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## The Image of the USSR as a Sports Power in Contemporary Russian Audiovisual Media Texts

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### Abstract

The main focus of the research is the cinematic representation of the USSR in modern Russia. The texts under study are Russian feature films and TV series of the last decade, 2010–2020. The relevance of the stated topic is due to the increasing interest in the era of the USSR, including the interpretation of historical facts and their emotional assessment, which form a system of social expectations and thereby directly determine the assessment of the experienced present and the desired future. The film narrative is considered as an integral structure – a set of linguistic and iconic messages. The conclusions are made about the specific myths defining cinematic representations of Soviet sports in modern films.

Films about sports, which are extremely popular, are aimed at the mass audience. Audiovisual texts on sports topics are an effective tool for strengthening and promoting various social myths, and the images of athletes and their coaches are the basis of these myths.

Representation of Soviet sports in modern films is modeled by the following myths: the Soviet athlete is a patriot, a man of the people; the Soviet coach is tough, but fair, uncompromising when it comes to the interests of the team or players; a professional, an innovator, often an outstanding athlete in the past; athletes and coaches usually have to resist the villain embodied by the party/state official, and succeed in competitions despite the efforts of the latter; the opposing team are professionals, however often unfair practice and unsportsmanlike behavior is featured; the triumph of Soviet sport is achieved despite the shortcomings of Soviet society.

Through modern film texts as a metalanguage, the transformation of the traditional myth and the establishment of new cultural codes of Soviet existence takes place. That is, modern cinema does not feature, but constructs the parameters of the social and cultural life of the society of the USSR era. The authors of audiovisual media texts offer the viewer up-to-date codes of personal and group feelings, often contradictory or overly exaggerated. We assume that such a perspective of the study will allow us to expand the idea of Soviet ideology as a mythological system, which is relevant in modern cultural studies, the theory of mass communication and linguistics, first of all, about the mechanisms of its formation and translation to the masses.

**Keywords:** media, media text, feature film, media image, semiotic analysis, the USSR, Soviet sport.

### 1. Introduction

Over time, the memory of the Soviet Union is fading away, while overgrows with myths and simplified interpretations. It is cinema that plays a critical role in the mythologization of the image

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of the USSR at the present stage, being one of the dominant phenomena influencing socio-cultural processes in society. On the one hand, a film, as a social product and a text, reflects social realities and renders a certain cultural code, on the other, as a social technology, it models and shapes the historical memory.

Russian and foreign media space of the last century has accumulated a very contradictory picture of the Soviet period: media texts either paint a predominantly positive, socially prosperous picture of the USSR or, on the contrary, create a terrible image of a totalitarian state with overwhelming numbers of repressed citizens held in camps, the rampaging party elite and the ubiquitous KGB. It is difficult for the growing young generation to comprehend such multi-polar judgments of the USSR era, therefore it seems important to analyze the image of the Soviet Union in media texts after 2000.

The objective of the research is to analyze the image of the USSR, namely, the iconic and linguistic signs as means of reconstruction of the Soviet period in Russian media texts of the period 2010-2020. The relevance of the stated topic is due to the increasing interest in the era of the USSR, including the interpretation of historical facts and their emotional assessment, which form a system of social expectations and thereby directly determine the assessment of the experienced present and the desired future.

The reality is reflected in the cinema and television screen as in a mirror. This well-known metaphor in relation to the cinema is still often used by both Russian and foreign researchers (Mai, Winter, 2006; Zhabsky, 2010). Experts state “the transition of modern cinema from the principle of representation to preferential simulation”, the principle of modeling reality (Khudyakova, 2000), which makes it possible to re-define historical memory by means of mass media. The communicative potential of cinema as a means of manipulation and propaganda is used in the interests of the state in order to develop the national identity, for example, the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation provides support to producers of patriotic content. It can be assumed that this factor explains the many feature films and TV series are dedicated to outstanding athletes (*Legend No. 17*, 2013; *Lev Yashin. The Goalkeeper of my Dreams*, 2019; *Idol*, 2019; *Streltsov*, 2020), honored artists/musicians (*These Eyes Opposite Me*, 2015; *Magomayev*, 2020; *Vertinsky*, 2021), scientists (*The Sky is Measured in Miles*, 2019; *Kalashnikov*, 2020), etc. In addition, cinematographers today are making attempts to reconstruct the tragic events of the Soviet past, for example, the events in Novocherkassk in 1962 (*Dear Comrades*, 2020). At the same time, it should be noted that the film, marked as “based on a true story” (or biopic), assumes rendering facts consistent with history, thereby making the audiences believe the model of the historical past presented to them. “A film's narrative is a crucial part of its appeal. Prior familiarity with the story to be found in the film can be an added attraction for audiences” (Crosson, 2013: 13).

## 2. Materials and methods

The subject of this research is screen representations of the world of Soviet sports in Russian feature films of the period 2010-2021.

In the course of the study, we relied on the main provisions of the semiotic theory of cinema by Y. Lotman, U. Eco, R. Barthes. The semiotic analysis was used as the main method, which involves the study of cultural phenomena as a sign system that allows us to learn the socio-historical world in which we live. Semiotics defines the established ways of thinking. “In the world of signs ... semiotics reveals ... the world of ideologies reflected in the established ways of using language” (Eco, 1985). Semiotic analysis makes it possible to detect structures of meanings actualized at the level of combinations of words, actions that form images, which, in turn, are combined into a movie. The film narrative is considered as an integral structure – a set of linguistic and iconic messages.

## 3. Discussion

Presently, the Soviet past occupies a quite significant place: its attributes may be found at various levels of everyday life: the national anthem; national holidays of the Soviet period, for example, May 1; some brands that use the reference to the “Soviet” quality as a marketing tool, for example, *Alyonka* chocolate, *48 kopecks* ice cream, fast food chain “Back to the USSR”, etc. One of the main characteristics of modern Russia is its “Sovietness” (Pivovarov, 2014). Meanwhile, according to sociologists, the mass Russian consciousness perceives and interprets the Soviet period mainly as a “golden era” (Barash, 2017: 126). In the extrapolation of images of the Soviet

past into the present, the positive feelings, created due to the mythologization of historical facts, dominate (Sikevich, 2014: 199). The growing popularity of the USSR is noted not only among Russians who grew up in the Soviet period but also among young people, i.e. the age group that is not a carrier of the “living memory” of the USSR. Forbes magazine identifies 20 signs of a “return to the USSR” as a desire to correct “the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (Forbes, 2014). However, this is a disputable point, as the cultural studies researcher V. Kurennoy argues that “it is impossible today to talk about the revival of the Soviet way of life because it has not disappeared” (Cit. by Voloshina, 2016). Without going into polemics about the differences between the modern lifestyle and that of the Soviet period, we note the genuine interest of cinematographers in the era of the USSR, including Soviet sports, which makes it possible to analyze the current codes of their personal and group feelings of the era in question, often contradictory and exaggerated, on the material of audiovisual texts.

We agree that “at present, the scope of the study of cinema is expanding again, researchers are not limited to studying film only as the “seventh art” represented by the “tenth Muse”, or a mass medium” (Chernysheva, 2001). Cinema is a technology for the development of social relations; it is capable of instilling, framing, as well as imposing certain patterns and models of behavior, norms, and values, which determines the relevance of empirical research of this process. Cinema works with artistic images that can successfully complement or replace the real ones that make up the historical memory of an event. Considering that one of the functions of cinema is mythological, we can say that cinema can be an effective means of forming and shaping historical memory. The discussion suggests that “in the symbolic mode the cinematic image is a projection of our imagination in its desire to produce meaning as a type of resistance to image totality” (Strukov, 2016: 254).

As for the research of film representations of the USSR, it should be noted that researchers are interested in both individual periods and thematic aspects of the existence of the Soviet country. For example, the topic of the Soviet school in Russian cinema is considered in detail in the monograph “School and University in the mirror of Soviet, Russian and Western audiovisual media texts” and articles (Fedorov et al., 2017; Fedorov et al., 2018; Fedorov et al., 2020). It presents the results of the comparative hermeneutic analysis of audiovisual media texts related to this topic (including stereotype analysis, ideological analysis, identification analysis, iconographic analysis, plot analysis, character analysis, etc.), anthropological and gender analysis. The essay “The Romance with Stagnation” by M. Brashinsky is dedicated to the era of the 1970s. The essay examines the period of stagnation through the prism of a surge of interest in the 1970s at the end of the 20th century. The author analyzes the 70s in the USSR and the U.S.A. as an image in the minds of directors of the end of the last century, which had been built on the materials of the cinema of the 70s, and was expressed in films of the late 20th century (Brashinsky, 1999). Everyday life in Soviet feature films of the 1950s-1960s is analyzed by N.V. Glebkina (Glebkina, 2010).

The most relevant to our study is the analysis of the transformation of the country’s image on the Western screen, mainly on the American screen, conducted by A. Fedorov. The scientist analyzes the cinematic stereotypes of feature films of various genres related to Soviet/Russian themes and Soviet/Russian characters, made and shown in the cinemas/or broadcast on television screens of Western countries, including Germany in 1946-2014, i.e. during the existence of the USSR and after its collapse. As the main plot schemes of Western films of the period 1992–2015, affecting the era of the Soviet Union, the author highlights the crimes of Soviet power in the period from 1917 to 1991: totalitarian dictatorship, concentration camps, military aggression against other countries, espionage, etc. (Fedorov, 2015).

The work of N.D. Ligostaeva is also of interest. The researcher analyzes the cinematic images of athletes of the Soviet and post-Soviet times, typologizes the film representations of sports in the Soviet and post-Soviet time-space, highlighting the totalitarian canonical hero of the era of socialist realism, the existential humanist hero of the period of the “thaw” and the era of Brezhnev’s “stagnation”, the hero of the “changes” of the turn of the XX-XXI centuries and the neo-canonical hero of the modern age (Ligostaeva, 2021).

There is no doubt that the film language has become one of the most popular metalanguages reflecting Soviet mass culture, partly because it meets all the communicative principles of the myth. The mythologization of Soviet mass culture is based on mythological, folklore, and historical images and plots formed in the past. Within the framework of this study, the myth is considered as a special

communicative system that forms and translates a certain set of values through the cinematic image of the Soviet Union as a sports power in modern audiovisual media texts of this subject.

#### 4. Results

The image of the USSR as a sports power consists of many components: the Soviet coach staff, outstanding athletes and their fans, sports officials and foreign competitors, as well as ideas about the everyday life of ordinary Soviet citizens. For greater credibility, some film directors, for example, N. Lebedev (*Legend No. 17*, 2013), K. Kondrashova (*Hockey Games*, 2012), insert black-and-white documentary sequences from the archives of the TV program *Soviet Sport* and other Soviet sports chronicle.

##### *The image of a Soviet athlete*

The image of a “cultural hero” was central to Soviet cinema (Tirakhova, 2020). Based on the material of our research, such a hero is a Soviet athlete who has all the necessary qualities of a hero including outstanding skills, strong character, ability to overcome difficulties and fight the enemy. The main function of the hero is to protect his native land and people from the enemy. The image of the enemy within the framework of Soviet reality is represented by capitalist countries, and sports grounds and arenas become the battlefield. Through modern film texts as a meta-language, the transformation of the traditional myth and the establishment of new cultural codes of Soviet existence takes place.

All the analyzed films are built around the central figures of an outstanding athlete and his mentor. A Soviet athlete is primarily a patriot, devoted to his country and his sports club. So, in response to the proposal of the president of the royal club Real Madrid to move to a foreign team, the film hero Lev Yashin replies: “Real” is, of course, good, but I’m used to Dynamo” (*Lev Yashin: the Goalkeeper of my Dreams*, 2019).

Coach A. Tarasov’s words to a hockey player V. Kharlamov are filled with the spirit of patriotism: ‘Defend the gate as your child, as a Homeland. You are a Soviet athlete!’ or “I need steel people, steel muscles that are stronger than Canadians”. The student did not let the teacher down. The Soviet hockey player replies to the NHL coach when he wanted to lure Kharlamov to his team: “A great offer, I always wanted to kick your ass”. “The whole country will look at you like at Gagarin. Don’t let me down!” – Tarasov admonished his student, accompanying him to the decisive match with the Canadians (*Legend No. 17*, 2013).

An athlete character in modern media texts about sports in the USSR is the embodiment of the “Soviet dream”, a sports celebrity, a man of the people. The character development of an athlete begins in childhood, in common Soviet families, often in communal flats, in courtyards. Parents are simple workers. The film football player V. Gusko’s father left the family, mother worked in the factory, he had one pair of trousers for the whole year (*Idol*, 2019). A young football player E. Streltsov’s mother toils away in three shifts so that her son makes his way in life. She sincerely rejoices that his son “is being taken to Moscow, to the Torpedo. What happiness! He’ll get a salary and a ration, and a free uniform. Now it will be easier” (*Streltsov*, 2020). Young film characters, as a rule, are supported by family and parents. V. Fetisov’s parents saved money to give him the first skates on his birthday. E. Streltsov’s mother defends her son in front of neighbors who are complaining about the noise of constant kicking the ball in the yard. There are exceptions though. Thus, the goalkeeper L. Yashin’s parents did not approve at first. “You’re an empty shell, Levka”, his father nags. “Is it a real job for a man?” – his mother is indignant. For a Soviet guy, the most approved road in life is the road to the factory, not to the stadium (*Lev Yashin. The Goalkeeper of my Dreams*, 2019).

The path of a Soviet athlete in films is always thorny, involves not only exhausting physical exertion but also moral overcoming oneself and circumstances almost beyond belief: V. Kharlamov (*Legend No. 17*, 2012) and V. Fetisov (*Slava Fetisov*, 2014) get seriously injured without hope of continuing their sports career; E. Streltsov returns to big football after imprisonment (*Streltsov*, 2020; *V sozvezdii Streltsa/In the constellation of Streltsov*, 2015). Often the relationship of an athlete with a coach is complicated. A. Tarasov and V. Kharlamov had particularly tough tension. Tarasov A.: “Do you hate me? That’s right! I don’t need clunkers”. When V. Kharlamov breaks his leg in a car accident, both team members and fans consolidate around to support him. For example, the factory workers make special exercise machines for him, but the main motivating message comes from the coach: “You’ll cope with it or you won’t – it’s up to you, and you only,

Kharlamov" (*Legend No. 17*, 2013). The film director shows in detail all the titanic work and willpower that the athlete had to apply in order to prove the right to be a Soviet hockey player.

The Soviet athlete plays for the honor of the club, the country, and for fans' joy. "I enjoy playing football. I just like it. But when other people like the way I play too, that's happiness," a football player E. Streltsov shares his thoughts with a teammate (*In the constellation of Streltsov*, 2015). Goalkeeper A. Khomich is equally sensitive to the fans. "When you start playing for the national team," he instructs his trainee, the future star goalkeeper L. Yashin, "the main thing is to remember, you are coming out for a reason ..., the country, people are behind you, and their life is not all honey... Try not to upset them" (*Lev Yashin. The Goalkeeper of my Dreams*, 2019).

#### *The image of a Soviet coach*

The athlete's life is directly connected to the coach and, as a rule, is defined by him. The image of the Soviet coach in the analyzed audiovisual media texts consists of a number of myths. Thus, the myth of the hero coach is actualized in the image of A. Tarasov, who for the sake of sporting victories does not compromise with his conscience, even at the request of the officials. He did not agree to the offer to draw with the Czechs for political gain, saying: "I am a Soviet man, a communist. I won't make any deals with anyone. I'm setting up the team only to win. I'm a hockey player, not a general. I did not send troops to Prague, it is not my responsibility". He was a tough coach, even cruel sometimes, he believed that a hockey player should be a "steel machine" in order to win (*Hockey Games*, 2012).

The Soviet coach is distinguished by absolute faith in his athletes: "I brought up a national team that is able to win against any opponent," says A. Tarasov in the sports committee, clearly realizing that in case of loss, officials "will get it good", and the coach's "head will roll" (*Legend No. 17*, 2013). The coach of the USSR national football team, whom athletes affectionately call "granddad", is ready to sacrifice his own career for the success of the country: "The one who wants to deprive our national team of the best football player has gone crazy" (*Streltsov*, 2020). The coach of the national basketball team gives the money intended for the operation of his son to player A. Belov, who needs urgent expensive treatment (Garanzhin in *Dvizhenie Vverkh/ Going Vertical*, 2017).

The Soviet coach is an innovator, develops and masters new techniques of the game, is not too proud to learn from the opponent (Garanzhin in *Going Vertical*, V. Bobrov and A. Tarasov in *Slava Fetisov, Legend No. 17*, etc.)

The Soviet professional coach, an outstanding player in the past, is represented in the character of the coach of the national hockey team V. Bobrov, who was a brilliant player not only in hockey, but also in football, a favorite of the political party elite. The party's general secretary L. Brezhnev said about V. Bobrov: "Chaliapin of Russian football, Gagarin of pucks in Russia" (*Hockey Games*, 2012). "Bobrov's twist", "Bobrov's feint", "Bobrov's goal" – in Soviet hockey, these were well-established collocations.

In his film *Legend No. 17*, director N. Lebedev demonstrates a "healthy" rivalry between coaches on the example of the relationship between Tarasov and Bobrov. The coaches of the Soviet national team are worthy adversaries, but not enemies. The confrontation affected the methods of training of Soviet athletes: A. Tarasov advocated tactics and team play, while V. Bobrov played for himself for fun, not focusing on the team. A. Tarasov: "I want the team, collective hockey, and V. Bobrov plays only for himself". Preaching the principles of collective hockey day after day, Tarasov turned the figure of the coach into the main one, and during his coaching life, no one tried to doubt the primacy of this. Bobrov, on the other hand, was convinced that it was necessary to play according to a simple tactical scheme: "the puck should have been given to him, Bobrov, and he, Bobrov, would sort it out". Tarasov saw tomorrow's hockey and the day after tomorrow, Bobrov – today's hockey (*Hockey Games*, 2012). However, both coaches equally understood the essence of educating a Soviet athlete, namely, a "national hero", "the best of the best", because no athlete with the letters "USSR" written on his jersey, no team called the "USSR national team" had the right to lose and thereby damage the image of Soviet sports, and hence the country.

With L. Brezhnev coming to power and the emergence of tough resistance with the West, the "struggle for power" was transferred to sports grounds, and the responsibility fell on the shoulders of the Soviet coach not only for the defeat in the game but also for undermining the authority of the state. As L. Brezhnev said, "The country has no right to lose to the enemy even on ice" (*Hockey Games*, 2012).

### *Communist party/state officials' representation*

Modern films demonstrate the constant confrontation between the coaching staff, athletes, and the officials. The latter directly depends on athletes' success: the victory of an athlete is the triumph of an official and vice versa: Postnikov – football player Streltsov; Tereshchenko – coach Garanzhin; Mishurin – goalkeeper Yashin; Balashov – coach Tarasov, etc. The explanation for this phenomenon is worded in the TV series *In the Constellation of Streltsov* (2015) by the coach: “It was in ancient Rome that winners could not be judged, but here both winners and losers have to justify themselves, and witnesses, if necessary, too...”

The official in the analyzed films is always a negative character, a mean, deceitful coward, a conformist. The only exception is the image of the chairman of the USSR Basketball Federation Grigory Moiseev, a friend of coach Garanzhin, who decides to support the coach and the team in their desire to “win” the US national team, contrary to the official version of “not to lose”, refusing the match due to objective reasons (*Going Vertical*, 2017).

Whistleblowing as a characteristic feature of the Soviet era is reflected in almost all analyzed films. “Half of the country writes denunciations in our country” (*Going Vertical*, 2017). “In this world, all people somehow survive, make compromises,” the KGB investigator blackmails the musician-informer. The latter pays for his “freedom” which means “playing and singing what I want”, for example, jazz, by working for the KGB (*Idol*, 2019). The representative of the central committee of the party E.M. Balashov, dissatisfied with the method of A. Tarasov's challenging training, unsuccessfully tries to put pressure on V. Kharlamov: “The time of the Stalinists is over, we need to end this cruelty of A. Tarasov. You should report it” (*Legend No. 17*, 2013).

In the film *Slava Fetisov* (2014), the protagonist also falls under the pressure of the Soviet bureaucracy but tries to fight it. In 1989, V. Fetisov received an offer to play in the USA in the NHL. The offer was made by the Soviet leadership in order to make money on the athlete, the contract conditions were ridiculous – 90 % of the profits went to the USSR sports committee, and 10 % to the athlete. To V. Fetisov's objections, the official answers: “We do not have the right to breed millionaires in the USSR, you must not earn more than our ambassador”. However, coach V.V. Tikhonov did not let the legendary hockey player sign the contract: “If we let go one player, everyone will run away”.

In the analyzed audiovisual texts, the images of the state leaders are presented grotesquely, simplistically, without details and semitones, which makes it easy to recognize historical figures, due to formulaic phrases and expressions, for example, N.S. Khrushchev: “We do not need illiterate athletes. First, teach him as a builder of communism, and then we'll see” (*Streltsov*, 2020) or “What do you think, I'm the premier figure skating? People, you know, have nowhere to live, and nothing to eat, and you tell me all about your figure skating” (*Hockey Games*, 2012). Many experts, including the writer A. Nilin, in his interview on *Echo of Moscow Radio*, noted that Khrushchev understood little about sports and his rash decisions often harmed its development in the country (*Dear...*, 2010).

The absolute majority of sports officials are portrayed negatively in films – are accused by film creators of putting sand in the wheels. Thus, V. Menshov in the role of party worker Balashov, who oversees the USSR national hockey team, encourages the team in his own way: “Dignity is critical. If you lose, then only with a decent score. This is an order from Moscow” (*Legend No. 17*, 2012). However, the legendary basketball player, coach S. Belov in his autobiography claims that “any Soviet national team under any circumstances was aimed only at winning... In the USSR, the political leadership has always set up sports officials and coaches exclusively for the highest result” (*Belov*, 2011). The film authors, building the opposition to the state party apparatus of the Soviet Union – against the Soviet sport, define artistic objectives, but at the same time model the corresponding negative attitude of the modern viewer to the era of the USSR.

### *Social relations*

The basis of social relations of the Soviet period is a mythologized consciousness, which manifests itself in a clear distinction between the “our circle”, i.e., all the Soviet things and out of the league - “a circle of strangers, enemies”, i.e., the “decaying West”, – this juxtaposition determines the vector of the characters' behavior. For example, the speech form of realization of this opposition is the frequent use of pronouns “we” vs. “them” (*Samarina*, 2006). The words of one of the representatives of the Soviet party apparatus before the match with the Czechs illustrate this idea: “*They* poke *us* in the face with an Afghanistan, and *we* have to show that we are not only good at weapons.” Here is another explicatory example with the pronoun “our”, which reflects the

true nature of relations between countries. Canadian coach says to his athletes after the loss to the Soviet national team: “Wake up, guys! This is not hockey now, this is war. This is *our* ice. This is *our* country!” There are also often linguistic units with a positive or negative judgment, forming either an image of “a hero” or an image of an “enemy”. For example, the words of A. Tarasov before the match with the Canadians: “The whole world should know that our country is the best in the world and Soviet hockey is invincible”. Or “Canadians greeted Soviet hockey players on the highest level, in order to show all the chic of a decaying society” (*Legend No. 17*, 2013).

The image of “us” is formed by both verbal and iconic signs. For example, in the film series *Slava Fetisov*, the director demonstrates many symbols of the Soviet era, including flags of the USSR, busts of V.I. Lenin, the anthem of the USSR and frozen tears of athletes, black-and-white televisions, the board game “Hockey”, which Soviet athletes play in a hotel in Canada. All this symbolism helps the viewer to immerse himself in the era of the USSR, experience it.

The “friend/foe” dichotomy also manifests itself in relation to foreigners. The following dialogue between two ordinary young men, in a hurry to watch a hockey match on TV, may seem bewildering:

- Ours are playing against Germans (Note: in Russian: “nemtzi”).
- What Germans? They're playing against the Czechs.
- What's the difference; they are all Germans (*Slava Fetisov*, 2014).

In ancient Russia, indeed, all foreigners were called Germans, but not in the USSR. As S.F. Ter-Minasova notes, “In the Old Russian language, all foreigners were called by the word “nemetz”. The root of the word *nemetz* is *nem*, i.e. mute, that is, a *nemetz* is a mute who cannot speak (who does not know our language). The definition of a foreigner, therefore, was based on his inability to speak his native language, in this case Russian, inability to express himself verbally” (Ter-Minasova, 2000: 20). Originally the word “nemetz” applied to all foreigners, not only Germans. But since Germans made up the majority among the foreigners coming to Russia, they became “nemtzi”. Nevertheless, it is not clear why Soviet men at the end of the XXth century use this outdated term.

In the same archaic way of labeling the foreigners as being “all the same”, “common” American guys playing street basketball perceive the Soviet visitors:

- How do you distinguish them? They all look the same.
- This one looks like a Spaniard, this one looks like an Irishman, but they are called the Russians (*Going Vertical*, 2017).

As the researchers note, “sports in the USSR is maybe, if not in the full sense, a social lift, which is still conditional in the Soviet state, but, in any case, an accessible way to achieve prominence, fame, glory” (Kalendarova, 2018: 18). The change of the honorary status of a factory worker to the status of a Soviet athlete assumed certain material benefits not available to an ordinary Soviet person, for example, a player of the Torpedo team is entitled to “2 coats, a raincoat, a weekend suit, a tie, shoes (2 pairs), winter boots, since the player does not represent himself, but the Torpedo team – the team of the plant named after Stalin, a 10000 employee workforce”. A member of the USSR national team has a personal car of the Pobeda brand - an absolute indicator of success and prosperity (*In the Constellation of Streltsov*, 2015).

The rhetoric of a modern film about a bygone era is often an attempt to explain the realities of today. Cinematographers “paint” images that should clearly fit into the whole envisaged picture, though not always correspond to historical reality. On the one hand, a feature film, as a work of fiction, does not imply absolute historical truth; on the other hand, the mass audience does perceive such films as an interpretation of actual history.

Thus, the problems of the current relations between Russia and the Baltic states can be traced rooted back to the distant past. A Lithuanian athlete, a member of the Soviet Union Olympic basketball team, demonstrates conflict behavior in the film, each time contrasting himself with all team members: “You never understand us”, the Lithuanian bitterly reproaches, “you Russians always get across. You don't like the way we sing; don't like the way we live... Why are you bugging us? Why are we bothering you all? ... It's stuffy with you here, I want to get free” (*Going Vertical*, 2017). After watching the film, one clearly realizes that Soviet Lithuania was never actually Soviet, it was always looking the other way, or rather the Western way. This interpretation generally does not cause objections, since “dislike, to put it mildly, for Russians has a centuries-old history”, explains the eminent film director N.S. Mikhalkov in one of his programs *Besogon TV*. He supports this statement with the reference to the appeal of the Grand Duke of Lithuania and Polish King

Sigismund II August to Queen Elizabeth in 1568: “We see that Muscovite, this enemy is not only temporary but also the hereditary enemy of all free peoples ...” (Mikhalkov, 2021).

In the author's program, historical references confirm the author's thoughts, while in the feature film, the image of the Lithuanian athlete can be considered as an instrument of purposeful construction of the viewer's attitude to the depicted era, with the help of which the “Russophobia” of today is explained to the current generation of viewers, the aggressive foreign policy of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia towards Russia. However Modestas Paulauskas, the prototype of the film character, was neither anti-Soviet, nor Russophobic, he was not preparing to flee the USSR, and after completing his sports career, he coached schoolchildren in the Kaliningrad region and in his native Lithuania. Currently, he lives in the Lithuanian town of Šakiai. In his interview, the athlete gave a positive assessment of the film, noting the successful fictional episodes that adorned the picture: “this is a work of fiction, not a documentary. The authors have the right to fiction, and, as the film showed, it worked” (Volokhov, 2018).

It should be noted that the idea of high sports achievements, in the meaning of personal and team leadership, does not contradict the Soviet idea of collectivism as a whole, according to which, on the one hand, being in a team means “being like everyone else”, not standing out, not demonstrating an opinion different from the majority, corresponding to the understanding of values, moral and immoral of Soviet people (Popova, 2019). On the other hand, being part of a collective means having its power and strength capable of resisting meanness and injustice. So, in the football drama *Streltsov* (2020), the Torpedo team amicably votes first for “giving a chance to a friend”, an alcoholic goalkeeper, then, under pressure from an official, unanimously votes for his exclusion from the team, thereby demonstrating absolute lack of will.

A few days later, the same team supports a new player who establishes himself at the decisive moment of the match, helps him get out of a dangerous situation provoked by a rival player. Having kicked out the scoundrel, the collective restores justice. A striking example of collective strength is the climactic scene of the decisive match when Streltsov is removed from the field. In response to the bewilderment of the Brazilian player, why the best player is not released on the field, and the captain of the USSR national team replies: “This is politics”. Football fans literally wreck the stadium, demanding Streltsov on the field. The outraged official suggests using the army and water cannons to stop the unacceptable behavior of fans. He is genuinely perplexed by such a form of expression of the desire of the team of fans: “our people are quiet and do not stick out”. But according to the author's idea, justice triumphs in the film through the sarcastic image of the country's leader L. Brezhnev. After official Postnikov argues that “Streltsov was in prison. He is the wrong football player”, Brezhnev sends the official into exile: “to engage in agriculture somewhere in Turkmenistan,” because “the will of the people, the desires of the people – they must be reckoned with!”

The main difference between modern film representations about Soviet sports from those made in the USSR is that modern cinematographers glorify the outstanding achievements of Soviet sports, obtained despite the shortcomings of Soviet society, thanks to the incredible efforts of opposition and resistance to bureaucratic arbitrariness and the Soviet system of public administration. While the films that had appeared on the screen in the Soviet Union were aimed “at creating the “right” priorities for a Soviet person in the field of work and sports-leisure. At the same time, the demonstration of the advantages of the Soviet system is realized through the final triumph of Soviet sports,” for example, on the football field (Kalendarova, 2018). Thus, the myth of the “benefactor state” of the USSR period (Popova, 2019) is replaced by the myth of the villain state, represented by party and sports officials, and even the heads of the Soviet state.

#### *The representation of the rival*

The image of the rival team refers in the first place to a global ideological confrontation with the Western world. Sport is not only a demonstration of strength and dexterity, “sport in the USSR is politics”, a newspaper editor reflects, therefore ideologically significant articles are needed to cover the World Cup (*Idol*, 2019). L.I. Brezhnev bans the game with professionals, stating that “the country has no right to lose to the enemy even on ice”. Since then, Soviet hockey has become a bargaining chip in political chess with other states. The Soviet general addresses the coach: “Hockey is not only a sport but also politics. After the entry of our troops into Prague (1967), we have no right to make mistakes” (*Hockey Games*, 2012).

The opponents are, of course, professional athletes, however, they differ from Soviet sportsmen in the fact that they use unsporting behaviour (throw a dirty check, hit, kick, etc.).

In modern films, a stereotypical image of an American athlete is presented, contemptuously chewing gum and demonstrating confidence in his superiority (a basketball player in *Going Vertical*, 2017; a hockey player in *Legend No. 17*, 2013). The main strategic principle of the Americans is the desire to make the contender play by their rules. Americans have adhered to this principle not only in sports, but also in foreign policy, trying to impose their own course on the USSR, later Russia, and when they encounter resistance, are sincerely surprised by this.

The mythological binary opposition “hero-enemy” is especially emotionally vivid (Khrenov, 2015). Thus, the “enemy” represented by a defeated Canadian hockey player recognizes the victory and superiority of the “hero”- the Soviet athlete: “I wish I had your speed and talent”. The “hero”, in turn, shows generosity, answering: “I wish I had your height and strength” (*Legend No. 17*, 2013).

The climax of most of the analyzed films is the scene of the final decisive match, which, according to the genre's laws, keeps the viewer in suspense until the very last minute and ends with the victory of Soviet athletes and the triumph of Soviet sports.

## 5. Conclusion

Films about sports, which are extremely popular, are aimed at the mass audience. Audiovisual texts on sports topics are an effective tool for strengthening and promoting various social myths, and the images of athletes and their coaches are the basis of these myths.

Representation of Soviet sports in modern films is modeled by the following myths:

- the Soviet athlete is a patriot, a man of the people;
- the Soviet coach is tough, but fair, uncompromising when it comes to the interests of the team or players; a professional, an innovator, often an outstanding athlete in the past;
- athletes and coaches usually have to resist the villain embodied by the party/state official, and succeed in competitions despite the efforts of the latter;
- the opposing team are professionals, however often unfair practice and unsportsmanlike behavior is featured;
- the triumph of Soviet sport is achieved despite the shortcomings of Soviet society.

Through modern film texts as a metalanguage, the transformation of the traditional myth and the establishment of new cultural codes of Soviet existence takes place. That is, modern cinema does not feature, but constructs the parameters of the social and cultural life of the society of the USSR era. The authors of audiovisual media texts offer the viewer up-to-date codes of personal and group feelings, often contradictory or overly exaggerated. We assume that such a perspective of the study will allow us to expand the idea of Soviet ideology as a mythological system, which is relevant in modern cultural studies, the theory of mass communication and linguistics, first of all, about the mechanisms of its formation and translation to the masses.

## Filmography

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*Idol*, film series, drama, 2019. Directed by V. Balkashinov.

*In the Constellation of Streltsov*, film series, drama, 2015. Directed by R. Gapanyuk.

*Going Vertical*, drama, 2017. Directed by A. Megerdichev.

*Legend №17*, drama, 2013. Directed by N. Lebedev.

*Lev Yashin. The Goalkeeper of my Dreams*, drama, 2019. Directed by V. Chiginskii.

*Slava Fetisov*, film series, drama, 2014. Directed by A. Azarov.

*Streltsov*, drama, 2020. Directed by I. Uchitel.

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