

METAMORPHOSES OF THE EAST EUROPEAN TELEVISION FILM

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Abstract

This study highlights the formation and evolution of television film in the former Soviet media space. Some boundaries are set from a historical point of view between the film that appeared during the commercial regime of competition and when there was only one “manager” of the televisual system. This study tries to give an answer to the question: “Why have film series become, in time, a true media phenomenon?”. Given the presented thematic axes and the arguments, the author believes that the television film always moved between two limits: art as a symbolic good and commercial interest, where marketing strategies are necessary.

Keywords: *television film, feature film, TV series, TV program grid, serialization, art, audiovisual marketing.*

Television film genesis as an audiovisual species and its gradual imposition as a media phenomenon can vary greatly from country to country. Thus, American television has known from the very beginning a commercial regime of competition, depending overwhelmingly on advertising resources. In the 1950s, the “godfathers” of television programs (the so-called “sponsors” – a notion that has taken root in the former Soviet Union after the fall of Communism) seek success by funding programs or ambitious films. As the audience widened, advertising grew and some models of programs gained weight becoming outliers, which are still representative today for American broadcasting: TV series, contests with cash, comedy with prerecorded laughter. One of the “golden rules” of this televisual system can be summarized as: “A good program is not one that attracts the most audience, but one which alienates less” [1]. In other words, the audience (rating) counts.

It has already become a truism that the USA is the home of television series, the production of which has gradually spread throughout the world. From miniseries (4-10 episodes) it reached the point of series with hundreds of episodes (the production *Dallas*, which in the beginning of the

90s was introduced in the former Soviet audiovisual space) and even thousands of episodes (*The young and the restless*). Many series circulate counterfeit compositional schemes with banal subject lines. Under the circumstances of fierce competition in the media market, commercial broadcasters are certainly forced to exploit safe prerequisites for obtaining maximum audience. One executive of the Russian channel NTV, as if trying to connote that he is mastering perfectly “the American lessons”, says that no matter how many corrections of structure or vision we try the sitcom as a genre will always be action or police: “This type of audiovisual production is not shot for aesthetics. We are in the mass culture zone and the topics of media culture, however you twist it, are violence and sex. The TV series represent an industry which requires hundreds of thousands of dollars. Nobody invests this money in something that will not have a wide audience. Therefore, we follow a beaten track” [2].

Compared to the American television model, the western audiovisual proposes both a popular and elitist versions, at the same time, promoting productions with shades of education. Thus, the French television of the 50s and 60s relies on adaptations of classic writers for the small screen and the “teaching” model of RAI becomes predominant in Italy... Still, analysts of mass communication believe that the analysis of the Western televisual phenomenon becomes more consistent if we consider, first, the United Kingdom. The French writer and journalist Charles Dantzig says half jokingly half seriously: “What is a good series? One that is not French. On TV, art is either in British or American series” [3]. Many researchers of the televisual phenomenon ask themselves: what are the factors that ensure the prestige of the English

audiovisual? They are many, of course, but one is essential: UK has a good balance between public and private sectors of television.

In the former Soviet Union, media production has always been the focus of ideological “almighty and infallible” structures which directed and controlled the editorial policy of each subdivision of the so-called system of mass information and propaganda. The audiovisual was considered by officials as “the most important propaganda tool”, with the purpose of advocating for the rendering of the Communist Party’s policy of real life, television journalists and filmmakers being forced to propagate the Marxist-Leninist agenda as “having eternal life” and to combat any other ideology considered hostile. Therefore, substantial financial and human resources were mobilized for the development of televisual. Compared with movie theater, which always covered its expenses, Soviet television was exempted from the start of any return. The damping of production costs mechanisms operating, more or less effectively, in the western TV, were simply unimaginable in the country of the “final victory” of Socialism. Advertising had a decorative character without a well-defined utility.

At the same time, the Soviet Union television was able to include in its program grid many motion pictures produced in the studios of the republics of the former empire, which, by the way, were purchased at symbolic prices. In a sense, the fact that Soviet cinema failed to satisfy the “hunger” for ever-increasing television fiction, imported films being scheduled in very rare cases, served as an impetus in launching the production of TV film itself.

Another cause that has spurred the development of television film in post-Soviet cultural space is the ideological potential of this audiovisual product, its enormous impact on the public (an instant propaganda of “socialist values” to millions of viewers on an unprecedented scale). The flourishing of the “national in form and socialist in content” culture has always been an object of undisguised pride for the Soviet Union. Thus, an unbreakable connection between ideology, propaganda and art was cemented. Not surprisingly, one of the first books devoted to the audiovisual’s

“new muse”, published in the Soviet Union, was entitled *Television is an art* (1962). Hence, many educational programs, good financing of television film and the appearance of “Soviet school of TV theatre” have emerged, the latter being an area which indeed has remarkable results.

To understand this phenomenon, it is sufficient to reproduce the bitter words of the great Russian theater director Piotr Fomenko: “TV theater almost doesn’t exist anymore. I don’t find inappropriate at all this boring term of **literary theater**. Stage art, cinema, television combine together in the case of lecture theater of the audiovisual type and something very special arises. Although I am not an apologist for the televised art, television rarely enters my soul, because it expresses superficially both human joy and sorrow. Television is interesting primarily as information” [4].

Finally, the USSR television was always contrasted to the Western audiovisual, especially the commercial one in its origin, the production of which was deemed, helter-skelter, “tacky”, while some TV films made during Soviet times are truly memorable. It is somewhat strange, but despite the fact that producing a soap opera type of TV series is economically profitable and does not require special artistic qualities, Soviet television has never allowed itself such an experience. Consequently, television film formation in the ex-Soviet is very closely related, both in aesthetics and in terms of production, to cinema. Film studios were, from the very beginning, very sensitive to commands coming from television, making concert shows for the small screen, and later – entertainment shows, TV plays and television films themselves.

Another significant moment: the bigger the number of TV films became, the more discussions about a certain “specific” of this audiovisual product were heard. Undoubtedly, the Soviet Union was the country where huge amounts of papers were written about the specific of TV film and even dozens of doctoral theses were successfully defended, even though, in fact, the behaviour of many consumers of media is similar. In other words, for most of us watching a film at home, questions like: “Is it a motion picture?”, “Is it a TV film?” do not spring up. The main

argument here is that the media product should be as interesting as possible.

It seems a strange thing, but in the diversity of views circulated on television film one will not detect any reference about the social effect of this TV product or its potential resonance in public space, to use a concept of modern sociology. Nobody discussed the place and role of the program grid in the life of the television film or about the factors that favor the audience of a message through film. The importance of these issues, not at all of small matter, will be realized much later, when the aesthetic thinking will address the television movie in all its complexity – from the professional mode of assembly and management of the televised message (TV production management) to the efficient use of tools to promote symbolic goods (audiovisual marketing).

Thus, as television evolved, it became increasingly clear that its peculiarities – in relation to the art of cinema were not dictated solely by the live broadcast or screen size, but primarily by the audience size. At the same time, from an aesthetic perspective, another element of visual communication was realized the **constant** and **cyclical** nature of contacts established between the two poles of communication: the viewers and the small screen. Considering television a kind of periodic “audiovisual media” (spoken, for the most part), it can be concluded that the social or public effect generated by the perception of a TV show can sometimes be more powerful than the actual content of the respective media product, especially during “rush hour” (when the problem addressed by the TV message covers perfectly the public’s expectations). Therefore, the old dilemma that generated endless discussions on the relationship between film and TV show was solved as follows: even though not every TV show is a TV film, certainly every television film looks like a TV show.

The TV program grid or outline is a remarkable phenomenon, namely, “the business card” of a TV channel involving, simultaneously, the concept of **system** (programs and TV items more or less stable, which generated the profile of a TV station) and the notion of **process** (the televisual communication is characterized by a

continuum of messages that precede and succeed a specific audiovisual product). The program grid determines the special way of interaction between viewers and the audiovisual representation. The spectator needs not be prepared specifically for TV reception of the message as it is for the theatrical or cinematic art. The fact that the audiovisual product is planned in the usual TV program grids makes a TV film to form a part of everyday reality and vice versa; everyday life becomes a part of cultural and artistic event. If the existence form of cinematic art is the distinct work of art, the ontological status of the TV creation is the TV program grid, which entity is perceived in always constantly modern coordinates.

The program grid can be compared to a “TV hyper-reportage” which dominates the reality of a day or a week. Due to the fact that the TV’s relationship with the public has a recurring character, the small screen has become the extension for the exciting compositional technique called “next” (also known in the written press as the feuilleton novel or cinema: e.g. the *Fantômas* series). The production series, broadcast on fixed time intervals may have a closed organic structure such as the Romanian type (*The Idiot*, 10 episodes, after Dostoyevsky’s famous novel), in other cases it might benefit from an open structure with endless prolongations (series in which actors “pass” from one episode to another, which remind us of the compositional principles applied in folk genres).

In the early 90s, the Soviet audiovisual was invaded by Mexican and Brazilian soap operas, such as *Escrava Isaura* or *Los Ricos También Lloran*. After the Soviet Union collapse, the audiovisual market in Russia was recaptured by local TV series productions. True, the players have become bandits, *killers*, prostitutes and the so-called “new Russians” (some dubious characters who became rich overnight by fraudulent methods). In a very successful TV series (*The Brigade*), produced perfectly from a professional aspect, a bizarre character says, without batting an eye: “Society is crap, the bandits are good people.” Vladimir Pozner, a well-known television moderator, when asked what kind of values the Russian television propagates, said categorically: “None whatsoever. The objectives of our

producers are: a) to earn a lot of money; b) not to provoke the wrath of government". Thus, the biggest problem of Russian audiovisual is the fact that it's almost entirely commercial (including the channel *Rossia*, which, although considered a state channel, depends overwhelmingly on the amount of advertising).

Yet in recent years there have been significant trends in the dynamics of artistic programs. A true "transfiguration" came with the broadcast of TV show *The Idiot* (2003). For the first time, some stage actors of great talent as Inna Ciurikova, Yevgeny Mironov, Vladimir Mashkov etc. have acted in Russian TV series. The hit of this TV production **at all the segments of audience** triggered a wave of screenings, the great Russian classic literature returning to the small screen. The year 2005 was particularly fruitful in this regard, when the premiere of TV series *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, *Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, *The "Dead souls" dossier* based on previous written work by Nikolai Gogol, *The Government Inspector*, *Diary of a Madman* etc were released. We can also mention the transposition in audiovisual images of the providential novel *Demons* (2007) by Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky. But the show *The Idiot* caused another phenomenon that deserves to be studied by the analysts of mass communication using sociological instruments: the novel *The Idiot* reached unprecedented sales in Russian bookstores and an increased demand in public libraries. When can we expect such a revival in the televisual space of the Republic of Moldova?!

In the last decade of the twentieth century a paradigm shift happened in the cultural life of our country. Censorship was abolished and the cultural and artistic offer became significantly more diversified. New cultural institutions appeared, media outlets have multiplied. The long split between the so-called elite culture and mass culture was diminished, this fact being perceived initially by very few analysts of the cultural phenomenon. Our economic decline certainly conditioned by technological shortages and poor management model doesn't provide a rich framework for future evaluations. But the obvious lack of clear strategies for developing local audiovisual production and the large amount of huge problems that have gradually

accumulated in this huge institution "Teleradio-Moldova" cannot be puzzled out even today, though many years have passed since the disappearance of the USSR and all attempts to revive the company have failed.

The National Television is not yet aware of an indisputable truth: an audiovisual product has a chance of being successful only if it belongs to a major TV project which, moreover, is no stranger to the **serialization phenomenon** of the televisual communication. Thus, for as long as the audiovisual in the Soviet media space was not really concerned with the viewer, the audience size, the artistic show was adjusted to an aesthetic rigor, maintaining the great illusion that a "new muse" was born after the "image and likeness" of cinema.

In fact, from time to time, this illusion was supported by outstanding examples of modern audiovisual practice. As already mentioned, some theater productions or TV films (*Boris Godunov*, *Pechorin's Journal*, *A banal history* etc.) were aesthetic phenomena, par excellence, televised, even unique works. But in their case, there was never the question to look for consumers for themselves or, especially, buyers. With the onset of democratization of the Soviet society and the transition to a market economy, television had to readjust its strategies and editorial policies, being forced to become a truly mass phenomenon, taking into account the public's preferences. Under these conditions, the theater TV, as a genre, succumbed. Of course, some actions were undertaken to revive this audiovisual product, including at the state television of Moldova (years 1991-1998), but they did not have the desired effect. Those who survived were film series and TV productions that are best suited to the phenomenon of serialization: talk shows (political, family etc.), information synthesis broadcasts, reality shows, documentary style series programs, all kinds of game and entertainment shows (*Star Factory* or *How to become a millionaire*) etc.

On the other hand, in the archives of the National Television there is a huge amount of audiovisual production, very little of which is used. Archival sources can find a very useful usage for assembly documentaries. This is especially true in our media space where the

audiovisual has not fulfilled one of its primary functions – **to be an authentic “history in images” of the time**. People in the framework of our television could develop such projects as *Namedni (Just now) 1961-2000* (NTV, 2000) from the famous Russian journalist Leonid Parfionov. In this televised series, an hour long segment is dedicated to each year of that period, the daily living of the former USSR being presented on a double register, in a significant contrast, between the “official speech” and the actual life.

Archived audiovisual products should not be underestimated or considered as *déjà vu*. The **writing time** of a TV message (film, show etc.) is always updated when an eventual user “is put in contact” with the product. There’s a kind of “revival of the word”, to use an expression dear to literary theorist Victor Shklovski. And the television production in which space-time determination has similarities with the reportage formula never loses its genetic connection to the most specific televisual approach, namely, live streaming.

Nowadays, the creators of traditional and technological arts come to realize a saying

attributed to American futurist Alvin Toffler, expressed some years ago: “Art and money, the quality of the first and the quantity of the second are closely related” [5]. Perhaps we should not consider this assertion absolute, given the socio-cultural context of the Republic of Moldova, but rather analyze local television production in terms of audiovisual marketing, and we have to admit that it goes through an acute crisis of “profitability”.

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