The Shadows of Russian: Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema as Course and Discourse

ABSTRACT

The present work addresses the problem of the conceptual content of “Soviet” / “Russian” cinema phenomena in terms of teaching visual anthropology (the course of Russian cinema in the didactics of RFL). The objectives of the study were determined by the practice of a distinct juxtaposition of meanings when they use named adjectives as applied to cultural objects of different historical stages, in particular to films. The hypothesis that the boundaries of Russianness and Sovietism can be partly determined through cultural stereotypes and the values that are accumulated in the form of concepts and are subsequently reflected in linguistic and cultural phenomena was verified by analyzing the contact of specific discourses of individual films from the “golden fund” of the Soviet and post-Soviet period. We used general philological methods of transformational analysis, contextual and conceptual analysis, as well as a private method of intertextual analysis to test the hypothesis and solve the tasks, involving the analysis of meanings associated with the concepts put in the title. The research revealed that the verbal and non-verbal signs presented on the screen regularly appeal to the content of the cultural discourse, the elements of which are dynamically developed, transcoded and supplemented, complicating the discursive content for the representative of Russian identity outside the era (Soviet ↔ Russian). They also studied the cases of the “Russian” cultural code interpretation in cinema, identified with a fundamentally different cultural specificity, appealing to the emotional memory of native speakers of another language, as well as culturally significant stereotypes and frames outside the Russian language consciousness (Russian - non-Russian).

Key words: film studies, cinema studies, soviet cinema, post-soviet cinema, film discourse, Russian as foreign language

Introduction

At first glance, it does not seem problematic to differentiate the adjectives “Soviet” and “Russian” semantically not only for a Russian specialist, but also for a foreigner who has mastered the Russian language sufficient enough to solve the practical problems of social and business interaction (B1 (Threshold Level)).

Thus, the use of the adjective “Russian” is appropriate with the words that are related to language and culture, while “Russian” and “Soviet” are associated with specific historical periods in the development of a multinational state, as well as with the dominant ideology of the era. It should be noted that the adjectives “Russian” are the basic representatives of the concept of “Russianness” (Glebova, 2017), their interchangeability is especially evident when translated into most foreign languages (their deep mixing is especially evident in the English language, where “Russian” defined as “historical (in general use) national of the former Soviet Union” (Russian, 2019), as well as in the German language (Russisch, 2015)).

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Besides, the adjectives “Soviet” and “Russian” are mixed cognitively in everyday speech by the meaning “located in Russia” and / or “related to the Russian way of life, culture” as the result of a metonymic transfer of one of the republic name within the USSR (so, “Russia” is defined as “Russia was a constituent republic of the USSR called the Russian Republic since 1922 to 1991”, at the same time “2. the USSR — a common usage despite the fact that the USSR included other republics besides Russia” (Russia, 2019)).

The authors of this work tried to solve the problem of the concept “Russian cinema” clarification, combining (especially in foreign languages, but also in the ordinary speech of Russian speakers) related works of cinema of the Soviet and Russian period chronologically, ideologically, and aesthetically. The practical goal of such a study is seen in working out these concepts during the Russian language lessons with foreigners studying the language in the context of culture; a clear distinction in terms of the content of these linguistic and cultural signs becomes the subject of a critical rethinking in the field of linguistic and cultural studies (Beumers, 2012), however, it is not often brought into the problem field of didactic research (Mitfakhova & Yapparova, 2018).

Recognizing the modern significance of the anthropological approach to cinema as the fact of “meeting the observer and the observed object” (Chiozzi, 2012), in the framework of this work we turn to the substantial potential of Soviet and Russian films (“The world is somehow fixed in the movie” (Yampolsky, 2011)) and, above all, to the cognitive capabilities of the visual, similar to the “black hole in the heart of a verbal culture” (Mitchell, 1995).

An important observation in the framework of our work is the fact that the film used as an educational material at the RFL lesson is a complex, creative whole, combining a number of semiotic systems (video sequence, audio sequence, verbalized and non-verbal characters, precedent signals, proper cinematic techniques and etc.), the elements of which are presented congruently. The process of perception and interpretation of cultural and speech phenomena directed by the representatives of other cultures and controlled within the framework of the lesson should not exclude the establishment of “shades” of Russianness (Russianness / Sovietism), which can be partially determined through cultural stereotypes and values that are accumulated in the film production. This work fills some research and methodological niche and shows the possibilities of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of cinema in the format of a culturological paradigm.

**Methods**

The vector of our research interest was determined, on the one hand, by the degree to which the problem of film text and the methods of its interpretation were developed, and, on the other hand, by the hypothesis that the cultural informativeness and attractiveness of films affect the communicative and cognitive behavior of recipients, the formation of perceptual readiness and the modification of personal thesaurus.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the work was composed of philosophical and methodological principles for cultural space study (Lotman, 1973; Tynyanov, 1977). Based on the fundamental principles of cultural studies, aesthetics, semiotics, as well as information theory and text theory, the principles of diachronic and synchronous analysis were used as basic tools. The empirical basis of the study was theoretical work in film science, critical works of directors, screenwriters and other “co-authors” of a creatively new language and vision of reality. Methodological priorities were defined in terms of the currently emerging paradigm of modern humanitarian knowledge, which finds its expression in empirical aesthetics, information theory, communication theory, etc.

To develop the author’s toolkit for film text study and to conduct the experimental (audience) part of the research, we relied on general philological methods of transformational analysis, contextual and conceptual analysis, as well as a particular method of intertextual analysis. Thus, the study of the discursive saturation of the message, verification of the visual series and text, along with the observation method and / or phenomenological analysis, made it possible to draw key conclusions of the study in line with the provisions of linguo-culturology and the methodology of interdisciplinary research.

We developed the testing (2011-2019) of the training course for foreigners on working with film texts (for understanding the audited material and possession of a complex of communicatively significant structures of the native Russian speaker's speech behavior beyond the narrow language criteria) allowed us to identify a specific and multi-level structure of film communication, including verbal-visual and non-verbal-visual units requiring interpretation in discourse. The methodology of comprehensive classroom work included the pre-cinematic level of phenomenon understanding (design, the history of creation and the cultural and historical context of the film), the cinematic level (analysis and interpretation of film images and the cultural text of the film) and the post-cinematic stage (the significance of the film content during its modern creation). Such phased work allows you to pass from a picture plot understanding (through observation and analysis) to the visual range verification (determination of documentary and fictitious) and discursive analysis of dialogs (in order to identify the general semantic orientation of the picture).
Results And Discussion

The hypothesis of this study was to identify the content and place of Russian and Soviet cinema phenomenon in the modern open educational space using an interdisciplinary approach (Bochina et al., 2017). The results of context studies in the stated aspect, as well as approbation data (2011-2012 - the Institute of Slavistics of the University of Giessen named after J. Liebig, 2012, the Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication of KFU, 2016-2018 - the Institute of Slavistics at the University of Regensburg) proved the potential of cinema language as the means of intercultural communication, which allows to study Russian as a foreign language within the framework of programs, to form the skills of the received cultural (artistic) experience interpretation taking into account the content of intra-cultural (Russian / Soviet) discourse.

Scenarios have been developed for classroom and independent work, which allow us to consider cinema as an open communicative system with the potential for impact (fiction code) and interaction (self-referential system). A model of thematic work with pairs of films (Soviet-Russian) is proposed, which provides for interferences between topics ("Thaw" - "Girls", "Girls" - "Superfluous Men", "From St. Petersburg to Moscow" - "Superfluous Men"), the access to an interdisciplinary level (interaction with other forms of art, the work with historical and sociological sources).

The developed “pair” model is designed for thematic courses with 24-32 hours of class work (and approximately 32 hours of independent work) and includes 4 pairs of films united by the themes reflecting culturally significant phenomena of Russian life: “Thaw”, “From St. Petersburg to Moscow”, “Girls”, “Superfluous Men”. The names of topics are obviously predominant in Russian culture, which supports the author’s concept.

The methods for working with the most significant verbal units of films (from assignments for intonation and listening to those requiring vocabulary or conceptual explanation of words, concepts, and expressions), as well as the mechanisms for cinema semiotics visual aspect verbalization (also as the means of intercultural communication, which have been identified and substantively worked out) i.e. focused on the accuracy and adequacy of the phenomenon nomination within a specific language environment), which, of course, is aimed at finding the methods for foreign language study effectiveness increase.

In the course of the study, the methodology for cinema material selection was improved. The material was submitted taking into account the acquired competencies of the students and also provides work on decoding and objectifying perception, including the conversion of cultural objects into a sign (verbal) system, modification of the personal thesaurus, and intercultural communication development. So, the sphere of “attraction” includes the paintings from the “golden fund” of Soviet and Russian cinema, containing simultaneously stereotypically recognizable signs (for example, the Moscow of the 60-ies in “Walking the Streets of Moscow” (director G. Danelia, 1963), “Moscow does not believe in tears” (director V. Menshov, 1980)) and not those who work on the author’s content of the statement, deepening the meaning of the film (memory of the main character Kolya about the children lost in the war in “Walking...”, the formula of “family happiness”, ridiculed by the main character Linda in “Moscow does not believe in Tears”), as well as allowing access to the level of typological correlation (for example, the war in the recollections of the father or the orphanage in replicas of Tosi from the movie “Girls” (director Yur. Chulyukin, 1961) or the formula for “family happiness” contained in the same film, but pronounced without irony by the heroine Katya, etc.).

They created the author’s experimental set of educational materials “AS in the movie” and “The Reserve: to see with your own eyes”. The results obtained were used in teaching the Russian Cinema course using feature films as authentic means of communication for students studying Russian as a foreign language in the main / additional educational programs of universities, which significantly increased students’ competencies in the field of cinema language and social communicative epiphenomena.

Conclusions

Based primarily on the data of linguistic and phenomenological analysis of a number of key films of Soviet and Russian cinema, we can conclude that there are possible alternative strategies for working with films at RFL lessons, since understanding the language layer of the picture (audio skill, mastery of the lexical and grammatical base) does not exhaust, and often does not fully reflect the content of the picture, the author’s directorial position and, most importantly, the significant cultural dominants encoded in this text. So, the issues of stereotypical perception of non-artistic reality in culture remain outside the scope: for example, the characters of the film “Piter FM” (directed by O. Bychkova, 2006) do not wander along tourist routes (which are inevitably connected with St. Petersburg for foreigners), but an outwardly hostile, almost mystically confusing environment that interferes with their meeting, thus reproducing the image of Petersburg of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Bely existing in the culture. Besides, the motive for “non-visits” appeals to the fabulous “trials” of the protagonist. Thus, the gender content imposed by the melodramatic genre of the romantic comedy directed by Oksana Bychkova does not exhaust the entire semantic potential of the picture, limiting perception and narrowing the possibilities for idea expansion about the cultural phenomenon, which ultimately restrains both cognitive and communicative processes in learning.
Turning to the effectiveness of authentic film use, most authors appeal to the implementation of visualization principle in the presentation of the studied phenomena, however, it should be recognized that the visualization of cinema art is not universal in the case of interaction with the cinema discourse of a foreign student, since fluent visual acquaintance often does not provide a sufficient and adequate picture of phenomenon, often being an optional audiovisual sign. For example, the alienation of the protagonists of the film “Elena” was emphasized many times by the inclusion of an extensive number of details (food preferences, transportation, the content of everyday life, media tastes, etc.), they are included in the context of the picture using different codes (visual, auditory, verbal). The film “Girls”, full of speech stamps of Soviet reality, however, contains the signs of an authentic language environment, appealing to the system of values in Russian society (cooperation, blurring of personal boundaries, ingenuity, etc.).

Obviously, orientation in the sociocultural markers of the authentic linguistic environment and the sociocultural characteristics of phenomena allows us to realize personal cognitive and informational needs in a different cultural and linguistic environment. As for working with the cinema discourse of “Russian cinema”, which reconstructs the basic values of Russian culture in the scenery of Soviet and post-Soviet reality, it seems promising to work on a consistent and interconnected interpretation of characters from different semiotic systems (video, audio, verbalized characters), complicating the perception of the production picture, bringing its content to a deeper level of generalization (Restamovna & Albertovna, 2015). Thus, the initial contrast between Soviet and Russian (by the time of creation, first of all) cinema can be overcome through background knowledge and idea expansion about the forms and methods of their reception and reconstruction in screen art.

Conclusions

The most important of the conclusions that can be drawn in the course of this work is the following: Russian cinema as a complex (stylistically and ideologically heterogeneous) element of the media and cultural space in the practice of RFL makes it possible to realize the potential of an interdisciplinary approach most effectively and fully in the field of co-learning a language and culture against the backdrop of dynamic conceptual paradigms in understanding the cultural and historical basis of the studied language country. It should be taken into account that fictitious film text, producing a new discourse, is brought to the level of cultural experience of society (Tomaselli, 1996), in the form reproduced and directly presented by the academic situation. In the modern system of language education, the goals of foreign language teaching are postulated by the idea of communicative competence development (Igor et al., 2018), in which the sociocultural competence acts as a fundamental component (Safonova. 2014), which is formed as a set of skills understanding and interpreting the cultural system as a complex aggregation in which everything is interconnected and interdependent.

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Authors Contribution

The study was prepared by two authors:
Aigul Restamovna Salakhova - performed conceptualization, methodology,
Ekaterina Vyacheslovna Sergeeva - performed the conclusion and structuring of the text

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