

Conference Paper

Comic Representation of the Tragic Past in Alexey Krasovsky's Film *Feast*

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Abstract

The article discusses the film *Feast* directed by Alexey Krasovsky (2018). The analysis focuses on the use of the comic genre to portray the tragic events of the Siege of Leningrad. It is shown that the director of *Feast* intentionally chose such comically charged, 'non-realistic' poetics to satisfy the audience's demand for alternative ways of depicting war, different from those employed by Russian mainstream cinema. For the director, comedy becomes an attempt to break the stereotypical depictions of war-related events in Russian cinema. By choosing an unconventional genre, *Feast* challenges the viewers to form their own opinions about history and art. The semantics of *Feast* is not limited to its underlying political message but produces a deeper aesthetic message about the fundamental impossibility of an unbiased and truthful commentary on war: whatever we try, such commentary would always remain a construct geared towards the needs, worldviews or demands of certain audiences.

Keywords: *Feast*, director Alexey Krasovsky, patriotic war films, war theme in cinema, mainstream war films, epic theatre poetics in cinema

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1. Introduction

The article focuses on the film *Feast* directed by Alexey Krasovsky, released at the beginning of 2019. This film text constitutes an important element of the modern retro discourse characterized by an unusual way of appropriating the past. The film is set in the outskirts of Leningrad during the Siege on the New Year's Eve, as 1941 fades into 1942. Interestingly enough, 'Feast' has all the genre characteristics of a comedy, which, at first glance, should create an irreconcilable conflict with the underlying chronotope as the unprecedented tragedy of the Siege of Leningrad in this film text is turned into a subject of a comic interpretation. Even before its release, the film had been criticized severely for depicting the Siege in such a way. The director was accused of Nazism and falsification of history, he received anonymous threats, there were pickets demanding the ban of the film, the Prosecutor's office in St.Petersburg requested the script of the film for investigation, Krasovsky was called in for questioning by the Investigative

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Committee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. As a result, he decided to abandon any attempts to obtain a screening license. Moreover, the amount of negative publicity made the meaning and aesthetic message of the film even more confusing for the viewer. This article is aimed to analyze the genre characteristics of the film; to clarify the conceptual approach of the author, and to identify the factors that determined the choice of such a format. This article presents the first attempt of scholarly interpretation of this film text.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodological framework of this study relies on methods of intratextual analysis. In our analysis, we focus primarily on the semantics of A. Krasovsky's cinematic expression. We also consider it necessary to propose a hermeneutic interpretation of the film 'Feast' because it helps us describe a significant cultural phenomenon that the film revealed. When the film was first released, however, its connection with this phenomenon went unnoticed, largely due to the nature of the criticism the film invoked. For this reason, we also use context-based methodology in our analysis of the reasons why this film sparked so much controversy; analysis of the characteristics of the audience's reception of the film; and analysis of its place within the context of contemporary mainstream patriotic war cinema. Furthermore, the research methodology also includes a comparative historical method, which allows us to compare the poetics of Krasovsky's *Feast* with the experimentation of Bertolt Brecht and early Mérimée and show the similarities in the aesthetic intentions of these authors.

3. Results

Our hypothesis is that the unusual choice of the genre for depicting the Leningrad Siege is meant to express the author's aesthetic intention to protest against the system of stereotypes developed and actively used in contemporary mainstream war cinema. This hypothesis is based on the opinion of Andrey Arkhangelsky, a journalist and editor of magazine *Ogonek*, who sees *Feast* as an "unconscious revolt...of the film industry" against the 'patriotic' standard of portraying war that has been gaining a foothold in Russian cinema [1]. By the 'patriotic standard' Arkhangelsky means high drama and the realistic effect combined the aim of fostering patriotic sentiment in the viewers. To this end, war in contemporary mainstream films is often mythologized and shown as a sacred time of heroic ancestors, who made a personal sacrifice and thus gained immortality in the memory of the people. Such mythologization often relies on Hollywood poetics.

Thus, Krasovsky expresses his protest against this trend by choosing the comedy format for his discussion of the war theme.

4. Discussion

We start by looking at the main focus of the criticism that was directed at the film. The objections against the film fall into two broad categories.

Firstly, it is criticized for the discrepancy between the comic genre and the subject matter of the film and the lack (or weak realization) of the underlying concept.

The author was accused of scoffing at the national tragedy since the characters are portrayed in an unsympathetic manner and include the immediate victims of the Siege. In the strict sense, there is only one victim in the film: Mashenka, who is invited to the New Year's dinner in the family of a famous scientist (Voskresensky family) by his son. Unlike the Voskresensky family, Mashenka has been a first-hand witness of all the horrors of life under the Siege: she has to work day and night, conceal the death of her father, who died of starvation, in order to be able to continue using his ration cards and to find means to support her dying family. At first glance, Mashenka's story seems to be at odds with the comic context of the film. Unlike other characters, she is also portrayed in a more sympathetic way. The image of the Voskresensky family, in its turn, presents a classic example of satire and thus allows us to classify the genre of this film text as a comedy of manners or a satirical comedy. Such approach dismisses the charges of the impropriety of the film's comic representation of the people in wartime Leningrad. The Voskresensky family have little to do with the horrible events of the Siege due to their privileged status. The satirical image of this family living on special rations is based on the realities of life during the war. In his interview to news website *Medusa*, Krasovsky describes his visit to the Museum of the Siege of Leningrad: "I was told about those rail carriages for Zhdanov, filled with food, which obviously could not be distributed among all the people. I was also told about the special rations and special ration cards and about the documents in the archives which they are not allowed to exhibit" [2].

Historian Konstantin Lvov in his review of *Feast* in the last issue of the magazine *Iskusstvo Kino* confirms the basic veracity of the film, describing at length the Soviet distribution system, especially in the war time and during the Siege of Leningrad [3]. Therefore, instead of accusing the director of falsifying Russian history or insulting the memory of these events, it is worth looking at the film from another angle: in fact, A.Krasovsky's attempt to satirize those who managed to stay untouched by the mass starvation is quite justified. For example, when the scientist gets chicken as a part

of his New Year special ration, his wife is disappointed because she was hoping for duck instead. She is also nagging her husband because his colleague's wife has got a luxurious fur coat. A bit later she gets upset by her daughter's dating choice and by the need to conceal the welfare of her household from the unexpected guest. We have to admit that the subject matter of the film legitimizes the choice of comedy as its main genre. Apart from the Voskresensky family, there is another comic character in the story – deserter Vitaly, who is trying to ingratiate himself with the scientist's family in order to take advantage of the material benefits they enjoy. The only character who does not fit into this comic paradigm is Mashenka although she is also presented in a parody-like manner, which we are going to discuss further.

The second kind of objections *Feast* raised deals with the comic exaggeration and the non-realistic style of representation employed by the film to destroy the illusion of reality. Some critics pointed out that the concept of the film was not thought through well enough, others, explained these features by perfunctory film making and by poor directing choices. Anton Dolin compared the manner of acting in *Feast* to a reading of a script in the theatre while a play is being prepared for production [4].

We suppose that such intensified theatricality, emphatic artificiality and the resulting destruction of the illusion of reality were intentionally introduced by the director as a part of his artistic vision. Such hypothesis allows us to explain why the image of Mashenka – the real victim of the Siege – is devoid of any tragic meaning, why her behaviour seems mechanistic and she appears to be as heartless as the members of the Voskresensky family. The point the film makes is not that the Siege has rendered her insensitive and indifferent and that the sacrifice these horrible events have forced her to make was beyond her powers. Krasovsky's film does not intend to depict a psychologically realistic transformation of the human soul in hard times. In fact, the film's aesthetic is close to that of the epic theatre of Bertolt Brecht with its effect of alienation, rejection of 'mimesis', empathy and catharsis [5, 6].

'Feast' in a similar way produces alienation rather than empathy through the non-realistic style of acting. The only true victim of the Siege in the film resembles a mechanical doll: we are alienated from her tragedy because the film is meant to provoke reactions other than empathy. These creative techniques, which seek to alter the viewer's perspective, were misread by the mass public and, as a result, the film director was criticized for cynicism and accused of insulting the memory of the war.

Alienation aesthetics becomes particularly evident in the final scene of the film. Vitaly the deserter (played by Timofey Tribuntsev), who is trying to pass himself off as a war hero, blackmails members of the Voskresensky family and goes to the grandmother's

room to do what he says should have been done by the family long ago. By the tense expressions on the characters' faces the viewer can guess that Vitaly is going to kill the almost incapacitated old woman. Surprisingly, the sound of the shot is followed by a knock, which, as we know, grandmother used to employ to show her discontent to the rest of the family. Alena Babenko starring as the mother of the family sighs with relief and then turns straight to the camera and says 'Happy New Year', winking at the viewer. In the film, this gesture acquires a special meaning as it is accompanied by a clattering mechanical sound, which bears a vague resemblance to bell sounds.

A similar historical finale, which seeks to destroy the illusion of reality, was for the first time used by Prosper Mérimée in his play *Inès Mendo or The Triumph of Prejudice. A Comedy in Three Days* from his collection *Theatre of Clara Gazul* (1825). It happened long before the theory of epic theatre appeared. Mérimée's play has a typical romantic plot about the marriage of a noble Spaniard Don Esteban to Inès Mendo, the daughter of a former prison executioner. The infidelity of Esteban leads to Inès's death and, as a result, her devastated father shoots his son-in-law. However, this tragic story ends up with a comic ending: mortally wounded Don Esteban generously asks his adversary to leave the scene so that he would not be held responsible for the murder of such an unworthy man as he had come to realize himself to be. In reply old Mendo says: "I'll not stir; inasmuch as the comedy is finished. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, thus ends the second part of *Inès Mendo; or, The Triumph of Prejudice*" [7]. This remark is followed by the words of Inès, who suddenly rises from the dead and addresses the audience, saying: "The author desires me to return to life to solicit your indulgence": "You may depart, with the satisfaction of knowing, there will be no third part", she says [7].

In 'Feast' the boundaries between the world of the play and the real world are blurred. What happens can be described as 'breaking the fourth wall' – the wall between the actors and the audience. For the early nineteenth century, this artistic technique was quite unusual and Mérimée used it to show his attitude towards the romantic drama [8]. He mocked the affectedness, exaggerated emotionality and the implausible, sometimes even absurd actions of the characters. Therefore, the final scene in Mérimée's play, which destroys the illusion of reality, is a form of expressing his aesthetic position and his attitude towards the dominant aesthetics, in other words, it is a challenge to romanticism. In the case of Brecht's theatre, the destruction of the illusion of reality had the same purpose – to reveal the faults of Aristotelian aesthetics.

A similar technique is applied by A. Krasovsky to convey his aesthetic views. In order to get a better understanding of this position let us look closer at the meaning of the final gesture of Alena Babenko's character: winking is a sign which implies solidarity

and agreement. If we consider the character's winking as an appeal to the audience to solidarize with the film creators, it becomes obvious that the purpose of this gesture is to increase the distance between the audience and what is being represented and to encourage the audience to take a more critical approach towards what they see (in the previous scenes, this message was conveyed through the detached, comically exaggerated style of acting). The author again emphasizes the fact that in this case the viewer's empathy is an inadequate and unjustified reaction as the film applies an anti-realist approach to representation. This rejection of the realistic aesthetics is aimed at distancing from the poetics of mainstream patriotic war cinema. The latter, in its turn, creates an illusion of real life propped up by a range of Hollywood special affects with an obvious aim of enhancing the educational function of the films. Creators of mainstream war films are not worried about making glaring historical or factual mistakes or including implausible details. At times, such details are accumulated intentionally. Thus, mainstream war cinema does not produce accurate lifelike representations of historical events but instead creates historical fantasy films.

This trend is easy to see if we compare two Russian films devoted to the same events: the Soviet film *Chief Engineer* (1980) and the recent film *Tanks* (2018). *Chief Engineer* and *Tanks* are based on the same story of tanks being driven from Kharkov to Moscow. Unlike its Soviet counterpart, the more recent film does not only digress from the true facts (while the Soviet film meticulously reconstructed these events) but is also riddled with all kinds of absurd fantasies about the German acts of sabotage the main characters had to resist. Apparently, this is done to add thrill and emotion, to make the film more attractive for the mass audience. The 1980 film, consisting of two parts, does not have a particularly exciting plot, although this does not prevent it from conveying the full drama of the events described. It is against this flippant, superficial approach to depicting war, as Anton Dolin puts it, that the author of *Feast* rebels against. A.Krasovsky's film intentionally, not 'unconsciously' (as A. Arkhangelsky thinks) destroys the stylistics that seeks to imitate real life. Suggestive imitation of reality is replaced in *Feast* by an attempt to make the viewer think why the film portrays these events differently from more conventional war movies.

The audience is requested not only to reflect upon the meaning of the art form. According to Brecht, the destruction of empathy encourages the viewer to practise their critical thinking and to adopt a more critical attitude towards what is shown in the play. The final scene in *Feast* makes it obvious that this intention is shared by A. Krasovsky. The idea underlying the gesture of Alena Babenko's character is that heartlessness and stupidity are not the unique qualities of the Voskresensky family. As hinted by their

surname ('Voskresensky' originates from the word *voskresenie*, 'resurrection'), they will come to life again in multiple types of people proliferating in present times. It is not by chance that in the film the Voskresensky family are depicted as indestructible: after the shot was fired by the impostor, the old woman inhabiting the second floor knocks to inform the family about her discontent. Members of the family stay alive and well even after the targeted aerial attack of the Germans. In the relation to the above, a question arises as to what kind of message the winking actress, who is at this moment out of character, is sending us – that the Voskresensky family are immortal? Krasovsky draws parallels between the events in the film and our present-day reality, mythologizing the type of people who are quite different from those mythologized by the Russian mainstream war films. They are not heroes who sacrifice themselves for the sake of the motherland and thus gain the right to immortality, instead they gain eternal life by staying latched onto their sinecures.

There is one more argument supporting the idea that the Voskresensky family are meant to be perceived as immortal: when Vitaly is going to the second floor to realize his intention, the camera focuses on the clock on the wall, which strikes midnight and thus symbolizes the beginning of the next turn in the cycle of the eternal renewal of the family. The New Year greeting addressed to the audience acquires a special meaning and thus establishes a temporal parallelism.

An important argument to support our idea that the comic representation of the tragic events in the film is not a sign of failure or 'a slap in the face of public taste' but a kind of a message (both aesthetic and social) the director is sending to the audience: in other words, it is a carnivalesque form of representation. After the closing credits, following the mischievous lines pronounced by Alena Babenko's character, the film crew appears dressed in New Year costumes, wishing the audience a happy New Year and asking for financial support. It is undoubtedly a carnivalesque gesture, similar to that of Prosper Mérimée, which mocks the dominant poetics. In the case of Mérimée, his collection of plays *Theatre of Clara Gazul* is ascribed to an imaginary Spanish actress and in his literary coax, he went as far as to have his own face sketched in a Spanish attire and presented as Clara's portrait. M. Bakhtin used the notion of carnival to emphasize freedom from dominant cultural and social norms as the carnival brings to light their conventional nature. [9] *Feast* performs the same carnivalesque function - it undermines the 'patriotic' norm of depicting the war being established in Russian mainstream cinema. The audience's dissatisfaction with this evolving norm manifests itself through viewers' online reactions: as of the time of finishing this article (June 2019), the number of likes given to the film exceeds fivefold the number of dislikes.

5. Conclusion

Our analysis has led us to the following conclusions about the semantics of this 'siege comedy'. We consider the comedy as an attempt to break the stereotype of reception and to force the viewer to think about the film's strange form and the eternal social problems it addresses. In this respect *Feast* seeks to incite the viewer to form his or her own opinion about the modern world and contemporary art. Thus, this film belongs to the paradigm of contemporary art, which uses the past to prompt our reflection on the present.

The semantics of *Feast* is not limited only to the underlying political message. It holds a deeper aesthetic message about the fundamental impossibility of an unbiased and truthful comment on the topic of war: in any case, such comment would always remain a construct oriented towards satisfying the needs or demands of certain audiences. In this case *Feast* was created in response to the demand of the audience discontented from the poetics of mainstream war films. We believe that it is the author's intention to meet the needs of this audience which caused him to choose the comic genre for his film and thus to challenge the poetics of the mainstream cinema with its 'realistic' representations. One more argument supporting this interpretation is that the director decided not to obtain a screening license but instead streamed the film on his personal YouTube channel, appealing to the good will of his audience. As we know, A.Krasovsky's hopes were fulfilled and he has managed to recover all the film costs and expenses.

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