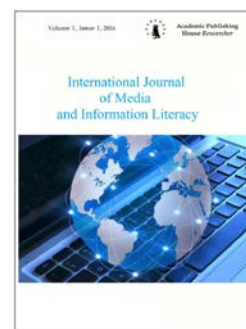


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Leviathan and Sunstroke: Opinions of the Russian Film Critics

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Abstract

Modern media criticism as a whole based on the hermeneutic approach to the analysis of the media and media products relying on such key concepts as media agencies, media / media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences, because they all have a direct bearing on the ideological market and structural and substantive aspects of the analysis of media and media texts. It is interesting to see how these approaches are implemented in concrete works of Russian film criticism concerning, for example, the two most controversial films of the last seasons: *Sunstroke* (2014) by Nikita Mikhalkov and *Leviathan* (2014) by Andrei Zvyagintsev.

The key questions of *Sunstroke* are: What kind of Russia we lost? How and why it happened? And the key questions of *Leviathan* are: What kind of Russia we gained? And why is this? The author of this article analyzed around 60 reviews of Russian critics' community (mainly of the leading, most active and visible). They were (very) roughly divided into two groups: texts from the authors of liberal wing, and texts from the authors of the conservative wing.

The main conclusion: *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*, in fact, has become an indicator of the political stratification of Russian film criticism: in many cases, films were analyzed, first of all, not as a works of art, but as social and ideological messages. However, this is not surprising, because of the bundle of Russian film critics' community. However, the Russian mass audience as a whole is much more conservative than media criticism community. And, of course which is more focused on entertainment component of media culture (and the lack of interest of the vast audience in serious problems eloquently showed modest box-offices of *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*).

Keywords: film criticism, media criticism, Russia, cinema, movie, film, Leviathan, Sunstroke.

1. Introduction

Modern media criticism as a whole based on the hermeneutic approach to the analysis of the media and media products (Bazalgette, 1995; Fedorov, 2010; 2012; Eco, 2005: 209; Silverblatt, 2001: 80-81) relying on such key concepts as media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences, because they all have a direct bearing on the ideological market and structural and substantive aspects of the analysis of media and media texts (Eco, 2005: 209).

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I think interesting to see how these approaches are implemented in concrete works of Russian film criticism concerning, for example, the two most controversial films of the last seasons: *Sunstroke* (2014) by Nikita Mikhalkov and *Leviathan* (2014) by Andrei Zvyagintsev.

The key questions of *Sunstroke* are: What kind of Russia we lost? How, and why it happened? And the key questions of *Leviathan* are: What kind of Russia we gained? And why is this?

2. Materials and methods

The main sources for writing this article became the materials of the journal and Internet publications. The study used the basic methods: the problem and situational, systemic and the comparative method. The use of these methods allows to reproduce assessment approach to the problem of the film studies. Comparative method defines the difference in views on actual Russian film criticism situation. I analyzed around 60 reviews of Russian critics' community (mainly of the leading, most active and visible). They were (very) roughly divided into two groups: texts from the authors of liberal wing, and texts from the authors of the conservative wing.

3. Discussion

Opinions of critics' community about ideology in the sociocultural context (how the media text reflects, reinforces, inspire, or generates the values, behaviors, attitudes, concerns, myths).

The dominant concepts are: media agency, media representation, media audience)

Most rigid Russian film critics of in the liberal wing noted with pleasure the *Leviathan's* total pessimism view of contemporary Russia (Matizen, 2015; Tyrkin, 2015). But some liberal film critics believed that, despite all pessimism, *Leviathan* gave the audience positive catharsis (Pavluchik, 2015; Dolin, 2014). A significant part of film critics positively celebrated the *Leviathan's* clear anticlerical pathos (Gireiev, 2015).

However, thoughtful expert opinion leads to a much more profound interpretation of *Leviathan* in the social and cultural context (Shemyakin, 2015; Solntseva, 2015; Stishova 2014). For example: "Attempts back to the late Medieval and restore the inviolable union of church and state secularism (in the name of social and political stability) inevitably revive the anticlerical of thinking part of the social organism" (Razlogov, 2014).

And from there it spreads the bridge to the main topic of *Leviathan*: personal responsibility of each of us for "what Russia we gained" (Ivanov, 2015; Plakhov, 2015).

But it would be a significant exaggeration to say that the *Leviathan* has received full and unconditional support of the Russian film criticism liberal wing. On the one hand, some critics saw (rightly, for my opinion) the *Leviathan's* overlaps (Malukova, 2014). On the other hand, the authors of *Leviathan* received the reproaches in the aesthetic varnishing of reality and the straightness of the critical promise (Zelvenskii, 2015; Maslova, 2015). M. Bezruk accused the *Leviathan* of speculation and opportunism (Bezruk, 2015). And even, perhaps, the most famous among liberal media critics' community (and not only) – Dmitry Bykov, blames the *Leviathan* in the secondary and the inner emptiness (Bykov, 2015).

Russian film criticism of the conservative wing, unlike the Liberals, could not forgive the *Leviathan* anticlerical attacks: (Yampolskaya, 2015). Sophisticated connoisseurs of world cinema does not miss an opportunity to sneer at the author's ambitions of A. Zvyagintsev (Trofimenkov, 2015). Moreover, as liberals, conservative critics, also criticized the film's political opportunism (Moskvina, 2015).

Naturally, that liberal film critics (who have long been hostile to director Nikina Mikhalkov) expressed a negative opinion about *Sunstroke*. Among the most common words used in reviews as guilty: propaganda, banality, nationalist, anti-Darwinist, monarchist, etc. (Bezruk, 2014; Gladilshchikov, 2014; Plakhov 2014; Solntseva, 2014).

One of the leading arguments against the *Sunstroke* author's concept became a liberal reproach to Nikita Mikhalkov that he supported "red communists" in his films of the 1970s, and now he supports "whites and monarchy", but always – "God-given" power (Bykov, 2014; Kichin, 2014; Matezen, 2014; Pavluchik 2014). However, some film critics wrote that they are bored to assess the ideology and philosophy of the authors of *Sunstroke*, since they do not see any artistic merit in this movie (Zelvensky, 2014).

As a result, it seems, the only discordant note has become in the consolidated opinion of the liberal film criticism: A. Dolin's replica: "Words "Three hours of emptiness" and "What for?" talk

about the inability to elemental analysis, sorry. The essence of the *Sunstroke* is simple and transparent, it is stated in two words: Russian *Titanic*. Fleeting love story on a ship and shipwreck in the final, which means deluge, end of the world, and the punishment for sin. The one-piece structure and distinct idea, which is difficult to argue" (Dolin, 2014).

Admirers of N. Mikhalkov's movies from the ranks of the conservative film criticism use the complimentary words and phrases in relation to the *Sunstroke*: perfect, great, bog cinema event, talent, artist, etc. (Danilova, 2014; Moskvina, 2014; Omecinskaya 2014; Surikov, 2014; Vladimirov, 2014; Yampolskaya, 2014).

Further, in response to many of the cited above reproach liberals, film criticism of the conservative wing confidently argue that *Sunstroke* is not propaganda, but a complex and multi-valued work of art (Rutkovsky, 2014; Tolkunova, 2014).

Opinions of film critics' community about the market conditions that contributed to the process of creating a media text (the dominant concepts: media agency, media technology, media audience, media / media texts category)

In general, film criticism of the liberal wing (simultaneously arguing with the conservative part of the audience) agree that *Leviathan* due to socio-critical orientation was in the center of the political debate in media (Belikov, 2015; Bogomolov, 2015; Malukov, 2015; Pavluchik, 2015; Plakhov, 2015).

Some critics have tried to uncover the reasons why the film was non-adequately received by the West: "West Europe did not understand the main thing: that the *Leviathan* is not just a story about a creepy private injustice, but also a political statement about the nature of modern Russia" (Gladilshikov, 2015).

As for the most consistent opponents of *Leviathan*, they angered state financial support for the film, which have so radically critical position to donor (Yampolskaya, 2015).

Film criticism of the liberal wing noted with satisfaction the low box office of very expensive *Sunstroke* (budget: \$ 21 million, box-office: \$ 1.7 million, <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/586308/box/>) against much less budget of *Leviathan* (budget: \$ 3,7 million, box-office: \$ 2.5 million, <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/705356/>) (Bezruk, 2014).

Curiously, the film criticism of the conservative wing is not as primitive as it seems, for example, Y. Bogomolov (Bogomolov, 2014). They ironically notice that their liberal colleagues have the real "herd instinct" against the *Sunstroke* (Omecinskaya 2014).

Opinions film critics' community about the characters of media texts, their values, ideas, behavior, appearance, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures, degree of stereotyping (the dominant concepts: media representation, media / media text category, media technology, media audience).

Film criticism of the liberal wing did not stint on the praise for the entire ensemble cast in *Leviathan* (Dolin, 2014; Kuvshinov 2014; Malukov, 2015; Plakhov 2014). For some reason they do not notice a distinct secondary actors' images created in the *Leviathan*: the works of the actress E. Liadova (she recently played a similar role in the movie *The Geographer Drank His Globe Away*), actor A. Serebryakov (he played a lot of these fierce and nervous men over the past 20 years) and actor R. Madyanov (in his collection also a lot of similar nasty characters).

But some film critics accurately noticed that almost all the characters in *Leviathan* flawed, and not all may evoke viewers' sympathy (Razlogov 2014; Kudryavtsev, 2015) and pay attention to the ambivalence of these characters, even the most, seems to be negative (Ivanov, 2015).

Film criticism of the conservative wing immediately recovered the secondary image of the *Leviathan's* characters (Razlogova, 2014). The film also received accusations of improbability: in the nature of the character, and in their everyday life (Trofimenkov, 2015; Yampolskaya, 2015).

Although I can say that the film critics of the all "wings" are often jointly note that almost without exception, the *Leviathan's* characters do not cause any sympathy (Moskvina, 2015).

Yes, liberal criticism relates enthusiastically to the cast of *Leviathan*, but their relation to the actors and the characters of *Sunstroke* was ironical and negative (Bezruk 2014; Kichin, 2014; Matizen, 2014).

Of course, the views of the film criticism conservative wing about the characters and the actors of *Sunstroke* was differ from liberal. Acting rated as brilliant, successful, wonderful, excellent, etc. (Haknazarov, 2014; Moskvina, 2014; Omecinskaya, 2014; Rutkovsky, 2014; Tolkunova, 2014).

E. Yampolskaya makes in the course of analysis of *Sunstroke*'s characters the conclusion: we must to rise above the fray of red and white, because no heroes in the civil wars, all people are the victims (Yampolskaya, 2015).

Opinions of film critics' community on the structure and narrative techniques in a media text (the dominant concepts: category of media / media texts, media technology, media language, media representation)

The main figure responsible for the structure and narrative techniques in the film is director, and Russian film critics of the liberal wing, as a rule, do not skimp on compliments (talented, courageous, powerful, virtuoso, polyphonic, wonderful, uncompromising, etc.) (Dolin, 2014; Plakhov, 2014; Stishova, 2014).

But in spite of such praises, some liberal film critics (and not so little) more subdued evaluating artistic result achieved in the *Leviathan* (thrift, straightness, superficiality, slurred, scarcity, falsity, emotional coldness, dramatic inconsistencies, etc.) (Bezruk, 2015; Bykov, 2015; Gireiev, 2015; Razlogov, 2014; Timofeevsky, 2015; Zelvensky, 2015).

Perhaps it is someone will seem paradoxical, but film critics of the conservative wing were as close as possible to their most critically-minded liberal fellow in the evaluation of the artistic level of *Leviathan* (conservative critics use the words such as straightness, boredom, dramatic discrepancies, stamp, serial, etc.) (Kulanin, 2015; Loshakova, 2015; Moskvina, 2015; Rutkovsky, 2014; Yampolskaya, 2015).

So, liberal media criticism quite clearly divided into two camps in relation to the artistic level of *Leviathan*: the unconditional fans and those who are considered *Leviathan* a step backwards compared with previous works A. Zvyagintsev (*The Return*, *Exile*, and *Elena*). But not very many disagreements are among the liberals on the *Sunstroke*: in general, all the opinions are negative (heaviness, strained, weak, secondary, slowness, boredom, illustrative, tasteless, vulgar, dishonesty, false, anti-liberal propaganda, obsessive self-citations, etc) (Bezruk 2014; Bykov, 2014; Gireiev, 2014; Maslova, 2014; Zabaluev, 2014; Zelvensky, 2014).

Some liberal film critics very negatively responded to the erotic scenes in the *Sunstroke*. Critics considered this scene almost vulgar parody (Ivanov, 2014; Matizen 2014; Tyrkin, 2014). However, A. Dolin and V. Kichin several alleviate this critical blows, noting the artistry of the analyzed media text (Dolin, 2014; Kichin, 2014).

And of course, some of the liberal film critics' community did not escape the temptation to blame of Nikita Mikhalkov. They accused him of losing the creative form (Kudryavtsev, 2014; Stishova, 2014).

Naturally, film critics of the conservative wing very positive appreciated the artistic level of *Sunstroke*, arguing that Mikhalkov did not lost his skill and talent (Haknazarov, 2014; Omecinskaya, 2014; Rutkovsky, 2014; Surikov, 2014; Yampolskaya, 2015).

4. Results

So, the result of the analysis, manifested in the fact that the approach of the Russian film critics clearly delineated political and ideological criteria. Film critics of conservative and liberal distributed in most cases into two irreconcilable camps. Such a distinction is quite typical for today's Russian journalism. This is typical, of course, not only film studies, but in general, in media criticism. On the one side there are a film/media critics' community groups advocating Western-style liberal values, on the other hand - their colleagues who hold conservative positions and special way of Russia's status.

5. Conclusion

So, *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*, in fact, has become an indicator of the political stratification of Russian film criticism: in many cases, films were analyzed, first of all, not as a works of art, but as social and ideological messages. However, this is not surprising, because of the bundle of Russian

film critics' community. However, the Russian mass audience as a whole is much more conservative than media criticism community. And, of course which is more focused on entertainment component of media culture (and the lack of interest of the vast audience in serious problems eloquently showed modest box-offices of *Leviathan* and *Sunstroke*)...

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