

Transmitting World War II's memory to younger generations in Russian cinema : myths and dialogues

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This study aims at interrogating the ongoing trend in Russian cinema towards the production of war and action movies (Norris 2007), with a particular focus on World War II movies. Such a drive appears characteristic of Putinian Russia, and has often been considered as propaganda, particularly when such movies benefit from state and presidential support, and when they tend to put forward some of the Soviet war myths, such as in *Panfilov's 28 men* (Shalopa 2016), which focuses on a dubious episode of the Battle of Moscow which became a staple in Soviet propaganda.

Such films, sometimes made by some of the most respected Russian directors (Bondartchouk, Mikhalkov), and which range from intimate dramas (*Franz + Polina* Segal 2006) to spectacular productions (*Battle for Sevastopol* Mokritskiy 2015), seem at first to perfectly fit the new Russian nationalism upheld by the Kremlin (Linan 2010), focused on the « defense of the realm » against any foreign influence (Gillespie 2005). When directed at a young audience, these films can be considered as taking part in the Putinian project of shaping the public into patriots (Hement 2015) through the celebration of victory (Wood 2011).

At the same time, these movies cannot only be deemed as state propaganda. As such, they also represent, particularly among young directors, a way to engage in a complex and constructive dialogue with the war memory represented by the huge heritage of Soviet war films, ranging from *The cranes are flying* (Kalatozov 1957) to the huge epic *Liberation* (Ozerov 1970-71), and to the critical *Come and see* (Klimov 1985), some recent productions being remakes of Soviet classics such as *The dawns are quiet here* (Rostotski 1972, Davletyarov in 2015). Such a dialogue emphasizes the evolution of the Russian visual culture, as recent movies differ significantly from their Soviet ancestors, especially aimed at the younger generation, whose references significantly differ from those of people who were familiar with the Soviet film tradition, and at the same time interrogating these Soviet references in regard of their Russian counterparts.

This dialogue between ancient Soviet references and the young Russia is also key to understanding the narratives that these films develop, which cannot only be reduced to the transmission of memorial myths. While this aspect can be crucial, these films also aim at deconstructing some of the Soviet myths, and create a new memory for Russia. Namely some aspects which were key to the Soviet war memory, such as the clear distinction between patriots and traitors, the unity of the various people of the Soviet Union under one flag, or the apparent equality in gender-based relations have come under scrutiny, and offer to the young generation, along key myths, a much more nuanced view of the war, in which racism and sexual harassment appear among Soviet troops, soldiers are pointlessly sacrificed, and all kinds of attitudes towards the invaders were possible.

Hence this paper will be divided into two parts : the first one will deal with the nationalist aspect of these films, linked to the Russian identity that is devised in Putinist Russia, while the second one will focus more on the questioning these films direct at the Soviet memory

Strengthening patriotism and educating the youth

It cannot be denied that some of these films appear as coherent with the Kremlin's view of

Russian nationalism. Whereas such films were rather rare during the 1990s, there has been a steady flow of them, including more and more TV series (particularly produced par Star Media, *The attackers, the night witches, the dawns here are quiet*) that focus on the Second World War. Instead of rooting themselves in the late Soviet movies such as *Come and see* by Elem Klimov, with its very harsh and intimate representation of the war, such films rather focus on being particularly spectacular, emulating in this regard European, American, and, to some extent, the most lavish Soviet productions. Films such as *Sevastopol*, *Panfilov's 28 heroes*, *The battle of Brest*, Bondartchouk's *Stalingrad*, or Mikhalkov's 2-part sequel to *Burnt by the sun*, all focus of battles in a very spectacular ways, with heavy use of special effects and lengthy battle sequences.

At the same time, their character design focus on martial heroes, rather generic to some extent, aimed at representing some sort of ideal Russians : family-loving, professional, good-natured people, ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of the motherland under the guidance of competent and selfless leaders. Some of them are meant to represent the various aspects of the Russian society, together with its various origins (Moscow, St-Petersburg, Siberia... and at the same time peasants, intellectuals, workers, delinquents...). As a whole, these characters allow to draw the portrait of an idealized war generation, a collective hero, which fought for the motherland and accepted with sadness, but with determination, the ultimate sacrifice. Such aspects appear to be linked to Soviet cinema, and its taste for collective and choral heroes, embodying the people, to which the audience could relate.

To some extent, these films also appear to go back to some particular events that were at the core of Soviet propaganda about the Great Patriotic War, such as Panfilov's detachment resistance on the outskirts of Moscow, or the Pavlov House in Stalingrad, all of which have been celebrated for decades and are linked to memorials and monuments that mark the Russian landscape. If not, as in *Unidentified heights* these productions develop the idea that one has to go beyond the few well-known examples, in order to develop the idea that heroism was present throughout the whole war, even when not marked in the countryside, which adds to the idea of the heroic generation, that the current youth should try to emulate.

Such a propagandist aspect, beyond the fact that some common myths of the Soviet Union have been put to the screen is the fact that, to some extent, these movies benefit from public funding, easy access to the army in order to film, and some sort of public support, as shown for instance when Vladimir Putin himself backed Mikhalkov's production of his films about the war. Various institutions, such as the army, the veterans organizations may also be part of the production scheme, as with *Panfilov's 28 heroes*, all of which are acknowledged in the opening or closing credits, as well as it is common for the directors to praise the people who fought during the war during these credits. Such messages may also be accompanied by a mention that they should not be forgotten, or that they set an example that shall be followed.

What distinguishes these films from Soviet movies is a focus which aims more at small groups than at larger units, facilitating individual identification, in a more intimate way, which mirrors American productions rather than Soviet ones. Even if those could focus on an individual soldier, one key issue seems to have been more for the audience to identify with soldiers as a group representing the whole of the people, rather than to develop a possible particular bond to one of the characters.

Given their topics, which range from the *Battle for Brest-Litovsk* to the northern front, a great majority of these films focus on a « defence of the realm » narrative, as most of them are set in the Soviet Union, rather than developing narratives about the end of the war in Poland, the Balkans, or in Germany. Instead, most are situated in Slavic territories of the former Soviet Union, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Hence, it appears that these films carry a meaning that focus on the defensive part of the war, against foreign aggression, mimicking to some extent the current tensions between Russia and Western countries, while at the same time abandoning the liberation narrative that was present in Soviet movies such as *Liberation*. On the other hand, the focus on Slavic territories (with little interest in Baltic countries) may appear as a way to develop a narrative that in the same way focus on Russian's contemporary policy in Belarus and Ukraine. Nevertheless, one should also

beware of too immediate assimilation in this respect, as both countries may also be interested in the development of such movies, even in times when tensions rise with Russia, as exemplified by the *Battle of Sevastopol*, produced with Ukrainian funding and help, even if Crimea has been a particularly hot issue between the two countries. This hints at the possibility of a more complex relation to these films, which cannot be deemed as simple and mere Russian propaganda, as at least other Slavic countries may find ways to inhabit these narratives, or to poeach within them (in de Certeau's sense).

What can also be considered in line with the Kremlin's objectives, beyond the heroization of the war generation, is the development of symbols and signs, which at the same time are rooted within Soviet film culture, but reinterpreted in a more Russian national aspect. The main case being religion, which was almost totally absent from Soviet films, but has since reappeared in such films and series, as in the *Attackers*, with the character of a officer of noble extraction, held in high esteem by his comrades, but also a devout christian who goes as far as to baptize one of his comrades. As a nobleman, he is presented as having been discriminated against by the regime, but also as a proud Russian, ready to fight for his country, whatever its name. The same can be said of Gulag prisoners in *Strafbat*, who, despite being in jail for all sort of motives, all appear a patriotic and ready to lay their lives for the safeguard of the country, may they come from the Moscow milieu, or be a pope, as two characters are.

The soldiers' various ethnic origins are a reinterpretation of a staple from Soviet cinema, which was rather keen on showing that various nationalities from the USSR all participated in the war, with soldiers coming from Central Asia, Siberia, the Caucasus... This aspect has been reinterpreted in contemporary movies in two ways. One way may be to focus on mainly ethnic Russian characters, which may be a way to develop a Russian narrative that would distinguish itself from the Soviet one. The other one is to develop various ethnic backgrounds for the soldiers, particularly Asian soldiers coming from Siberia or Russian Central Asia, again either to develop a common narrative with Russian-friendly former Soviet republics (such as Kazakhstan in the case of *Panfilov's 28 heroes*) or to focus more on an inclusive Russian identity, considered as per se multiethnic and open to all religions (Islam may appear from time to time in this regard), while at the same time focusing on the Eurasian aspect of contemporary Russia, again as a move that may be interpreted as mimicking some aspects of the country's foreign policy. On the other hand, the development of such characters may also be considered to be part of an ongoing struggle to impose the Russian narrative on screen, and to avoid the development of competing narratives in former Soviet republic. In such a case, this narrative would be considered as aiming at developing some kind of on-screen Russian hegemony on the Second World War Eastern Front on-screen memory. Such an issue is possible, as Russia, when it comes to action and war films, already has to face the development of competing memories developed in Eastern Europe and in the Baltic countries. These countries are themselves aiming at going back on these memory issues, and transmitting it to the younger generation, be it about sufferings, or about heroization of the war generation. As such, the Russian narrative cannot be considered alone, as it competes on the global scene for developing its narrative, in a particularly competitive entertainment market, together with an also extremely competitive memory scene. On this scene, it aims at contesting what some politicians and artists in Russia consider to be an hegemonic Western narrative, in the face of which they want to preserve Russian memory.

II A memorial dialogue with Soviet cinema

If some aspects of this cinema may appear as propagandistic, as mentioned before, one should also beware of reducing it to this aspect. Rather, if particularly patriotic to some extent, this cinema is also extremely diverse, and even when patriotism, heroism, and the example set by the war generation are put forward, some elements allow for a more complex understanding of this cinema.

These aspects are particularly important when it comes to Russian war memory. If it seems at first that these film fit into a grand national narrative, they also allow for a more in-depth questioning of the war period.

The attackers of Strafbat focus on the heroism of fighter pilots and disciplinary battalions in defence of the Russian motherland. But at the same time, the contribution made by disciplinary battalions to this defence has until then been largely ignored by Russian and Soviet cinema. Some soldiers did appear as having a criminal past, but within regular units. Here, in 2004, it became possible to focus on a penal unit as a whole, and to develop a narrative that evoked both its participation in the war, and the terrifying way such units had been sacrificed by the Soviet high command, being considered as little more than cannon fodder. In the case of the *Attackers*, it is gender relationship that is tackled, as well as it is in the *Battle of Sevastopol*, or *Witches of the night*. True, women in the army did appear in Soviet cinema, for instance in *The dawns here are quiet*, which was nominated for an oscar. But the *Attackers* even if it lacks the cinematographic quality of its predecessor appears as rather new when dealing with gender relations, especially when it comes to sexual harassment in ways that were rather absent in Soviet films, which avoided such an issue, leaving it behind a more general reflexion about the war and the part women played in it. In the *Attackers*, as well as in other films, women in the Soviet Army face rape at the hands of their comrades or their enemy, may be discriminated because of being women... The fraternity that appeared in Soviet films is thus put into question. In the same way, women such as the heroin in Sevastopol appear as more in-depth carved characters, especially when it comes to human relationships, rather than being portrayed as selfless characters devoted to the fight, or as victims of Nazi violence, as could be the case in Soviet cinema.

The same applies to politics. Compared to Soviet films, in which political commissars were quite commonly portrayed in a rather positive light, or at least neutral, it has become possible to develop characters that are particularly odious. With Soviet political imperatives gone, it has become possible for film directors to question in a deeper sense how the war was handled. Hence, some political commissars may appear a genuinely caring for the soldiers and the civilians under their responsibility, some may also be portrayed as corrupt, career-oriented, violent, and lacking empathy, as, once again, the one portrayed in the *Attackers*. In the same way, officers may be portrayed in these films as cynical and selfish, ready to sacrifice the soldiers they command. This allows us to question the idea of a Soviet nostalgia that has sometimes be assigned to Putinist Russia. Russian directors, in their portrayal of the Soviet period are dealing with a film heritage that they aim at questioning and such characters are a way to do so. In this regard, it appears that Russian cinema has developed a complex relationship with its Soviet predecessor, at the same time acknowledging the Soviet memory of the war, and apying homage to the ones who fought and gave their lives during the conflict, but at the same time, refusing to turn a blind eye on what Soviet films avoided.

This memory aspect is particularly interesting when it comes to the portrayal of Soviet society, as can be seen in films such as the *Bomber*. This film, which deals with hardships a young bomber pilot has to overcome after having been shot down over Nazi-occupied territory, seizes the occasion to offer a portrait of Soviet society, painted at the same time as rather close to the Russian contemporary one, but at the same time, as a society that is radically different, and which may appear somehow estranged to the younger generation. In doing so, once again, these films engage into a memory dialogue with the Soviet past. Soviet society is portrayed through the various speeches that people in charge deliver in front of workers, soldiers, farmers, in a manner that mimicks the hyperbolic speeches of the time, laden with political references. In the same way, the *Bomber* insists on the particularly prudish aspect of Soviet society, which together with the issues of sexual harassment, allows viewers to develop a more complex vision of the now-defunct society in which the young generation's grandparents lived in. The bomber pilot, rather than an ideal and asexual hero, appears as a naive character, who still does not know much about gender relations, and particularly shy when it comes to intimacy, out of ignorance. Patriotism and the threat the Nazis posed to Russian society are put at the forefront of the narrative, but the shortcomings of this

society are far from ignored.

Which leads us to our last point, particularly exemplified in a film such as *Franz+Polina*. Many films are focused on the German occupation of Soviet land, and deal with resistance fighters who developed underground networks. This, again, has its roots of in the narratives about resistance during the Great Patriotic War, but it also appears as a way to engage more deeply with the memory of occupation, rather than opposing underground fighters against their Nazis opponents. These films aim at exploring all the depth of the grey area in which millions of Soviet citizens had to live, and to some extent, to compromise. In the regard, *Franz+Polina* is particularly telling as the hero is nothing less than a SS. As a soldier, he meets Polina, a Soviet peasant, and they both decide to leave the village, with Franz refusing to take part in any more killing, and to live in the forest, apart from the rest of the world, in peace. This appears new in two aspects : of course, taking a SS-man as a hero appears as a rather bold move from the director, who chooses deliberately to distance himself from the unidimensional characters that were (and are still to some extent) common in Soviet and Russian war cinema. And on the other hand, Polina does not join the underground, rather choosing to feel with the man she loves, a move that in other films would have been considered as treason. By grey area, we mean that these films aim at questioning why and how some Soviet had to join the German auxiliary forces, be it out of hatred for the Communist regime, lack of choice, need for supplies, and so on. Most of these movies of course hold the underground in high esteem and focus on their fight against plunder and violence in the Soviet Union. But they also aim at questioning a reality that appears on screen far more complex that during the preceding decades, in which each citizen, rather than being driven by ideological motives, aimed at surviving, and could make mistakes.

Given the scope of Russian war films, it would probably be a mistake to consider them all basic propaganda. Their cinematographic quality may be inferior to Soviet classics, but they do explore some themes and issues that had been previously ignored. It cannot be denied that these films appear, to some extent, to be in line with Putinist Russia's self-image, especially as they appear particularly keen on upholding patriotism and, to some extent, the values and ethos that appear to be praised by the Kremlin. In doing so, they can be considered a part of a visual historical and national narrative that aims at passing such values to the younger generation, by means of popular culture. Still, at the same time, these films aim at questioning this Soviet past, and the obscure corners of Soviet cinematographic heritage on this topic. Hence, one might argue, these films also appear as a mirror in which contemporary Russian society may contemplate its own doubts and uncertainties about the Soviet past, between pride and the need to question it. In the same way, even if these films can be considered as a mean used by Russia to try to develop its soft power by offering to foreign audiences a narrative of the war that puts the Soviet part in it forward, it can also be considered that these films aim at making this contribution known, particularly in the West, against what can be considered a form of amnesia towards this contribution. It is possible that Russia may appear hegemonic in this regard when it comes to the former Soviet Republic, but one should also not forget that these films are also part of a more global struggle for audience, and for memory, in which Russia, with its doubts, aspire to be taken into account.