

The Aesthetic Features of the TV Version of "The First Circle"

TV Adaptation by A. I. Solzhenitsyn, Director - Gleb Panfilov, 2006

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Abstract—The following article addresses the Russian TV version of "The First Circle". The author analyzes the style of Gleb Panfilov's directing and the principle images and motifs of the series. The study demonstrates that the screen reality maintains the correlation of the Solzhenitsyn novel's aesthetics with the cultural history of Western Europe, in particular, with some types of characters of drama and romance, some space compositions of theatre of different epochs.

Keywords—Alexander Solzhenitsyn; Soviet art; *Don Quixote*; screen culture; classical traditions; Renaissance individualism; theatre; Iron Curtain

I. INTRODUCTION

A prominent figure of Alexander Solzhenitsyn embraces a variety of spheres – writing, history and philosophy. The same goes to his novel *The First Circle* that can be regarded as a historic document, a philosophical work and an artistic form. This article analyzes "The First Circle" mainly as a novel, which was turned into a television script by the author, Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn. The subject of our analysis is Gleb Panfilov's film series as an integral aesthetic form, correlated with the novel.

In order to bring his novel to the screen, Solzhenitsyn has to reduce and abridge it. Many authors' reflections which cannot be summarized are left behind. But the abridgments of the original text lead not to the simplification of the meaning, but to the identification of those pre-realistic structures that live in the novel itself. The transformation of the novel into a small television series turned out to be similar to a theatrical approach to reality. The theater takes onto the stage only the most important, significant, symbolic details. [1] Gleb Panfilov's television series spontaneously goes the same way. It does not seek to create illusions of chance; it focuses on the semantic significance of every detail.

II. THE IMAGES OF SPACE AND COLOR ACCENTS

The refrain of the color scale accents not what the audience would expect from the film about the Stalin era. Gleb Panfilov does not use the red color of attributes of

Soviet power on camera; he also avoids a brownish color, which is traditional when shooting films about the Soviet era.

The prologue to each series is a wide shot of the landscape and the buildings of the Marfino sharashka (a prison). The dark forest, the blue sky, and the falling snow - it seems they are outside the history of the totalitarian state. The landscape is beautiful and clean. But the first thing that the audience can hear is songs of official Soviet culture. The songs fill the vast space with the sonorous optimistic voices of people belonging to the official culture of Stalin's time.

In the space and time of the series, the off-screen sound of Soviet songs is counterbalanced by the voice of Solzhenitsyn and the inner voice of his character, Innokentii Volodin. This way the series follows a polyphonic structure, revealing to the viewer a sounding inner world of the man who has been pampered by his native state, and yet decided to confront it. In addition, the voice of the author as both an eyewitness and a narrator accompanies his audience in a well-known "first circle", like Virgil accompanied Dante, and Dante – the readers of the "Divine Comedy" - in many circles of hell.

Blue and white colors reveal various shades of meaning, also accompanying the characters along the circle. A blue light fills the prisoners' sleeping room, depriving them of their right for the natural darkness. God once separated the darkness from the light. The Soviet government can abolish this. It is not darkness that is a symbol of the disturbed order of things, but the abolition of the natural light and darkness sequence.

The small buses which carry prisoners are blue and white, like the sky and clouds, or the sky and snow. Being tender and innocent, they do not look like the official transport of the totalitarian regime. And yet, they perform the functions of exactly that kind of transport.

However, there is a blue painted wall, near which Volodin stands before his arrest, examining family relics and as if saying goodbye to them. The authorities can use blue colours, but these are also the colors of hope. It was not by chance that a handkerchief in the cult song of the times of the Great Patriotic War «The Blue Headscarf», performed by the popular pop singer Klavdia Shulzhenko, was blue as well.

Blue is the color of peace, the color of the Vault of Heaven, the boundless airspace, and freedom.

The blue sky matches the blue overalls of the prisoners. Overalls are a neutral uniform. It does not degrade human dignity; it only denies the right to individual style and choice of color. However, such clothing is not capable of neutralizing individuality and personality as a whole. Quite to the contrary, it emphasizes the unique originality of the faces and facial expressions of the characters.

Whatever documentary touch, associated with the clothes of the Marfino inmates is, it objectively opens the reality of imprisonment and connects it with the phenomena of the theatrical culture of the early Soviet period.

Blue color refers to Meyerhold's overalls, which could, however, highlight the uniqueness of each character. [2] It was also a reference to "The Blue Blouse" propaganda teams of revolutionary art, which, despite the pathos of the society Sovietization in their activity, were closed in the early 1930s since there was found to be too much artistic freedom in their agitation [3]. Blue is the color of creativity and freedom.

Overalls are a universal article of clothing that is supposed to turn the one who wears them into an average man and a laborer. The paradox is that here all the prisoners do not only work twelve hours a day, but they are also Thinkers.

For all its external realism and even documentary, the novel itself is permeated with artistic connections with other pre-realistic styles, genres and art forms. The first circle is the circle of hell; the soul gets into it. And some fleshlessness of the prisoners, dressed in blue, is a sign of their special status. It is their souls that continue to live active lives. Violence over bodies is total, but violence against souls may lead to emotional breakthroughs beyond the prison walls. In the eighth series, we can see a hallucination of Lev Rubin (Alexei Kolubkov), when he, together with Sologdin (Igor Karyakin), finds himself in Moscow, on the embankment near the Kremlin walls. This episode is similar to the medieval genre of vision, a story about the journey of the soul into the other world [4]. By the way, the idea of the immortal soul is mentioned in the novel, when the author tells about Professor Chelnov, who believes that "a prisoner is probably the only one who has an immortal soul ... Chelnov did not conceal the fact that he borrowed this idea from Pierre Bezukhov" [5].

For the convicts, the world of everyday life beyond the prison walls is otherworldly. Rubin is carried away to the future, to the world of other speeds and urban design. In his mind, he hovers over reality. Moscow post-totalitarian future embraces the. In the foreground, cars start flashing, hiding the characters from spectators. The scene gradually makes the viewer believe in its objective reality. But what is real in this scene is the energy of the spiritual being of the exhausted Marfino inmates. The genre of vision about the other world merges with a genre that can be defined as intellectual fantasy. (In Russian cinema, this genre is embodied in such films as "Faust" by Alexander Sokurov,

"It's Hard to Be a God" by Alexei German, "Dust" by Sergey Loban.)

The dazzling whiteness of the snow continues through the white walls of Marfino. The white stone house with elements of pre-revolutionary classical architecture does not look like a prison. And yet, it is a prison. The guards make their rounds with the dog on a leash. Later, the camera will rise a little further and capture barbed wire and a watch tower with a team of sentries. Nevertheless, this house looks majestic, similar to the facade of the classic palace. The similarity becomes even more vivid through the use of the foreground, which is typical of the style of classicism. There is something poetic in this beginning, similar to the beginning of a tragedy.

Later, the right semicircle of iron beds, echoing the wall lines, will be shown in Marfino interior. It also refers to symmetrical, geometrically accurate scenes of classical and baroque theater. In this combination of prison objects of everyday life and classic stage settings, one can see a cruel irony of history. Even more ironic is the fact that the official workplace of the Soviet diplomat Volodin has a semicircular shape, because he also uses or reproduces classical architecture. By designing the scene, the director demonstrates the equanimity and independence of the cultural space that does not allow a totalitarian state to cut off prisoners from the culture of the past, from its traditional forms. The Stalin regime can appoint a person to a high position in an inhuman state. At the same time, it can do the opposite - deprive people of their homes, families, freedom of movement and activity. It is much more difficult though to separate them from historical and cultural space.

III. THE NON-SOVIET PECULIARITY OF CHARACTERS

The inconsistency and non-identity of non-Soviet external forms and their new Soviet semantification is one of the central motifs of the film. The prison does not look like prison. The prisoners do not look like prisoners in terms of their thoughts and behavior. Each of them seems to live in a certain role, being artistic in their own way. The old comic Abramson (Semyon Furman), the romantic adventurer Rodka (Oleg Kharitonov), and the gloomy reasoner Bobinin (Andrei Smirnov), feared by the Soviet minister. A visual image of the old professor Chelnov (Boris Romanov) has been inspired by the style of Renaissance painting. This is a collective image of a European scientist. Describing him in the novel, Solzhenitsyn remarked that Chelnov was like "either Descartes, or Archimedes." [6]

The viewers of the series witness a sequence of scenes revealing a total lack of freedom, which people resist in different ways depending on their social position. Minister Abakumov (Roman Madyanov) does not seem to act like a minister in his office. He feels cramped having to sit at the desk and do loads of paperwork. He lifts weights; his tennis ball lives on the most honorable and prominent place, like a springy geometric alternative to the heavy, huge portrait of the leader, painted in the manner of social realism. The small ball is opposed to the massive rectangle. The former does not feel though that Stalin is hanging over him as well.

Abakumov needs some elements of freedom here, in this "prison", which is actually true for any other office of a high rank official. Thanks to the ball and the sports cups, the office looks different from a typical office of a Soviet minister.

The series creates a more ambiguous image of Abakumov, highlighting and complicating his figure in comparison with the novel. As for the image of Dotti, it is not entirely given to severe critical realism. Olga Drozdova does not at all play the transformation of Volodin's wife into an ordinary bourgeois woman, which is so terribly described in the novel. The relations between Dotti and Volodin in the series are poetic, dating back to the traditions of the romanticism.

These deviations from the severe critical view of the novel are justified by the peculiarities of the visual dynamic form. Describing things with words is not as terrible and painful as living through them as an actor. Acting requires a greater variety of shades and less precision in moral assessments, which are often overshadowed by the characters' aesthetics and relationships. What is more, the narrator's voice, which persistently accompanies the reader in the novel, appears only occasionally in a film version. In the series, this voice fails to complete the picture of the terrible Soviet world with its intricate intonations and dynamic descriptions. So, the characters themselves must become more complex and contradictory. They exist as if by themselves, without the author's direct descriptions and evaluations.

A lot of movies and television series unwittingly teach their viewers to replace serious consideration of ethical problems with a simple division into 'allies' who are supposed to be good, and 'enemies' who are believed to be bad. In the series, Gleb Panfilov departs from this principle. He creates ideological opponents with different social beliefs and attitudes. In some characters, one cannot see anything "soviet", which would look like a mark of service to a totalitarian state. Their images could be perceived as "typically soviet" because that is what one would expect from the series about Soviet totalitarianism. But is there really so much soviet about the people of Stalin's time?

Innokentiy Volodin, performed by Dmitry Pevtsov, is different from an average Soviet diplomat, both in terms of his feelings and appearance. The scene in the bathroom after going on a visit confirms that Volodin is not a true diplomat. Pevtsov is a well-trained, athletic-built actor. Watching his grace and plasticity, one can feel the pain of the unexploited strength and self-will potential.

This character has a special place in the novel. The multiple-page narration covers only a few days before the Catholic Christmas in 1949. More than that, the main act of Volodin, his call to the American embassy, takes place at the very beginning of the narrative, which suggests that the author has no intention of giving a detailed explanation of what preceded that call. At the same time, this move requires a much greater determination from a man than, for example, Nerzhin's act of deciding not to condone the regime that refuses to deal with him. Yet, he does not commit any

obvious criminal offence that is subject to the death penalty. Even in the frame of the novel, Solzhenitsyn can only briefly tell, in hindsight, about the reasons for the call, and about Volodin's personal growth and transformation. It turns out to be impossible for the author to let the reader go through the process of rebirth together with the character and witness how he became a new one. Solzhenitsyn does not attempt to do this; he rather gives Volodin's figure some abstraction, understatement, incomplete determination, which demonstrates the author's flair.

People like Volodin always have some kind of irrationality, inexplicability and incontinence in a certain society. It does not matter why or how, but they appear when political power seems to be particularly mighty, the state is formidable and invincible, and individuals are especially dependent and seem to be clinging on to their personal achievements, privileges and prospects.

Pevtsov gives his character the features of a collective supranational and supra-historical individualistic loner who is inclined to break out of any system, violate any written laws and unwritten agreements. (By the way, his hat and cloak are in line with both the Soviet and Western men's fashion of the time; such clothes can be seen in old Soviet photographs as well as in Hitchcock's films, for example.) He ignores commonly accepted ideas of conscience, duty, and honour. The only person whom he owes anything is himself. And the only "institution" that Volodin could sacrifice everything for is a planetary world in its integrity and indivisibility.

In the interpretation of the series, Volodin calls from a street phone to America not only because he does hope to save the world from the Soviet atomic bomb. The main thing for him is that he has reached the point when he cannot resist the urge to perform an escapade, some wild act of self-preservation, because he must destroy his unacceptable well-being, stop serving the regime, and let the authorities know his attitude towards them. It is quite clear that he is the son of the Red Army commander, not a diplomat in his soul. It is difficult for him to restrain his inner world, to wait long and hide his hatred. He does not live a full life as long as he does not work for self-destruction.

What makes his image artistically unusual is the absence of the typical character's disregard for his life. It seems irrational that Volodin hopes for salvation after voluntarily involving himself in a situation that makes salvation impossible. He tends to desire the impossible, and he tries to combine his endless adventurous energy and the tragic act that leaves no options open. This way he reminds of a modern man, eager to save the world, but not willing to self-sacrifice, as if not convinced by a number of clear examples that an individual is rather limited in his opportunities when living in a totalitarian state.

Volodin, Dotty, Gleb Nerzhin with his «sharashka» friends, Roitman, and many other characters of the filmed "The First Circle" involuntarily accentuate the fact that there were quite a lot of non-Soviet in spirit and "breed" people on different steps of the Soviet public pyramid. That was

actually one of the reasons why the pyramid was not strong enough and passed into history.

There is another character - Volodin's uncle, an absolutely non-Soviet person who lives outside the social elite and outside «sharashka». It is quite revealing that in the series he has his own world - a local natural and artistic niche of the yard and the house. In the yard, there is a sculpture of a mother and child, a reminder of timeless values, always central, always life-giving. "Is that me?" Volodin asks, and Uncle Abner (Albert Filozov) nods, not because the figures bear resemblance to the little Innokentiy and his mother. They represent a random mother and child, today, long ago, any time. The paintings in Abner's house are also far from the Soviet standards of social realism, even in spite of the tractor drawn on the picture next to a beautiful girl looking out the window.

Everyday spiritual resistance to the totalitarian state becomes a cross-cutting theme in the series. Not all the contents of Uncle Abner's home are banned or semi-legal. There are not only good paintings and old newspapers that fix the political absurdity of Soviet history. Once in Abner's house a Don Quixote statuette falls off the shelf. This is a symbolic event, because Volodin, with his call to the American Embassy, acts like another Don Quixote (that is why he gets angry with himself - "Do not call, you silly Don Quixote"). And point about Don Quixote is not at all the battle with imaginary evil, imaginary giants, etc. It is about the readiness to fight, sometimes even being naïve, with something that it is impossible to beat at all, especially alone. Don Quixote, like Hamlet, «takes arms against a sea of troubles». [7]

The paradox of the figure of Don Quixote lies in the fact that it was not part of the forbidden culture. Don Quixote could be found in many houses and was part of the mass culture of Soviet-era. And since in many houses Don Quixote figurines lived up to the 21st century, these identification signs of Soviet everyday life can serve to bridge the gap between the modern viewer and the past of their native country which sometimes seems so distant and as if not their own.

Along with the replicated cast-iron Don Quixote figurines, unofficial meanings, non-Soviet ideals, and philosophy of individualism get into Soviet everyday life. And it is this statuette that the series focuses on. There are no giant Stalin banners in the film, no mighty statues; in general, there is no line of monumental Soviet sculpture that is part of "Culture-2", according to Vladimir Paperny's concept. [8] This is because the focus here is not just the era itself which has been deservedly and repeatedly debunked in various arts and sciences. The series, as well as the novel, puts an emphasis on personal ways of resistance to the era. That is why the inner connection of the characters with the archetypal image of Don Quixote is so important. It applies not only to Innokentiy and Abner, but also to Nerzhin, Gabrilovich, and even Lev Rubin in a sense. Galina Belaya's book "Don Quixotes of the 1920s", dedicated to revolutionary art, tells about the "moral stoicism of those who kept human values." [9] Such people, both in and

outside the sphere of art, existed not only in the 1920s, but also in the 1930s and in the 1940s. Every decade produced its own Don Quixotes.

Among the multi-figure compositions of '...Circle', among its trios and duets, there are two diametrically opposed figures: Uncle Avenir and Stalin. Usually, when it comes to traditional aesthetics, Stalin's figure is demonized; he is often painted as a clever, sly reasoner. This is the way he appears in anecdotes, for example. This is not a figure to vilify; people rather portray him in a flattering light or make him one of their funny jokes. Post-Soviet art, however, intends to turn Stalin into a farce old man, or into a striking fear, sick monster. [10] Not only in Soviet, but also in post-Soviet art, it was not typical to portray Stalin as losing self-control and panicking in fear for his life. Panfilov portrays Stalin (Igor Kvasha) as a neurotic villain. This is what he shares with another historical figure - Hitler, who was in most cases portrayed in the same way. [11]

Both the novel and the series remind us of a ballet performance with a succession of solo parts, duets, and trios. The division of the Soviet world into separate closed worlds, often inaccessible to one another, in the screen version creates the effect of changing scenes with various characters succeeding one another on the stage. This is how the stage of history works. Only occasional meetings of separate inter-Soviet worlds take place through their representatives.

IV. CONCLUSION

In all the episodes of the series, one can feel the atmosphere of terrible tension whenever a person tries to gain something for themselves in life, somehow physically save themselves, improve their state of mind or social position. The tension only goes away when the characters decide to abandon everything tempting, pleasant, physically reviving, and appropriate for human opportunities. They face the impossible, almost irresistible, and unbearable. Both Volodin and Gleb Nerzhin, who decided to return to the Gulag, abandoning the relatively comfortable life in Marfino, commit acts that are similar to those of the characters not even of the Renaissance, but rather of the ancient tragedy. Those lone heroes fought against fate, with the will of the gods, with sacralized statehood. Solzhenitsyn's lone heroes are struggling with the forces that claim to have divine powers and total impunity. The reality itself captured by the authors speaks the language of tragedy.

Summing up, it should be stated that the adaptation of the novel "The First Circle", directed by Gleb Panfilov, emphasizes the correlation of the novel's aesthetics with the cultural history of Western Europe, in particular, with some forms of Western European theatre, drama, romance, and architecture of different epochs. The main characters of the novel and the series are a type of tragic individualists, in many ways similar to the characters of the ancient and Renaissance tragedy, and partly – of the novels typical of the Baroque era. At the same time, what prevails in the series, as well as in the novel, is the author's original design of space, environment, and characters' images that portray Soviet people and the world of the Stalin era. All these features of

aesthetics attest to Solzhenitsyn's inner freedom as a writer opposed to the circumstances of the Iron Curtain. The aesthetics of the series accentuates the existence of the integrity of the spiritual space of European culture, including the artistic world of the film adaptation "The First Circle".

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