

The Experimental Strategy of V. Shukshin in the Short Story Cycle "Strange People"

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Abstract: The article analyzes the experiment of V. Shukshin on the use of the "auteur cinematography" style in the film "Strange People". Considering this trend as avant-garde, he was trying to work out a new aesthetic. Artistic manner of the director can be characterized by some typical features of auteur film like an intense authorship, a specific cinematic language, a special choice of the cast. The use of the specific techniques such as associative parallels, metaphorical constructions and materialization of the inner monologue of the character, activation of the authorship in the plot and the voiceover, self-reflection indicates his desire to fill the niche between the traditional and avant-garde movements in the Soviet cinema. The poetic manner of the movie debunks the image of Shukshin as "an artist by instinct".

Key words: Auteur film • Inner monologue • Metaphor • Script • Film • Experimental strategy

INTRODUCTION

Many literary and film critics referred to the understanding of the conceptual film "Strange People". For example, the American scientist J.D. Givens calls the film paradoxical, even provocative from the point of the development of film language and in terms of creative biography. In his opinion, "Shukshin is both more visually daring and experimental in his literary adaptation and more provocative in his treatment of his private history" [1, p. 186]. Let us try to find out the terms of the experimental strategy, which marked a new stage in the creative evolution of the film director Shukshin.

Methods of Research: The initial research method is the analysis and interpretation of the artistic component and image-semantic structure of the film.

Main Part: The movie picture features a series of three stories "Chudik" ("Odd Fellow"), "Mille Pardons, Madam!", "Dumy" ("Thoughts") based on the similarly titled short stories [2]. According to E. Wertlib, Shukshin turns to "eternal constants of human existence", he's concerned about "sincerity and dogmatism, emotional responsiveness and deafness <...> light and darkness, life and death" [3, p. 104].

An obvious change in the author's world view reflects the unusual design of the titles that introduce the viewer in an endless course of life. With a woman's song about impossibility of being happy with her darling in a far country one can see a spinning carousel in the foreground and a long queue in the background as a constant attribute of the Soviet city. The feet in the fashionable shoes mill on the paving slabs. A monotonous, repetitive sequence of shots: carousel, queue, sidewalk. Finally, there is a figure of a young man in a black suit and dark glasses. The camera overlooks on a black puppet moving on the slabs and then it approaches the dark glasses blushing with reflection of "that far land", where he is from. Birds chatter fills the hearing and the screen shows a blossoming meadow and a fair-haired child. In the next moment, a gray wall with the title of the first novel "Bratka" ("Brother") fills the screen like a contrast separating the urban world. The viewer's sight breaks away from the circle of the carousel, wall and sidewalk into the wide of the sky and the river valley. If the urban shots contain a festive spinning carousel, the rural - Saturday night with bath fuss.

The images of the carousel gyre in one place, trampling of a citizen on the concrete slabs create a sense of impasse, the return to the past generated by the era of the after-thaw "freezing". In the final stages of the first

novel, the image of the carousel is hyperbolized; for three times the screen shows a huge black wheel, the rotating Yalta cable railway, where the Odd Fellow (actor S. Nikonenko) moves in a circle trying to comprehend the fate of his brother. In such a context, this is the image of the wheel of fortune and the wheel of history crushing people's lives. The village cadres also receive a symbolic content. Images of the baths, fire and water symbolize purification, renewal of modern man, the acquisition of a new force in the relationship, native culture and nature. The director includes the image of the Crimean brother, played by E. Evstigneev, to the number of his film metaphors. The appearance of his character is clearly correlated with the image of the fashionable man in the prologue. The squares of paving slabs in the meaning of urban captivity are being transformed into the metaphor of capture of a "country boy" – the grid of basement, where the brother was after the divorce.

According to N. P. Balandina, "the art of the film directors of the "thaw" age Marlen Hutsiev andrey Tarkovsky, Sergey Parajanov, Tengiz Abuladze, Michael Kalik and many others, has prepared the formation in the second half of the 1960s - early 1970s <...> of domestic "auteur cinema" [4, p. 6]. The uniqueness of the cinematic language and the choice of the cast provided the feeling of the presence of the author-director. Shukshin in "Strange People" falls back on an extreme expression of the "auteur cinema" style. He is the author of the script and the film; among the actors his wife L. Fedoseyeva and his young daughter Masha. Throughout the film, he uses the author's voiceover commenting on the events on the screen. In the prologue Shukshin sings along with his wife one of his favorite, according to his countrymen, folk songs "My Darling", which becomes a leitmotif of the first novel.

The demonstration of authorship justified the style changes in the eyes of the audience and claimed the freedom of the right to experiment, which is explicitly expressed in the methods of metaphorical cinematic language. The image of a young man in dark glasses, in addition to its conceptual function, resembles J.-P. Belmondo's character in the movie of J.-L. Godard's "Breathless" that serves as a reference to the pictures of the French "New Wave". J.-L. Godard and F. Truffaut formulated the basic principles of independent films with the main idea of the director as a "key figure of filmmaking and the true author of the film with his original style and approach to the material" [5, p. 137]. Soviet filmmakers of

the "Thaw" were close to the theorists and practitioners of "Paris School" due to the will of updating the expressive means of the cinema.

Generally, as noted by A. Prokhorov, citing in the films of the 1960s "was perceived as a revelation"; cited were paintings, icons, words and images of the heroes of the past, "the Scripture, the motives of the Apocalypse, the biblical characters" [6, p. 271]. Shukshin uses various kinds of citation in the film, a reproduction of the painting by Ivan Aivazovsky in the room interiors, a record of Chalyapin performing the song about the robber Kudayar, a fragment of the lecture of the tour guide at the Chekhov's museum. Most of all he uses self-citation intensifying his authorship. Thus, in the short story "Dumy" ("Thoughts") the teacher Zakharych becomes a screen voice of the writer-publicist dealing with the problems of preservation of Russian national culture.

An important aspect of the work on the film "Strange People" was a new attitude to the script typical for auteur cinema, when the director often is a screenwriter too. A free treatment of the already approved in all instances scenario of the first story demonstrates the complete creative independence of the director, his leading role in the filmmaking. In fact, Shukshin created a new text on the film set in Yalta with a new name (not "Chudik" but "Bratka") and incorporated the various motifs of other stories. The last shot story "Bratka" became the first story with a newly composed plot that had no counterpart in Shukshin's prose; however, the familiar motifs of antipode brothers, the opposition city-village integrate it into a single metatext of the work of the writer and director.

During the work on the film "Strange People" Shukshin was experimenting in another direction evolving from an apology of the literature to the concept of independence of the cinema. While in the short story "Bratka" the director was implementing a program of non-adaptation of his own literary works ("From now on, I will stop making films based on my stories, I will try to write stories for films"), in the first made short story "Fatal Shot", on the contrary, he was experimenting with "transplantation" of "live" literary word of his story to the screen [7, p. 78].

The story "Mille Pardons, Madam!" as a literary basis of the film story fits well into the concept of the movie and the representation of Bron'ka's story about the attempt of assassination on Hitler confirms the experimental strategy of the director. The monologue-confession of the

character became a feature of the poetic manner of the filmmakers in the 1960s, who sought some ways of expression of the inner world of the character on the screen. Shukshin acts in accordance with the ideas of his essay "Means of Literature and Cinema". He does not use the voice-over for the understanding of the world of the man, but he materializes it in the sounding speech; he displays a "live" distinctive word as the embodiment of the national spirit. To solve this difficult problem he invited the actor of the drama theater E. Lebedev for the role of the national narrator. E. Lebedev knew professional plastic means of the monologue speech. Shukshin entrusted him with the fate of the film, he "left him alone with the audience as much as for twenty-five minutes, two and a half part. The actor is on close-up almost all the time and nothing distracts the viewer from him" [7, p. 129]. By following the tactics of the director with such a precise transfer of the character's speech to the screen, the actor adopts the behavior of Pupkov described by the author in the story: nervousness and unpleasant physiological manner.

The eccentric manner of Lebedev's monologue has caused some irritation of the first critics and doubts of the director in the success of the plastic solution of the speech episode. However, the researcher S. Boym, when examining the ways to express the sincerity of the Russian culture, noted, "sincerity in Russia <...> - the melodrama, in which the speaker's voice in the first person is trying to prove truthfulness and candidness in much exaggerated and sometimes controversial statements" [8, p. 101]. Namely, this "Russian" expression of sincerity and especially the desire to convince the audience of the truth of the fantastic story justify a scandalous behavior of Bron'ka both in the story and on the screen.

The attempt of realization of the aesthetic program on the use of cinematic means for representation of the inner human world was made in the film version of the story with the significant title "Dumy" ("Thoughts"). The author's idea focuses on the character's consciousness willing to understand the soul of peasant, who has always had only work on his mind. The thoughts of Matvey Ryazantsev about love and death have been transformed from the direct speech into the dialogue and supplemented with the spectacular visions. In this sense, a metaphorical episode of imaginary funeral of Ryazantsev is very interesting. The film critic Yu. P. Tyurin could not solve the author's intention, "the cameraman Ginsburg took the shot in this particular conventional manner: on

the contrasts of black and bright, even with some grotesque. I do not know why, but I was reminded of the style of horror films, movies-puzzles like the movies of Cavalcanti..." [9, p. 177]. At the request of the members of the Arts Council at Gorky Studio, the voiceover warns the viewer for three times that this is only the imagination of the character. In addition, the director takes the episode in the comic mode reached with a variety of details: Matvey whacked a fellow on the back, who was trying to close the board of the hearse and then he was interviewed by a journalist. Suddenly shining cathedral domes raise right in front of the audience, apparently claiming the Christian idea of the immortality of the human soul.

Shukshin interweaves some thematic pieces of the story "Dumy" with the fragments of the story "Sten'ka Razin". The image of the village original Kol'ka develops the theme of the previous novel about the talented folk storyteller Bron'ka Pupkov. Critic D. Rayfield in the prestigious literary supplement of the newspaper "The Times" noted that the writer shows every character "impressively bright due to the vision of the director and the hearing of the play writer. The magic power of the artist lays in the organic unity of all his incarnations" [10, p. 11].

The choice of the Razin's story is the most powerful act of self-presentation as a director of "auteur cinema" who uses the screen in order to accomplish his creative strategy. The author here speaks as an opponent of the strict critics who criticized his screenplay "I Have Come to Give You Freedom". By representing the interest of a simple guy and a rural teacher to the figure of the "people's defender" Shukshin stated how vital the memories about him are. He commented on the Razin's image helping through the words of the characters to understand the essence of his figure, to present him in the closest way to national perception of the present. Author's "I" is, therefore, the third subject of intellectual act that makes the task of the literary material more complicated.

The main difference between the film and the story was the redistribution of the functions of the subjects of internal psychological action. While in the story the author was only a mediator between the minds of the character and the reader, in the movie, on the contrary, the characters have become mediators of the author's thoughts. Thus, Shukshin confronts three different life positions in one of the episodes. The older generation, represented by Matvey and an old blacksmith, defends

the right to assume responsibility for the land, for their country, for the farm. Kol'ka blames them, as they have not read any book in their life and requires attention to the creative work of a man. The author's position is expressed in the construction of the cadre where only the heads of the contending characters are visible in the foreground and far off there is a bell tower of the temple that symbolizes the spiritual principles of national life. The composition of the cadre reflects the sharp contradictions of modern society; it raises the question about the priorities of spiritual values.

In the next episode Zakharych, a rural intelligent, joins the dispute. He is not only the opponent of Matvey, but also another carrier of the author's thought. His "history lesson" is an obvious appeal of the author of the historical scenario about Stepan Razin to the public. In the scene of Kol'ka's creative suffering during the work on the sculpture of Razin dominates the author's idea that transforms the new subject and musical images into the metaphor of creative self-reflection of the director: the sculpture of the tied Razin thrown into the fire by the artist, the song about Kudayar- robber performed by Chaliapin. The unappreciated and unsolved allegories became the subject of the recent discussions about the work of the writer and director.

CONCLUSION

This film created in direct connection with Shukshin's journalistic articles and speeches fully debunks the persistent representation of him as "an artist by instinct". The poetics and the image system of the film picture "Strange People" are full of author's reflection. Moreover, volens nolens the sequence order of the characters reproduces the evolution of the writer and director: from a sensitive but unable to express his attitude Odd Fellow to Bron'ka Pupkov, who has found the words to express his craving for heroism and from him to Matvey Ryazantsev, a reflecting, thinking and conscious man.

Therefore, the experimenting thought of Shukshin in the film "Strange People" is aimed to mastering the techniques of "auteur cinema" like metaphorical structures, associative parallels, the materialization of the inner monologue in the sounding speech, imaginative world, the activation of authorship in the creation of the script and the voice-over, self-reflection of the author. Artistic manner of Shukshin, which can be observed in this cinematic cycle, is expressed in a particular author's

view and the author's style of narration. It is characterized by the pursuit of creative research and free expression of his attitude to the world.

The way to the screen proved to be quite complicated; the director had been submitting the film for about eight months. At the beginning of 1969 the film "Strange People" was finally accepted and soon released on the screen, but it did not have a box office success, as well as the other auteur or intellectual movies. A. Prokhorov pointed at the fact that, "in contrast to the Western European or North American cinema of the fifties and sixties of the last century, the Soviet cinema remained a monolithic culture industry with no division in the entertainment mainstream and marginal experimenting avant-garde. Everyone, even those arthouse masters like Tarkovsky or Parajanov, had to work in a unified ideologically and economically extremely sluggish film industry. The state remained the sole financier, producer and film distributor"[6, p. 273].

Finding: On the one hand, Shukshin was trying to fill the niche between the traditionalist and avant-garde movements in the Soviet cinema; he sought to reach «the audience of million people" with his thoughts. On the other hand, he was not satisfied with the folk primitive, "popular print" anymore; he was attracted by new techniques of film language developed by avant-garde. However, the escalated spiritual crisis caused by inability of filming the Razin's story and the release failure of "Strange People" has found its expression in Shukshin's own estimation of the last film as a creative failure and betrayal of worship to folk artist. A kind of way out of the crisis was the idea of creating new movies based on original screenplays and renouncing the past practice of the film adaptation of his own literary works and focusing on the specifics of mass entertainment cinema. Such experience of rejection of the "literariness" was the film Pechki-Lavochni.

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