the agitation and propaganda role of cinema. As early as 1918, a cinema subdepartment was created under the extracurricular department of the State Commission for Education, and the educational role of cinema acquired a clear vector for upbringing the younger generation in the spirit of the socialist worldview and corresponding values. This was due to the fact that “cinema optimally corresponded to the needs of the Soviet government in mass media influence. Cinema was supposed to become not only a means of “educating the masses”, but also a kind of demonstration stand, emphasizing the progressiveness and modernity of the new government. In addition, ritually staged collective trips to the cinema, which were readily covered in newsreels, were supposed to strengthen the impact of the ideas being demonstrated on the masses and control over their correct perception” (Khanzhov, 2018).

One of the serious challenges that the new government faced was the significant influence of foreign films of an entertaining nature on the mass audience. And although the fight against “thoughtless and harmful films” was introduced everywhere, was supported by censorship control, people continued to view cinema as entertainment and an amusing event. In order to distract the younger generation from their passion for entertaining films, the Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema, created in 1925, was actively working, film education activities were carried out in remote rural areas, etc. And of course, the Soviet government faced the urgent necessity to create Soviet films that would fully meet the new ideological requirements. To achieve this goal, film studios were created throughout the country.

As the analysis shows, work with film or “film work” had to be organised in such a way as to prepare the audience for proper understanding of feature films. Moreover, the task of reading introductory lectures before the start of the film was assigned not only to teachers specially trained for film work, but also to trade union workers. Thus, for example, “it was assumed that trade union workers would organize regular lectures, discussions on films, introductory speeches, reading of the libretto” (Zhdanova, 2013).

As for the forms and methods of media education with feature films, it was mainly developed during film lessons, film lectures, specially organized film screenings – film matinees, independent media creativity during amateur filming, etc. At the same time, in the first publications of the Soviet period on the use of cinematography in the upbringing and education of the younger generation, the basic principles and approaches to media education were formed, which found their development in subsequent periods.

The ideology and worldview of the new Soviet cinema were vividly reflected in the presented film images. The key foundations that the Soviet screen reflected were the revolutionary struggle to build a new world. In this regard, the family theme was not central in the period under study.

The issues of family education were considered primarily through the prism of propaganda and agitation. A good example here is the 1918 film *Cohabitation/Uplotneniye* by A. Panteleev, N. Pashkovsky, and A. Dolinov. It is interesting that among the authors of the idea of the simple story about a simple working family moving into a professor's apartment was the People's Commissar of Education A.V. Lunacharsky who was very passionate about cinema and clearly understood its ideological role, which he repeatedly emphasized in his speeches and articles.

In addition, the Soviet public widely discussed the advisability of the family in its traditional sense. Ideas were put forward that the family could well be replaced by a commune, and parents by the state. There were proposals to "implement the communist idea of transferring all minors to the care of the state, since the family would cease to exist" (Nechaeva, 2016). It was believed that "the family had to be abolished and ousted from the consciousness of the population by new forms of the communist world order. A special role in this theory was given to issues of upbringing and socialization of the individual: children were to be raised not by parents who were busy in production, but by professional teachers in special institutions. Innovations also concerned the moral aspects of marriage – requirements for maintaining moral purity in marital relations were cancelled as obsolete" (Bikkinina, 2017: 160).

Consequently, the family theme in cinematography in this period gave way to propaganda tasks that faced the young Soviet state. The state replaced the family values that were characteristic of pre-revolutionary Russia with the values of public education of children in the spirit of the new time. These trends were declared as priorities of the state policy, education and culture. They were presented in films and actively positioned in Soviet cinematography of those years.

The films of the 1920s and 1930s reflected the dominant historical events of the period in question: the revolution, the fight against the remnants of the past, etc. Accordingly, the images created by filmmakers of those years depicted the revolutionary events and the years of the Civil War through the prism of film production. These events influenced both the representation of the family as a whole and the reflection of female, male and children's film images.

Thus, on the young Soviet screen, strong, goal-oriented women dominated as positive characters, for whom the main factors determining a woman's happiness were not family and everyday life, but study, hard work and social life. These images are sharply different from the romantic and languid beauties that appeared before viewers on the Western screen. Examples of such film characters are Marfa Lapkina from the film *Old and New/Staroye i Novoye* (the original title of the film *General Line/General'naya Liniya*) by S. Eisenstein and G. Alexandrov, Oktyabrina from the film *The Adventures of Oktyabrina/Pokhozhdeniya Oktyabriny* by G. Kozintsev and L. Trauberg, Tugatysh from the film *Rivals/Sopernitsy* by A. Dmitriev and others. Such heroines are opposed by negative female characters – with bourgeois and outdated ideas about life. Such female characters, however, as well as male ones, are usually created in a satirical manner. For example, Madame Irene is presented in this way in B. Barnett's comedy film *The Girl with a Hat Box/Devushka s Korobkoy* (1927).

A detailed description of female images in Soviet films was given in the research conducted by O. Khloponina. The author notes: "In the 1920s, the female image was characterized by determination, orientation toward a new way of life, social activity, collectivism, and literacy. In general, the female type manifests itself in pronounced masculinity" (Khloponina, 2017).

The themes of creating a family as a human value, the idea of a woman as the keeper of the hearth are replaced by the mother's protective functions. The reason for this is that "motherhood in the new conditions is in demand as a function of the body for the reproduction of new workers, while educational functions are transferred to the state. The film demonstrated the role of the Soviet government as the first protector of women and their children. Nadezhda in the film *The Prostitute/Prostitutka* emphasized the independence of women and their ability to make decisions about the life of their children. Kat'ka in the film *Kat'ka-Paper Rennet/Kat'ka-Bumazhnyy Ranet*, Lyudmila in *Third Meschanskaya St./Tretya Meshchanskaya*. All these roles were intended to demonstrate the freedom of decisions and movements, possible only in the conditions of a new society and a new way of life" (Khloponina, 2017).

In other words, in Soviet feature films of the 1920s, we can see a completely new image of a new Soviet woman – independent, free, striving for a bright life, making a conscious life choice in

favour of serving new ideals. Stereotypical images of female characters in films of those years are workers, peasants, less often – representatives of the intelligentsia. Moreover, the display of female characters on the screen was closely connected with their views and attitude to the revolution. As a rule, positive female characters actively support communist ideas, advocate for the construction of a society free from old ideological remnants. The central symbols personifying the goals of a woman of the new world on the screen were such as faith in a bright future, the desire to learn something new, become independent, overcome difficulties, together with like-minded people.

New male images presented on the Soviet screen of those years (revolutionaries, sailors, workers, peasants, etc.) also differed from Western ideals. The main values for male media images, as well as for female ones, became the construction of a new society in which “who was nobody will become everything”. A smart appearance, work clothes, a leather jacket, a Budyonovka, boots and a tunic – these are the distinctive features of real men. The words “revolution”, “proletariat”, “workers” are often heard in the speech of such film characters (in sound films). These characters are merciless towards the enemies of the revolution, however, if they meet like-minded people, they show friendly, even family feelings. Often in the films of the period under consideration, positive male characters are shown surrounded by children, to whom they show care and tenderness.

On the screen, they are contrasted with male images of the bourgeois class and enemies of the Soviet power. These film characters, as a rule, appear in civilian clothes, their appearance clearly shows the features of the old world, outdated foundations. Typical characteristics of these characters are rudeness, bad attitude towards women and children, a gloomy face. Often, negative characters are lonely, they seem to be in a world alien to them, in which there is no place for them.

The relationship between a man and a woman is also considered in most new Soviet films through the prism of a new idea of the family, where public interests and loyalty to the new ideals of the revolutionary struggle play a leading role. The themes of family comfort, home, motherhood and fatherhood are subtle and do not occupy a dominant position in films. This was due to the fact that the main purpose of releasing feature films during the period was agitation and propaganda. These trends were characteristic of both the representation of urban and rural families in Soviet cinema. For example, L.N. Mazur, providing an analysis of the image of a rural family in Soviet cinema of the period under consideration, points to its mythological nature, aimed at achieving the goals of agitation and propaganda of the new state system: “In general, the cinema of the 1920–1930s was a myth-maker, called upon to substantiate and justify the policy of collectivization, to form a positive attitude towards the collective farm system, and to show the role of the Soviet government in resolving the women’s issue” (Mazur 2017: 380).

Of particular importance for our study are film images of children. If we talk about stereotypical ideas about children, then we can distinguish several types in the films of the 1920s and 1930s: street children, little farm labourers, pioneers, children from working and wealthy families, etc. It is clear that the film representation of these images is different, it determines a positive or sharply negative attitude towards film characters. As a rule, stories about the difficult fate of orphans, children who are servants or are raised in families where violence and merciless exploitation reign, end quite positively. Having abandoned old views and being tired of humiliation, they end up in children’s communes or orphanages, join pioneer detachments or the Red Army.

One of the central themes of Soviet feature films of the 1920s and 1930s was the problem of homeless children, children who were orphans or from shelters. For example, the films *How Petyunka Went to Ilyich/Kak Petyun’ka Yezdil k Il’ichu* by M. Doronin, released in 1924, told a story of a child from an orphanage who goes alone to say goodbye to V.I. Lenin in Moscow, or *Mariyka* by A. Lundin (1925), who ends up in a thieves’ den.

Children without families were not necessarily complete orphans, but they are also shown in most films of this period as fully grown and independent people for whom family and parents do not occupy a significant place in life. Here, the conflict with parents (people of the old formation and views) who the children oppose often runs through as the red line. Examples of this theme are the films *Van’ka – a Young Pioneer/Van’ka – YunyuyPioner* by P. Malakhov (1924), *Tal’ka the Innkeeper/Tal’ka Traktirshchitsa* by B. Svyatozarov (1928), which tell a story of children for whom the pioneer organization replaced their family. Having rejected their parents, who live by old ideas and end up with pioneers, the main characters of the films find a new family – a pioneer detachment. As E.A. Artemyeva correctly notes, “the new ideology provokes child film characters to abnormal, completely unchildish behaviour. This inconsistency can be explained not through the

eternal problem of “fathers and sons”, but through the distinction between two concepts – intelligence and wisdom. Intelligence in the most positive sense is now exclusively given to children and teenagers, wisdom with negative connotations (it is from the past) is given to adults. They, the “wise”, that is, burdened with knowledge of the past, including numerous ossified prejudices, must certainly give in to truly “smart” children, right in their decisiveness, youthful audacity, ability to look at the problem with a young and therefore the only correct view. In other words, the problem lies in the dispute between two ideologies – old and new, and not a dispute between two generations” (Artemyeva, 2013: 156).

The families of revolutionaries, fighters for Soviet power, are shown in a completely different way on the Soviet movie screen, where parents and children together embark on the path of struggle against the enemies of the revolution. Examples of such films are *Mother/Mat'* by V. Pudovkin (1926), *Bay of Death/Bukhta Smerti* by A. Room (1926).

Another theme associated with the family in the feature films of the period under consideration is revenge on enemies of the revolution for parents. A striking example here is the leader of the Soviet distribution of the 1920s – the film *The Red Little Devils/Krasnye D'yavolyata* by I. Perestiani. It was released in 1923 and became the leader in terms of audience, especially children. The historian of children's cinema K.K. Paramonova highly appreciated this work of cinematographic art and its role in the development of children's cinema: “*The Red Little Devils* was a work of “new spirit”, new revolutionary aspiration. Everything in this film was a living echo of the revolution, the pathos of the film was generated by the revolutionary struggle of the people. In its style and content, the film largely met the requirements of the future art, and this determined its place in the history of cinema” (Paramonova, 1962: 9). Analysing the phenomenon of the success of this film among viewers of that time, E.V. Brodskaya notes: “*The Little Red Devils* turned out to be extremely successful – partly due to the fact that they were persistently promoted at the box office by the party. *The Little Red Devils*, in fact, were a mixture of ideological clichés and an adventure film. Already at the very beginning of work on the film, the story underwent significant changes – for example, the father of the main characters turned from a revolutionary peasant into a conscious railroad worker, etc.” (Brodskaya, 2021: 77).

5. Conclusion

Our analysis of Russian feature films of the 1920s-early 1930s shows that the main objectives of working with film in those years were forming a new society, where every citizen was devoted to the ideals of the revolution. The most important thing in life for each person was not the traditional values formed in the pre-revolutionary era, but the fight against the remnants of the bourgeois past. For this purpose, active work was launched to introduce children and adults to the culture of the new revolutionary cinema, the ultimate goal of which was to form a communist worldview, the primacy of public interests. Accordingly, pedagogical tasks related to family education faded into the background, giving way to public education, which functions were performed by the state and the Communist Party.

The image of the family in the first Soviet films was not the central theme, and family issues, as well as family education, were considered in the context of the clash of the old bourgeois social order with the new – revolutionary. This conflict can be traced in many plot lines of Soviet feature films. Another plot line of films of this period was compliance with the principles of emerging socialist realism: a change in the fate of the characters, which is accompanied by joining a collective, revising their views, and re-education.

The core principles of creating a good film, including showing a family in it, were mass appeal, accessibility, and compliance with the ruling ideology. It is no coincidence that films by Soviet directors were accompanied by a new style of visual images associated with the revolution and the echoes of the civil war. In the context of depicting a family, this theme is reflected in the plots of films about street children, orphans, people with difficult fates who had to make a hard choice between the old and the new.

The state's increased attention to the family in the 1930s brought a new view of the socialist family, where the dominant values were collectivism, participation in restoring the national economy, the fight against enemies of the revolution, and active public work. By the beginning of the 1930s, there was an increase in state control over child rearing. This trend laid the foundations for communist principles of upbringing, which were preserved for many years both in educational institutions and in the family.

As for family education, this topic was also presented in contrast to old and new views. The former were characterized by a rude attitude towards children and demands for complete obedience, the latter – a friendly life in a collective. Moreover, the collective could not necessarily be a family, often these were state or public organizations.

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