

The East and gender in popular culture: the visual discourse of the harem in the modern television series

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Abstract - The article is devoted to the study of the peculiarities of gender marking of the artistic space of television series in the context of postcolonial theory and feminist criticism. By the material of artistic images of the harem cultural, national and gender features of representation of the East in modern mass cinema are studied. An attempt is made to consider the harem as a gender-marked space, the values of which are disputed by the carriers of the European consciousness. One of the features of the gender marking of the harem is a clear structuring of its space, which is characterized by gender and social stratification. The second feature of gender marking is due to the possibility/impossibility for the characters to observe the space. The possibility of observation is due to the presence of "male gaze", subjectivity and dominion. Concubines of the harem have no identity and are just objects for observation.

Keywords — *gender marking of space, visual discourse, harem.*

I. INTRODUCTION

What is the basis of the poetics of American cinema? We consider that it is based on the image of a strong personality, "self-made man". To achieve his goal (and the goal is freedom and independence), the hero must overcome serious trials of life and demonstrate considerable willpower.

The poetics of a strong personality turned out to be extremely popular among the adherents of popular culture. And it can be stated that in modern mass cinema "self-made man" is the central character. Storylines are built around this image, circumstances and characters of other heroes are created. This is especially true of cinematic series, which provide numerous representations of the "self-made man" image. One of the most popular images is a man faced tragic circumstances or treachery and restores justice. At the same

time series in which the "self-made man" image is represented by female characters are also popular. Series, in which the central figure is a woman, have a number of distinctive features: for example, they pay special attention to the love line. In addition, the artistic space of the series, in this case, acquires a specific gender marking. This marking is more evident in the series about the East and Eastern women.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to identify the gender marking features of the artistic space in the television series about the East in which the central figure is a woman.

The material for the study was the historical series "Magnificent century" (Turkey, 2011-2014), dedicated to the wife of the Turkish Sultan Suleiman - the Magnificent Hurrem, lived in the XV century. The choice of research material is due to several reasons.

The first reason is the story about Alexandra (Anastasia) Lisovskaya - the heroine prototype. By a twist of fate she was transported as a slave for the harem of the Turkish Sultan. Thanks to personal qualities and purposefulness Lisovskaya could pass a way from the ordinary concubine to the wife of the Ottoman Sultan. Her biography became the basis for the story devoted to the formation of a "self-made man".

Secondly, the series represents an interesting gender marking of art space, which is divided into male (the battlefield, the male half of the Palace, travel space) and women (harem). Our analysis may not be exhaustive, but, in our opinion, it presents the most representative work in terms of research objectives and our audience perception (in the concept of receptive aesthetics).

The object of the study is the visual discourse of the harem. The subject of research are the meanings and ideological principles represented in the analyzed series through the discourse of the harem.

The objectives of the study included analyzing the visual discourse of the harem in the context of the "self-made man" ideology and determining by what means and images the image of the harem is mythologized (according to R. Barthes), turning from real space into a visual metaphor.

Firstly, the novelty of the approach is based on the removing of the "harem" genre in mass cinema from the aesthetics plane into the space of cultural criticism, as well as the use of postmodern and feminist methodological apparatus to study the evolution of harem images in such works of modern mass culture as TV series.

Serials are close to the mass consciousness because their main purpose is to confirm models and patterns of behavior. They represent trivial images and in this context the imaginary sphere, collective dreams and myths, collective consciousness attitudes are actualized.

The methodology of the study is based on the ideas of postcolonial criticism of E. Said, the theory of the "Other", Visual group theory of L. Malvi, discourse analysis, narrative and structural-semiotic analysis of R. Barthes are also used.

The main theoretical message is that the harem in mass television series is a gender-marked symbolic space. It represents a collective image of traditional Eastern femininity, defined through connotations of humility, passivity, which is disputed by the person who shares European values – the main heroine.

We hope that this work will make a certain contribution to the study of the peculiarities of gender marking of space in the works of modern mass culture in the context of the East-West opposition. Until now, television series have not been analyzed within the framework of the discussed problems, the relevance of the study is determined by this fact.

The first studies on the semantics of the harem appeared in the XIX century. At this time, European countries (France, Russia, etc.) owned significant colonies in the East, and the cultural experience gained in the course of military, cultural, commercial interaction between the East and the West, needed to be comprehended.

At the turn of XX – XXI centuries interest in the history and Ethnography of the harem is still high ([1], [2], etc.). Additionally, in recent years, fiction and cinema have shown increased interest in the theme of the East as well as the theme of the harem. We consider that analyzed TV series was created due to this interest. In this series, the harem is represented as a space of collision of European and Eastern normativity: a beautiful European woman (Polish or Ukrainian) is captured and through the prism of her — European Christian normative perspective — the harem is represented as a chronotope of Eastern customs, on the one hand, she tries to adapt to these customs, on the other - tries to challenge them.

In modern mass culture the work of E. Said "Orientalism" [3] is the most significant one in the context

of the harem discourse study, in this work the author carried out postcolonial criticism of the European discourse of the East and its construction principles. As well as the works of I. Nojmann [4], H. Bhabha [5] and Y. Stavrakakis [6] who studied the problem of perception of the East in the European consciousness as gender and racial "Other". The well-known work of L. Nochlin "The Imaginary Orient" [7] is devoted to the study of the fantasy projections of the western subject to the space of the East. The issues of visual representation of the harem were considered by V. A. Sukovataya and E. G. Fisun, the authors studied the gender features of the East representation in the colonial consciousness of European empires of the XIX century on the material of Orientalist paintings [8].

III. RESULTS

It is obvious that in the series scenes the considered image of "harem" doesn't reflect the actual historical realities. In this case, the image of the harem and its inhabitants is the result of the cultural imagination of the filmmakers, based on certain cultural and ideological discourses of our time.

The series "Magnificent century» gives the background to the story – the abduction of a young woman on the eve of the wedding. The plot of the film is based on the relationships between the women of the harem - slaves, concubines, female relatives of the Sultan and independent, unwilling to live according to the established laws of the harem Hurrem.

The narrative in the "Magnificent century" is linear, it is a set of episodes showing Hurrem (in a conflict with other women of the harem and people in Sultan's entourage) passes through great trials. Episodes are based on the same plot: Hurrem is facing a problem which must be solved (conflicts with other concubines, the intrigues of the enemies, the fear that the Sultan will know about her misdeeds and so on.); search for a way of escaping a difficult situation (with the help of faithful servants or on her own); crucial moment, culmination (when the heroine is at the end of her rope); happy end (transition of Hurrem to a new social level or a fundamental improvement in relations with the Sultan).

The key theme is the harem. This is not just space where the Sultan's concubines are forced to live, it is a model of life and attitude of an Eastern woman, and her main values are fidelity to the tradition, obedience, lack of individual character traits, an objective attitude to herself. Harem – is the background for the representation of the personality development of the heroine, the myth about personal success of the "self-made man".

The harem, undoubtedly, occupies one of the central positions in the representations of the feminine space of the series. This space remains unchanged and untransformed throughout the series, in contrast to spaces marked as masculine. This is a private space in which an Oriental woman can perform several gender roles: maidservant, odalisque, mistress of Sultan, dancer. There is a strict social and role-based stratification in the harem: so, odalisques and mistresses of Sultan are intended for sexual relations; dancers entertain Sultan or his sons - Shahzade; maids are engaged in household issues, serving the owner. Each of

these roles is implemented in a specific type of space. There are rooms for servants and slaves, rooms for mistresses of the Sultan, chambers that belong to Valide Sultan – Sultan's mother and the head of the harem.

In the series the increase in the social status of the heroine is represented through her transition from one space of the harem to another. For example, she fights for the privilege to move to the chambers of Valide Sultan - this is, primarily, a struggle for leadership in the harem. As a result, the heroine has conquered these chambers, thus she leaves the space intended for the concubines, and goes beyond the harem hierarchy, occupies the top of the hierarchy.

The location of these chambers is also important. Firstly, they are located in a separate section, which marks the special social status of its owner. Secondly, their location allows Hurrem to observe the scenes of the harem (in former times she and other slaves were observed from this place by the former mistress of the harem - Valide Sultan). On the other hand, this is one of the few rooms with an exit to the terrace, allowing the owner to observe what is happening outside the Palace walls. Inhabitants of other spaces of the harem do not have this opportunity.

The image of Hurrem's chambers makes us turn to the concept of the "male gaze" considered by L. Mulvey. In her work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [9] the author notes that, precisely, it is the ability to observe, follow someone, remaining invisible to the object of observation i.e. to objectify the Other, indicates the "male" status in the culture, the one who has the power.

In the series, Hurrem suffers from the inability to observe what is happening in the "male" spaces of the Palace, which remain impenetrable for her, this space is controlled by the main antagonist of the heroine - Sultan Suleiman's friend and guardian of his chambers Ibrahim.

Another space inaccessible to the main heroine in the series is the so-called "Golden way". In the series, the image of the Golden Way becomes a visual metaphor for sancta sanctorum of the harem space, which the servants of the harem and Sultan's sisters closely guard against Hurrem. This space is intended for concubines preparing for the date with Sultan. It is noteworthy, that this space is not shown to the viewer, because, as we have already noted, the camera in the series represents the view of Hurrem, and she is deprived of the opportunity to observe the "Golden way".

If Hurrem is the bearer of the "male gaze" and gets the opportunity to observe others, then the other residents of the harem are deprived of this opportunity. The structure of Topkapi Palace, as it is shown in the series, provides little opportunity for the harem residents to see the Sultan or heirs. Concubines – is the object of observation, "toward-what-the-gaze-is-directed", in the terminology of L. Mulvey. Women of the harem must lower their eyes, meeting the Sultan, his mother, sisters, and heirs.

In the series there are many scenes where concubines are presented as an object of close observation. For example, slaves are observed by the buyers in the slave market, in the harem concubines are observed by the servants, who decide which of them will go on a date with the Sultan; also they are observed from the space of Valide's upper chambers.

Another feature of the harem space representation in the "Magnificent Century" series is the romanticization of everyday life, taking into account gender aspects. Topkapi Palace is presented as an aesthetically decorated space with magnificent long corridors, beautiful courtyards and gardens for the harem inhabitants, rooms with luxurious oriental decoration and equally luxurious baths. This is a gentrified space and the inhabitants of this space are unburdened with household problems.

Thus, the first feature of the gender marking of the harem is clear structuring of its space, which is characterized by gender and social stratification [10]. The main heroine disputes this stratification, tries to neutralize it regarding herself, but at the same time she wants to keep this stratification for other women of the harem. The second feature of gender marking is due to the possibility/impossibility for the characters to observe the space. The possibility of observation is due to the power, which may belong only to a man in the case of the 15th century Ottoman Empire. The main heroine strives to become the owner of the "male gaze", subjectivity, and it will be a guarantee that she will take the top position in the hierarchy of power relations. Other concubines of the harem have no identity and are just objects for observation

What are the meanings and attitudes of the harem discourse in the "Magnificent century" series? To answer this question, let us turn to the structural and semiotic analysis of R. Barthes, as it is presented in his work "Mythologies". R. Barthes [11] considers the formation mechanism of mythological and ideological systems in modern mass culture. The essence of this mechanism is that the new ideological meanings are considered as connotations to the already formed and functioning semiotic systems. As a result, these meanings can be quite explicit and at the same time not seem self-serving.

The series "Magnificent century" is built on the poetics of a strong personality, which embodies the main heroine - Hurrem. This poetics assumes, as we noted, that the main heroine overcomes serious trials of life, as a result of which she becomes stronger and more powerful.

The creators of the series included elements of "Oriental" in the traditional narrative for mass culture, thus creating a new version of the myth about the "self-made man". Connotations of the East are also realized through the visual discourse of the harem and the images of concubines. They represent the semantics of traditional society and traditional social relations structure in which a woman does not possess subjectivity and self-worth. She is perceived as an object of control, desire, observation.

It is noteworthy, that as soon as Hurrem achieves absolute power over the harem and the need to conquer its space disappears, new heroine appears - the concubine of one of her sons, named Nurbanu, who also begins her ascent, reproducing the way of Hurrem at another level. Filmmakers create a separate narrative for Nurbanu, reproducing already established pattern: a problem which must be solved, search for a way of escaping the difficult situation, culmination and happy end. Nurbanu, as well as Hurrem, is a bearer of European culture and European consciousness, she also enters the struggle for the harem space, trying to transform it for her own purposes.

IV. CONCLUSION

The visual discourse of the harem in the series "Magnificent century" acts as a context for the narrative about the fate of a "self-made man", a strong personality represented by the main heroine – Hurrem. The image of the harem is aestheticized and romanticized from a visual point of view. Its spaces are presented as aesthetically designed and comfortable for its inhabitants, household details of life in the harem are omitted in the series.

At the same time, the harem is presented as a gender-structured space in which each of its inhabitants has a certain role. The stability of the harem structure ensures strict compliance by all residents of the harem with the prescribed gender roles. Challenging this structure by the main heroine is the driving force for the development of the series narrative.

The activity of the main heroine in the harem is associated with the desire to achieve power, represented by the opportunity to observe others. This ability allows Hurrem to achieve the symbolic status of the subject, whereas the other concubines of the harem are objectified. They are perceived as an object of control, desire and observation. In the series, the possibility/impossibility of observing others is represented through a strictly hierarchical and structured space of the harem.

By visualizing and aestheticizing, the harem space is mythologized, turning from a real geographically defined place into a visual metaphor. This metaphor of traditional eastern femininity, which is determined by the connotations of humility, passivity, objectivity, hierarchical embeddedness. It is disputed by the main heroine, who embodies the image of a "self-made man". Challenging occurs through the desire to overcome the hierarchy and objectivity, through the right to "male gaze" and the right to observe, as the privilege of the subject.

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