

Cultural Studies**Культурология**

UDC 13

**The Ideological, Structural Analysis of the Russian Image Representation
in the Cold War Times' Film 'White Nights'**

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Abstract. This article included the ideological, structural analysis of the Russian image representation in the "cold war" times' film 'White nights' (USA, 1985). Following the methodology developed by U. Eco the author selected three *systems* which are significant in a product: the author's ideology, market conditions which determined the plot, the creating process and success of media text (or, at least, promoted the first, the second and the third); narrative techniques, ideological and social trends, stereotypes.

Keywords: cold war; Western films; screen; image of Russia; USA; ideological confrontation; media studies; film studies; enemy.

Introduction. The modern society is characterized by a variability of norms, damage of traditions, social mobility, fragility of all standards and principles, — in other words, people in such a society are constantly under information pressure, sometimes even powerful information attacks which require continuous reorganization of perception, continuous adaptation of mind and continuous re-training of intellect (Eco, 2005, pp. 199-200). Perhaps, for this very reason the audience more strongly strives for media texts of the past what explains the increasing demand of such TV channels as "Nostalgia", "RetroTV" and the like. It is paradoxical, but the audience of these channels does not consist only of elderly people who willingly review the films of their youth but partially of young people too for whom such films become, per se, a premiere. Moreover, retro TV channels, as a rule, show again and again mainly entertaining, "genre", "consumer" media texts which were often disapproved of by ideologically engaged critics in the time of their creation...

But, I agree with U.Eco: isn't it natural that even a quite educated person while relaxing and resting (both useful and indispensable) wants to take pleasure in the luxury of infantile laziness and refers to 'consumer goods' in order to find rest in a redundancy orgy? Should we approach the problem from this point of view, — and we are already inclined to treat the 'distracting entertainments' more indulgently... and to blame ourselves for applying acrid moralism (seasoned with philosophy) to what is actually innocent and, maybe, even beneficial. But the problem appears in a different light - if the pleasure derived from redundancy turns from a means of rest, from a pause in the intense pace of the intellectual life caused by information perception into *'the norm'* of the whole imagination activity (Eco, 2005, p. 200).

I also agree with U. Eco that any study of work structures becomes *ipso facto* a development of certain historical and sociological hypotheses — even if the researcher does not realize that or does not want to. And it is better to be aware of the fact in order to correct as far as possible the perspective distortions created by the chosen approach, and to derive the maximum advantage from the distortions that cannot be corrected. ... If a person realizes these basic principles of the scientific method the description of product structures turns out to be one of the most advantageous methods of finding the links between a product and its socio-historical context (Eco, 2005, p. 208).

T. Hackford's film "White Nights" as a case-study

Let me take T. Hackford's film *White Nights* (the USA, 1985) as a case-study of the ideological and socio-cultural analysis: though it was released at the height of a new round of the *Cold War*, it is still in demand on video/DVD and it is regularly shown on world TV screens. It will

enable us to trace not only the socio-historical context of the time when the media text was created but also to define its structure, plot, representativeness, ethics; also the peculiarities of genre modification, iconography, characters.

Following the methodology developed by U. Eco we shall select three *systems* which are significant in a product: the author's ideology, market conditions which determined the plot, the writing process and success of a book (or, at least, promoted the first, the second and the third); narrative techniques (Eco, 2005, p. 209). This approach, in my opinion, fully comports with the method of media text analysis suggested by C. Bazalgette (Bazalgette, 1995) which is based on such key concepts of media education as *media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations, media audiences*; since all these concepts are closely related to ideological, market and structural-content aspects of media production analysis.

The authors' ideology in the socio-cultural context (dominant concepts: media agencies, media representations, media audiences).

Here we should mention that under 'authors' we mean the main film creators – script writers J. Goldman, E. Hughes, film director Taylor Hackford and cameraman D. Watkin. They conceived and created the film in the epoch of active political confrontation between the USA and the USSR (see Table of key political events in the Appendix) which got aggravated with the beginning of the Afghani war, actions of the Polish 'Solidarity' movement crushed by the imposition of martial law, with the new arms race escalation (the so-called *Star Wars*) and President R. Reagan's accession to power. To crown it all, on September 1, 1983 a Soviet fighter shot down a passenger aircraft of the South Korean airline which had crossed the USSR border. Thereby, the film *White Nights* released in 1985 became a telling illustration in the ideological meaning of the legendary thesis of R.Reagan about the USSR as '*the Evil Empire*'.

Actually, the USSR is shown in the film as a grim, gloomy country where even majestic St. Petersburg looks like a hostile trap city. The miserable main characters are tortured by furious KGB agents - tireless fighters against Freedom and Democracy...

The market conditions which facilitated the plot, creation and success of the media text (dominant concepts: media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media audiences)

The western media market of the 1980s quite often turned to the Russian topic – approximately 80 films about Russia/USSR and with Russian/Soviet characters were shot (half of them were made in the USA) from 1980 to 1985. Not all of them were a success with spectators; therefore it might be supposed that the studios were guided not only by commercial interest but also by political motives. Anyway, *White Nights* became a box-office hit due to the ideological tension, a skillful genre synthesis of a melodrama, a musical and a thriller, and also thanks to the involvement of well-known emigrant dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov starring in the film.

At first *Colambia* allowed the film to be shown in a limited number of cinemas of the USA and Canada where *White Nights* collected almost half a million dollars during the first weekend. During its *Big Weekend* on December 6-8, 1985 the film was shown simultaneously in 891 cinemas and its box-office receipts were 4,5 million dollars (it was the 3rd place on the weekend box-office receipts top list of Northern America). In total, *White Nights* collected 42 million dollars during the first year of its exhibition in the USA and Canada (it was the 17th place in American charts of 1985) leaving behind such famous action films as *Commando* (\$35 million), *Silverado* (\$32 million), and *Young Sherlock Holmes* (\$20 million) which were also showing in cinemas at that period (<http://www2.boxofficemojo.com>).

Thus, the authors of the film achieved their main goal – tangible success with viewers caused not only by a felicitous synthesis of genres, excellent music and choreography, all-star cast (M. Baryshnikov, H. Mirren, I. Rosselini, G. Hines), but also by skillful usage of the ideological anti-Soviet conjuncture.

The structure and narrative techniques in the media text (dominant concepts: media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations)

In our opinion, the film *White Nights* is founded on simple dichotomies: 1) the hostile and aggressive Soviet world and the democratic world of the West; 2) positive characters (emigrant

dancer Rodchenko) and villains (KGB agents); 3) yearning for freedom and independence (Rodchenko) and conformism (ballerina Ivanova); 4) plot and effect.

In outline, the structure, plot, representativeness, ethics, the peculiarities of genre modification, iconography, and characters can be represented in the following way:

Historical period, scene: *the USSR of the mid-1980s.*

Setting, household objects: *an air liner compartment, urban streets, living rooms, theatre, rehearsal halls. Ascetic living conditions in the USSR.*

Representation of reality: *pointedly favorable in relation to positive characters, especially towards famous ballet dancer Rodchenko; unambiguous grotesque in relation to the characters connected with KGB.*

Characters, their values, clothing, constitution, lexicon, mime, and gestures: *former soloist of the Soviet ballet, and nowadays American citizen Rodchenko and his former sweetheart – Ivanova, the first Soviet ballet dancer. They are of a different ideological, social and material status. The characters are dressed in training or ballet costumes. Both the characters are well-built. Their speech is plain. The mime and gestures are emotional and artistic. The KGB colonel – a brutal, harsh, cruel character ‘standing guard over the USSR national security’ acts as a foil to them.*

Significant change in the characters’ life: *1985. Emigrant Rodchenko quite unexpectedly appears on the Soviet territory and gets caught in KGB meshes as a result of the forced landing of a plane. The Soviet special services send Ivanova to Rodchenko: her task is to coax him into remaining in the USSR.*

Incipient problem: *the difference in their ideological views prevents the former lovers from finding a common language.*

Search for solutions to the problem: *unruly memories and feelings make Ivanova take a decision to help Rodchenko to run to the West through the Soviet-Finnish border.*

Problem solution: *Rodchenko manages to return to the West from the USSR.*

A. Silverblatt, an influential American scholar and media teacher (Silverblatt, 2001, pp. 80-81) developed a set of questions for media text critical analysis in a historical, cultural and structural context. Let us apply them to the analysis of *White Nights*:

A. Historical context.

1. *What does a media text tell about the time of its creation?*

a) *When did the premier of this media text take place?*

The premier of the film occurred in November-December of 1985 in the USA.

b) *How did the events of that time affect the media text?*

The aggravation of the confrontation between the USA and the USSR of 1979-1984 connected with the war in Afghanistan, political events in Poland, had an obvious impact on the media text. The world resonance of condemnation of the USSR after a Soviet fighter had brought down the South Korean passenger plane on September 1st, 1983 apparently provided the impulse for the plot development.

c) *How does the media text comment on the events of the day?*

The authors’ treatment of events is in many respects under the influence of the *Cold War* stereotypes – it concerns the relations and personalities of the characters, images, etc. Russia/SSSR appears on the screen as a gloomy totalitarian country reigned by malicious KGB agents who torcher ordinary people...

2. *Does the knowledge of the historic events contribute to the media text understanding?*

a) *media texts created during a certain historic event:*

- *What events occurred when the media text was being created?*

The film was being made in 1984 when a new round of the *Cold War* between the USSR and the USA was at its height – there was a protracted war in Afghanistan. R. Reagan was the USA serving president who *played hardball* with the USSR. In February, 1984 the leader of the USSR of that time – Y. Andropov died of a serious malady; he was a hard-line supporter in relation to the USA. Then K. Chernenko, a terminally ill person, came into power: he ordered to boycott the Olympic Games in Los Angeles and lodged a protest against the American military program ‘Star Wars’. However, after K. Chernenko's death in March, 1985 liberal-minded M. Gorbachev became the leader of the USSR. He restarted arms negotiations on March 12 of the same year in Geneva.

But by that time the shooting of the film *White Nights* was already over, and the beginning of the *warming* in the *Cold War* could not affect the general conception of the film.

- *How does the understanding of these events contribute to our understanding of the media text?*

Naturally, the understanding of the historico-political context helps to better understand both the peculiarities of the film's plot and its ideology. It may be very difficult for a person who is unaware of the historico-political context of the early 1980s to understand why the image of Russia/USSR is created in this particular way.

- *What are genuine historical allusions?*

Among real historical allusions one can mention the following: the dramatic events of September 1, 1983; KGB functions as a ramified apparatus for suppression of dissent in the USSR; real facts of the so-called dissidents' flight from the USSR (including M. Baryshnikov starring in *White Nights*); V. Vysotsky's status as a symbol of creative non-conformism...

- *Are there any historical references in the media text?*

The film is not based on real facts, the historical references are circumstantial, and the treatment of events contains a certain degree of grotesque, though all the above-mentioned political trends are revealed in the film.

- *How does the understanding of these historical references affect our understanding of the media text?*

Undoubtedly, the understanding of historical references ensures better perception of *White Nights* as a certain symbol of the ideological confrontation between the USA and the USSR.

B. Cultural Context

1. Media and popular culture: how does the media text reflect, strengthen, suggest or create cultural: a) relations, b) values, c) conduct, d) concern; e) myths.

Logically reflecting a negative stereotyped attitude of the West to Russia T. Hackford's film creates an image of a hostile, aggressive, militarized and economically backward totalitarian Russia – with a frigid climate, poor population deprived of civil rights and ruled by malicious, cruel, perfidious communists/special services. There is no place for democracy and human rights, freedom of expression and creativity here...

2. Outlook: what world is shown in the media text?

a) What is the culture of this world?

Generally speaking, the image of Russia/USSR in *White Nights* represents the 'Evil Empire'. This empire does not negate Culture but aims to bring it under control of the totalitarian Ideology.

- *People?*

People in this world are divided into three basic groups: 'evil forces' (administration, KGB agents, military men and so forth), 'suffering conformists' (the majority of ordinary people including those who belong to the world of culture, arts) and 'non-conformists' (outstanding ballet dancer Rodchenko played by M. Baryshnikov) – they are in minority, they are few and far between...

- *Ideology?*

The communist totalitarian ideology dominates in this world, and everyone is forced to obey it even if one does not approve of it...

b) What do we know about the people who belong to this world?

- *are the characters shown in a stereotyped manner?*

In general, the characters of *White Nights* are represented in a stereotyped manner without special undertones (especially it concerns villains), however the talents of outstanding dancers M. Baryshnikov and G. Hines enable them to 'tell' of the emotional-psychological experiences of the characters through choreographic etudes. Moreover, at the beginning of the film M. Baryshnikov gives a brilliant performance of a solo ballet part in which the authors' conception of the film is reflected in an allegorical form.

- *What does this representation tell us about the cultural stereotype of this group?*

The representation is based on the following cultural stereotype: the USSR is a totalitarian country flooded with KGB agents (whose leisure-time activity is drinking vodka) with gloomy, dark cities, official-looking interiors and people's clothes, communist ideology domination and with suffering ordinary people...

c) What outlook does this world represent - optimistic or pessimistic?

The authors of *White Nights* create a pessimistic image of the USSR; their optimism reveals itself only in giving the main character a chance of escaping from KGB clutches alive and intact...

- *Are the characters of the media text happy?*

At last, there are no happy characters in *White Nights*, each of them suffers anyhow (even the furious brutal KGB colonel played by J. Skolimowski is unhappy in his way as he failed to prevent Rodchenko from running to the West).

- *do the characters of the media text have a chance of being happy?*

The authors of *White Nights* make it clear that one can be happy only OUTSIDE *the Evil Empire*...

d) *Are the characters able to direct their own fates?*

Here the American pragmatism shows up – the absolute confidence that a person can control his fate if he does want to. Conformists (Ivanova) remain prisoners of the *Evil Empire*. Non-conformists (outstanding ballet dancer Rodchenko) are capable of changing their fate even under the most unfavorable circumstances for the better...

e) *What is the hierarchy of values in this outlook?*

- *what values can be found in the media text?*

According to the authors' conception the principal values in the world are freedom and democracy.

- *what values do the characters embody?*

Prominent ballet dancer Rodchenko is a symbol of Russian non-conformist yearning for freedom and democracy. The most vivid episode indicating it is M. Baryshnikov's choreographic etude to V. Vysotsky's song 'Fastidious Horses'. But the KGB colonel (J. Skolimowski) is not a less bright character of the totalitarian regime suppressing the human personality.

- *what values prevail in the end?*

The end of the film when M. Baryshnikov manages to run away from KGB agents through the Soviet-Finnish border can be considered as a triumph (local, of course) of the democratic values of the Western world, their attractiveness for positive representatives of the Russian nation.

- *what does it mean to be a success in this world? How does a person succeed in this world? What behavior is rewarded in the world?*

According to the authors' conception only an 'ideologically staunch' personality who is an obedient and conscientious worker of the totalitarian regime can succeed in the USSR.

It should be noted that A. Silverblatt's methodology corresponds to basic approaches of the hermeneutic analysis of the audiovisual, space-and-time structure of media texts. It needs to be reminded that the *hermeneutic analysis of cultural context* is a process research of media text interpretation, cultural, historical factors which influence the viewpoint of the agency/author of a media text. The hermeneutic analysis consists in comprehending a media text through correlation with the cultural tradition and reality; penetration into the logic of a media text; a media text analysis through comparison of artistic images in the historical and cultural contexts. Thus, the object of analysis is the media system and its operation in the society, relationship with man, media languages and their usage.

Let us remember the dynamics of the space-and-time audiovisual image of one of the culminating episodes of *White Nights*.

...The protagonist – emigrant dancer Nikolay Rodchenko as fate has willed meets his former partner and lover ballerina Ivanova. They are standing on the stage. The house is empty, the hall is scarcely alight. Nikolay is speaking about conformism, about intellectuals who have sufficient courage only for listening to Vysotsky's *sedition* songs. And as for him, he is suffocating in the dead air. He needs Freedom – freedom of spirit, creation, life... Then Nikolay begins to dance to a tape recording of Vladimir Vysotsky's song 'Fastidious Horses'. The camera zooms in on Ivanova's face, tears suddenly flushing her eyes.

Rodchenko's dance is built on twists, jerks, attempts to overcome difficulties, dangers, counteractions. Thus following the disquieting, impulsive Vysotsky's music and verses he is dancing as if on the brink of a precipice. The character puts all his anguish into the dance which he felt after his separation from the motherland, because of slander, lies, human envy and malice...

In this episode the authors skillfully use choreography which metaphorically reflects the psychological condition of the character, his mental turmoil, breakdown, yearning for freedom by all means. And V.Vysotsky's song is not a random choice. Vysotsky did not wish to become an

emigrant (though he had many opportunities for it). However, the authorities failed to make him a time-server, an obedient seeker of official awards and honours ... Vysotsky's fate and Rodchenko's destiny serve as a reproach to outstanding ballet dancer Ivanova. After all, she preferred a silent and obedient life, thus having betrayed true freedom...

But that is not the only reason why the heroine cries. The point is that she used to be in love with Rodchenko. And it was difficult for her to put up with the fact that he had chosen freedom in America and actually sacrificed his love for her. That is why the conflict between one's yearning for freedom, independence and an abyss of falsehood and conformism is tinged here with the drama of irretrievable losses, loss of love... Though Ivanova is not dancing in the episode, her movements as well as Rodchenko's ones have their own musical plastic rhythm. Rodchenko's motions are a desperate, hysterical vortex of incoercible energy whereas Ivanova's movements are a sad melody of a love romance...

Certainly, it is important not to *pick out* the so-called *expressive means* from the context of a whole product while analyzing an audiovisual media text but to attempt to reconstruct more or less a complete picture of your own feelings and impressions, show the interrelationship of psychological states of characters, conflicts, dialogues, etc. with the artistic, musical solutions, with composition tasks and the whole image structure of a media text.

In particular, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that the authors of *White Nights* create a tense, controversial atmosphere of the action by using purely visual, light-and-shade means: in the twilight of the empty hall a luminous flux highlights the dancer's figure and his whole dance is built on color contrasts (black, yellow, white) and light-darkness opposition...

There is so much energy, force, obstinacy in the frantic dance of Rodchenko that it gives one a feeling that he is able to escape from any pitfall of fate. It would seem that all the signs point to hopelessness and absence of any prospect: Rodchenko is in tenacious clutches of special services, his fair one preferred to surrender... From the window one can see ominous silhouettes of guards... The hero's hands are in close-up, clenching into fists... His whole figure is strained for a violent leap... And here the camera gives a feeling of his flight... Rodchenko seems to be hovering over the stage in a gorgeous leap...

Approximately in this manner one can practice an analytical *reconstruction* of the media representation of the seen and heard flow of sound and visual images including the light and color solution, mise-en-scène, actors' plastic movements and mime, usage of certain details. Thus, one should describe not only the psychological and emotional but also the audiovisual, space-and-time content of an artistic image in the given episode, its culmination, when the authors endeavor to express their feelings and thoughts concerning the purpose of human life, the price of independence, origins of creation, freedom which come to man through his overcoming of both outward Evil and his own pusillanimity.

It is also interesting to see the development of the audiovisual, space-and-time image dynamics (including a metaphorical nature of the choreographic composition to Vysotsky's music). Besides, a specific plot of *White Nights* (the main characters are actors, dancers, and the action for the greater part takes place in the theatre) makes you consider the interrelation between a media text and music, choreography, theatre. For instance, lack of montage and system of frames, camera movements in a performance (though there are some common features such as dialogues, a character's costume, music, and choreography) would most likely lead to intensified actors' mime, to verbal complement of dialogues, to bright and contrasting effects of lighting which would enable the producer to impart his creative concept to the audience...

Conclusions. Thus there appear associative relations between the screen and the viewers' experience (life and aesthetic). The emotional empathy with characters and the authors of a media text initially develops on the basis of intuitive, subconscious perception of the audiovisual, space-and-time artistic image dynamics of an episode. It is followed by the process of analysis and synthesis – reflection on the meaning of frames, angles, shots, etc.; their generalization and combination, contemplation of different interpretations, and expression of one's personal attitude...

As a result, contrary to the initially conceived concept of the Russian image, the image created in T. Hackford's film *White Nights* does not exactly fit in the stereotypic ideological framework of the *Evil Empire*. There are also talented, affectionate, suffering people in this country who strive for creative self-expression, who can resist conformism...

In other words, from more or less a linear interpretation of the initial narrative scheme we proceed to an associative, polyphonic one. The events, characters' personalities, the artistic and musical solutions are perceived all-in-one.

However, one should not forget that one and the same media text can provoke a variety of interpretations from different audiences. This fact confirms the correctness of U. Eco's statement: the text aimed at quite definite reactions from some definite circle of readers (children, fans of *soap operas*, doctors, law-abiding citizens, representatives of youth subcultures, Presbyterians, farmers, middle-upper class women, scuba divers, effete snobs, or representatives of any other imaginable socio-psychological category) who are actually open to various 'incorrect' decoding variants (Eco, 2005, p. 19). So, it would be improper to insist on one's own interpretation as the only correct treatment of any media text.

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Filmography

White Nights. USA, 1985. Director Taylor Hackford. Screenwriters: James Goldman, Eric Hughes. Actors: Mikhail Baryshnikov, Gregory Hines, Isabella Rossellini, Jerzy Skolimowski, Helen Mirren, Geraldine Page, etc.

УДК 13

Идеологический, структурный анализ образа России в фильме эпохи «холодной войны» «Белые ночи»

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Аннотация. В данной статье дается идеологический, структурный анализ трактовки образа России в фильме эпохи "холодной войны" «Белые ночи» (США, 1985). В соответствии с методологией, разработанной У. Эко, автор в своем анализе основывается на трех факторах, имеющих значение для анализа: идеология, рыночные условия, которые повлияли на процесс написания и успех медиатекста (или, по крайней мере, способствовали первому, второму и третьему); техника повествования, социальные тенденции, стереотипы.

Ключевые слова: холодная война; западные фильмы; экран; образ России; США; идеологической конфронтации; медийные исследования; враг.