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Published in the USA  
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)  
Issued since 2005.  
ISSN 1994-4160  
E-ISSN 1994-4195  
2025. 21(3): 353-359

DOI: 10.13187/me.2025.3.353  
<https://me.cherkasgu.press>



## Media Studies with University Students Based on Soviet and Russian Drama Films about Family and Family Education

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### Abstract

The study is devoted to media education of university students based on Soviet and Russian drama films about family and family education. The theme of family drama is prominent in Russian cinematography, reflecting our country's deep cultural, historical, and social complexities. This theme is often explored through the lenses of generational conflict, personal versus societal expectations, emotional repression, and the tension between tradition and change. Media education based on critical analysis of Russian family drama films is rather productive as they often explore universal themes, so for students such films provide a foundation for analysing how storytelling conveys human psychology and social transformations. The article contains a list of classroom activities which may help students develop skills in critical analysis, aesthetic interpretation, and cultural contextualization. These activities focus on key media education concepts: media language, media technology, media audience, media category, media representation and media agency. Students should also be involved in creative media production after completing analytical and critical activities. The portrayal of family in Soviet and Russian cinema serves as a mirror to the nation's evolving identity and values. By examining drama films about family, students gain a deep psychological insight into how family, as a fundamental social unit, has been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in the sociocultural context.

**Keywords:** family, family education, media text, media education, drama film, genre, Russia, drama.

### 1. Introduction

The theme of family drama is a central and enduring element in Russian cinematography, reflecting the nation's complex social history, philosophical depth, and emotional intensity. Across both Soviet and post-Soviet periods, family dramas have served as a cinematic microcosm of broader cultural, political, and moral tensions. Through evolving styles – from socialist realism to modernist minimalism – Russian directors have used the family to explore what it means to live, love, and suffer in a society constantly in transition. It is not surprising since Russian cinema's dominance of drama is the result of a unique interplay between historical heritage and cultural traditions. Russian film production has always been influenced by Russia's literary tradition – L. Tolstoy, F. Dostoevsky, A. Chekhov – which is deeply rooted in psychological depth, moral conflict, and tragedy. This influence carries over into cinema, where filmmakers often aim to explore profound existential themes. Moreover, Russian culture values introspection and

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seriousness in art. That is why drama is seen as a more serious genre capable of exploring deep human truths.

Thus, analysing family drama films hones students' abilities to compare literary and cinematic narratives (e.g., A. Chekhov adaptations), interpret symbolism and subtext, often abundant in intimate Russian narratives, draw connections to psychology, sociology, gender studies, and history. Family dramas offer a lens into social values and historical change, so the cultural and historical contexts can enable rich discussions around ideology, generational identity, feminism, patriarchy, and social policy in class.

In our opinion, media education based on critical insight into Russian family drama films is rather productive as family dramas often explore universal themes – love, conflict, generation gap, identity, sacrifice – which resonate across cultures and time periods, so for students these themes offer accessible emotional entry points into complex narratives. They provide a foundation for analysing how storytelling conveys human psychology and social transformations.

## 2. Materials and methods

The material of our research is audiovisual media texts on the topic of family and family education of the drama genre. The main method is a comparative-hermeneutic analysis of Soviet and Russian drama films (1920–2020) devoted to family issues. We also referred to C. Bazalgette's key media concepts theory ([Bazalgette, 2009](#)) when analysing practical media literacy activities for university students. In addition, the following research methods were used: analysis and synthesis of articles and monographs on the topic of the study, generalization and classification.

## 3. Discussion

In our study, we analysed some scientific findings ([Allen, 1999](#); [Antunes, 2017](#); [Basaslan, 2022](#); [Bitney, 2022](#); [Brown, 2013](#); [Callister et al., 2007](#); [Chopra-Gant, 2006](#); [Douglas, Olson, 1995](#); [Edmondson, King, 2016](#); [Fulmer, 2017](#); [Garlen, Sandlin, 2017](#); [Garrison, 2022](#); [Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2013](#); [Levy, 1991](#); [Lloyd, 2014](#); [Norton, 2021](#); [Tanner et al., 2003](#); [Zurcher et al., 2018, 2020](#)) devoted to family and family education in the mirror of Soviet and Russian dramas.

The analysis of the Russian family image in mass media was carried out by V. Mishchenko: "In the crisis of family values, the most important tool for building an effective institution aimed at solving demographic problems is the technology of forming and providing information support for a positive image of the Russian family" ([Mishchenko, 2013: 79](#)).

V. Tyulyunova analysed some film images of young families in contemporary Russian drama films and identified a number of social problems such as deviant motherhood and fatherhood, problems of orphanhood, problems of single-parent families ([Tyulyunova, 2020](#)). She also concludes that modern present-day Russian film family is often shown in a negative or dramatic way.

Media representations of acute and urgent social problems reflected in Russian social dramas were researched by G. Mikhaleva in the context of developing university students' civic culture on the material of Russian social drama films: "difficult" teenagers and teenage cruelty, problems of growing up and relationships of teenagers; homelessness, child orphanhood and problems of children in orphanages; problems of dysfunctional or single-parent families; the generation gap; support and care for the elderly and disabled; homeless and socially vulnerable categories of citizens, risk groups; drug addiction, alcoholism and other socially dangerous phenomena; socialization of people with disabilities ([Mikhaleva, 2021: 184](#)).

Media education opportunities of feature films about family and family education were described by I. Chelysheva: "Feature films have a rich educational potential that must be used and implemented in work with the younger generation and the parent community. Therefore, among the urgent tasks at the present stage is the use of the best traditions of media education and the introduction of innovative methods and forms of work with feature films to form family values of the younger generation" ([Chelysheva, 2024: 59](#)).

The importance of fostering media competence is also emphasized by I. Kairova: "The new image of the family, broadcast through the media, becomes a transformation factor of conventional values inherent in the patriarchal type of family, reducing the importance of the reproduction function, transforming the form of the family; children and adolescents, whose value ideas undergo strong changes under the influence of the media, become suggestible. A way out of this situation may be media literacy, which is a necessary condition for a communicative culture of society" ([Kairova, 1093](#)).

Practical basis for film analysis was laid by some Russian scholars such as Ju. Usov (Usov, 1995), S. Penzin (Penzin, 2005), A. Fedorov (Fedorov, 2007; Fedorov et al., 2018; Fedorov et al., 2019), and G. Polichko (Polichko, 2006).

#### 4. Results

Here are some engaging and academically applicable media studies activities for analysing family drama films, suitable for university-level film or media studies courses. These activities help students develop skills in critical analysis, aesthetic interpretation, and cultural contextualization.

1) *Scene Dissection*. Media concepts: media language and media technology.

Objective: Teach students to analyse mise-en-scène, performance, and narrative tension in a single scene.

Instructions: Choose a pivotal family drama scene (e.g., dinner table confrontation, a farewell, a family secret revealed).

Students are supposed to analyse camera angles and movement, use of space and blocking, sound (diegetic/non-diegetic), lighting and colour, symbolism. Group presentations with freeze-frames and analysis slides are also possible.

2) *Character Psychology Profile*. Media concepts: media language and media representation.

Objective: Deepen students' understanding of character motivation and narrative structure.

Instructions: Assign students to create psychological profiles of key family members in a drama film. Use tools like: backstory construction, A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, conflict mapping (internal versus external).

3) *Film versus Literature Comparison*. Media concepts: language representation and media technology.

Objective: Explore a screen adaptation and intertextuality.

Instructions: Use a feature film adapted from a literary source (e.g., *The Cherry Orchard*, *Anna Karenina*). Students are supposed to analyse the following aspects:

- What are the key similarities and differences between the book and the film? Which scenes, characters, or themes were changed or omitted? Why do you think the filmmakers made these choices? Are any parts of the story rearranged, shortened, or modernised?

- How does the film director interpret the original text's themes, tone, or characters? Is the adaptation traditional (faithful) or radical (modernised or reimagined)?

- How do the actors' performances align with your reading of the characters in the original text?

- Are any characters portrayed differently in the film than in the book (e.g., more sympathetic, more dramatic)? What might these choices say about the director's perspective or the intended audience?

- Are there particular stylistic choices (e.g. cinematography, colour, music) that highlight or alter certain themes?

- Has the setting (time or place) been changed in the film? How do these changes affect the story's impact, themes, or message? What does the film gain or lose by being set in a different context?

- Does the film reference other texts (literary, historical, cinematic)? Are there any visual or verbal allusions to other works of art, culture, or politics? How do these references add meaning or change the way we interpret the story?

- Are the core themes (e.g., love, loss, class, identity) consistent between the film and the text?

- Are any themes emphasized more or less in the film? Why might that be?

- Who was the original text written for, and how does that differ from the film's audience?

- Do you think the film successfully captures the essence of the original text? What does the film offer that the text cannot, and vice versa?

- Would someone unfamiliar with the original understand and appreciate the story fully from the film alone?

- What is lost/gained through visual storytelling? How does the medium influence the emotional tone?

4) *Thematic Roundtable: The Family as Microcosm*. Media concepts: media representation and media language.

Objective: Encourage philosophical and sociological thinking.

Instructions: Students choose a theme from a family drama film (e.g., duty, betrayal, sacrifice, generational trauma). In roundtable or seminar form, they analyse the following aspects:

- How does the film present the family theme?
- How is the theme introduced and developed across the storyline? Does the theme evolve or shift throughout the film? Which characters are most affected by or connected to this theme?
- How do family relationships (e.g., parent-child, siblings, spouses) reflect or complicate this theme?
- Are there characters who challenge or resist the theme?
- How is it reflected in cinematography, dialogue, or conflict?
- What conflicts arise in relation to the theme (e.g., internal versus external)? How are these conflicts resolved – or left unresolved – by the end of the film?
- Are there symbolic objects, settings, or recurring images that reflect this theme? How do visual or cinematic techniques (lighting, camera angles, music, colour) reinforce the theme?
- Are there specific scenes where the visuals speak more loudly than the dialogue?
- What message or emotional impact does this resolution convey?
- What is its cultural relevance in the Soviet, post-Soviet, or global contexts? Does the film reflect a particular time, place, or cultural background that shapes how the theme is portrayed?
- How might different audiences interpret the theme differently?
- Have you encountered this theme in other family dramas or literary works? How is it treated: similarly, or differently? Do you relate to this theme personally or see it reflected in real-life situations?

#### 5) *Timeline of Family Representation in Russian Cinematography.*

Media concepts: media language, media representation and media agency.

Objective: Track how family has been depicted over time in different historical periods in Russian drama films.

Instructions: Students are to research and create a visual timeline (digital or physical) showing key feature films about family and family education, shifts in dominant tone or theme (e.g., from idealism to realism), external influences or factors (e.g., war, economic crisis, political regime change, etc.). Students present the results of their research in classroom.

#### 6) *Genre Hybrid Analysis.* Media concepts: media category and media language.

Objective: Challenge genre assumptions.

Instructions: Choose a family drama that incorporates elements of thriller, horror, comedy, or romance (e.g., *Loveless* as a social thriller). Ask your students to analyse the following aspects:

- How does genre influence the emotional tone of the film?
- How are family issues heightened or subverted by other genres?
- What secondary genre (thriller, horror, comedy, romance) is combined with the family drama? How clearly is this genre visible in the narrative, tone, or visual style? Does the combination feel balanced, or does one genre dominate?
- How does the cross-genre approach deepen the emotional or social themes of the family drama?
- What family issues (e.g., divorce, grief, betrayal, infidelity, trauma, parenting) are addressed, and how are they amplified by the added genre? Are these themes explored in a more subtle or heightened way because of the genre elements?
- How does the added genre affect the tone (e.g., tension from thriller, absurdity from comedy, dread from horror)? Are there tonal shifts throughout the film? How do these impact the viewing experience?
- How are family relationships shaped or distorted by the genre elements? Are there any moments where characters act in unexpected or exaggerated ways due to genre conventions? Do genre elements (like fear, suspense, romance, humour) bring out hidden aspects of the characters?
- What visual or sound elements reflect the genre blend (e.g., eerie lighting for horror, fast pacing for thriller, bright colours for comedy)? Are there specific scenes that showcase genre conventions – such as chase sequences, awkward family dinners, romantic tension, or moments of terror?
- How might the mixed genre affect the way audiences respond emotionally to the story? Does it create discomfort, surprise, empathy, or detachment? Are expectations subverted or fulfilled?
- Does the blending of genres help the film comment on broader social, political, or cultural issues (e.g., class, gender roles, parenting, state institutions)?

– How does the genre-blending version feel different in tone, structure, or message compared to a more traditional family drama?

7) *Analysis of a Film Poster*. Media concepts: media category, technology, representation.

Objective: Develop students' critical skills.

Instructions: Students are asked to analyse a poster of a family drama film they are not likely to have seen. It should be a whole-group discussion. Ask your students to analyse the following aspects:

- What is the title of the film? What does it suggest about the story or genre?
- Is there a tagline (a short phrase or sentence)? What does it tell us about the tone or message of the film?
- Who or what is shown in the poster? What can you infer about the main characters or relationships based on their expressions, poses, or placement?
- What colours are used most? Do the colours create a particular mood (e.g. bright and fun, dark and mysterious)? Is the lighting warm, cool, dramatic, etc.?
- Where does the action seem to take place? What clues are in the background?
- What do you notice about the style of the text (title, tagline, credits)?
- Who do you think the film is aimed at (e.g. young children, whole family, teens)?
- What genre do you think the film belongs to (comedy, drama, melodrama, adventure, children's film, etc.)?
- What techniques are used to make the poster eye-catching?

8) *A Movie Poster/Film Poster Redesign*. Media concepts: media technology and media representation.

Objective: Encourage students' creative production tied to analytical insight.

Instructions: Students are to create a film poster of a famous Russian drama film about family or design a new poster that visually represents a deeper or overlooked theme in the film. Include symbolism, colour theory, and layout design choices.

Reflection: Students prepare a short paper linking their creative choices and preferences to the presented film.

9) *Director's Intent Essay*. Media concepts: media language, and media representation.

Objective: Encourage students' creative production based on critical analysis.

Instructions: Students are supposed to write a short essay or presentation exploring what the filmmaker might be saying about family, society, or generational conflict. They should also take into account the social or cultural setting of the story and how it influences family roles, values, or conflicts.

10) *Microfilm Project: Family in 3 Minutes*. Media concepts: media technology and media representation.

Objective: Encourage students' creative production tied to analytical insight.

Instructions: Students are supposed to write, direct, and shoot a 3-minute short film centered on a family conflict or theme. They must apply the techniques observed in class: framing, natural lighting, tension-building.

Reflection: Students prepare a short paper linking their creative choices to the films studied.

This list of creative and critical activities for studying a family drama film provide for a balance of analytical depth with imaginative expression, helping students engage with the film's narrative, characters, themes, and cinematic techniques.

## 5. Conclusion

The portrayal of family in Soviet and Russian cinema serves as a mirror to the nation's evolving identity and values. From the idealized, state-sanctioned family models of the Soviet era to the multifaceted and often troubled families depicted in post-Soviet films, these cinematic narratives offer a window into the complexities of familial relationships and their role in shaping and reflecting societal norms. By examining these feature films, students gain a deep psychological insight into how family, as a fundamental social unit, has been constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in the cultural context, providing a rich tapestry of stories that continue to resonate with audiences today.

## 6. Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the grant of the Russian Science Foundation (RSF, project No. 24-28-00032) at the Rostov State University of Economics. Project theme: "The image of family and



family upbringing in Russian feature films and prospects for media education (1920-2020)". Head of the project is I.V. Chelysheva.

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