

HISTORY, PATRIOTISM AND MAN: A CASE STUDY OF THE ONE-SHOT FILM BY B. LIZNEV "POLK, SMIRNO!"

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Abstract

The architectonics and poetics of B.A. Liznev one-shot film "Polk, Smirno!" (2006) based on antique photograph are considered.

The features of the director's cinematic style are studied, and the screen means of expression used by Boris Liznev to reveal the historical outline and the image of an ordinary soldier at war are described: intra-frame editing and sound editing, color symbolism, defects of photo and a storyline of Peter the soldier.

In conclusion the methods of modern conceptualisation of historical events and patriotism through documentary and artistic representation combined are characterised.

Key words: history, patriotism, hero, one-shot film, intra-frame editing, architectonics, poetics, semi-documentary

INTRODUCTION

In one of his interviews (Zhogolev, 2009), B. Liznev said, "Students from GIC would always complain they did not have those and other things.... No money for filming, no money to pay actors for narrations..." He answered in response that, "If you have something at the bottom of your heart you will shoot a film virtually out of nothing." He made the case of his words by shooting that film [*Polk, Smirno! (Regiment! To Attention!)* – author's note].

Boris Alexandrovich Liznev (or: Liznyov; pronounced as [lɪznɐjɔf]) is a multiple-times winner of international and Russian documentary film festivals. His creative work is centered around topics of history, life and thought of people living in the stream of times, from famous figures (*Tsarskoe Delo*, *Posledny Bal*, *Skobelevsky March*, *Morning Star*) to ordinary people (*Pryamoy Put*, *Posledny Boy*, *Veshky nad Rekoy*, *Vologodskie*, *Tambovskie*, *Tverskie*, *Neostavlennye*, etc.).

The twenty-minute short film *Polk, Smirno!* (2006), distinguished at multiple international mini-movie contests, has been made by innovative direction techniques. It produces an outstanding emotional impact and tells about the tragic fate of the Russian army and battles at Russia's borders in the early XX century, showcased in lives of soldiers and officers in an old-time picture.

The drama of the whole film is built around one single documentary shot dated 1903 which is a photograph of the Kexholm lifeguard regiment. Several years ago this picture became famous all over the Internet in Russian, it was kept in Tver, Saint-Petersburg, Barnaul and later exhibited in the history museum in Gomel (Belarus). Since the day of foundation, the renowned regiment roamed the length and breadth of Russian lands right to the Asian borders, taken part in 20 wars and a lot of sea campaigns, set foot in Turkey, Persia, Germany, Denmark, England, Portugal, Greece, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, Rumania, and Bulgaria (Pozharskaja, 2001). A lot of famous people served in the regiment, including M. Yu. Lermontov's father, Ya. Govorov MD, political and historical essayist I. Solonevich, etc. The picture was taken in 1903 on a 65x110 cm silver photoplate on the occasion of the resignation of the Regiment Commander. The picture shows around one thousand soldiers and officers and a padre. The perfect photographic work has made it possible to capture groups of people in their entirety as well as faces of individual soldiers. The subject matter of this paper is the single heroic image formed by this multitude of people. The goal of the study is to identify the visual and expressive means used by Boris Liznev to create this image in his film.

1. CLOSE LOOK AT THE FACE INSTEAD OF GENRE TRICKERY

The Director has intentionally included in the film very few components typical of historical and historical-revolutionary motion pictures with their characteristic *ceremonial official narrative*, adventurousness, *adventures motifs and means of detective plot* (Razlogov, 2011, p. 121, p. 123); as a result, the film text is neither a work of agitprop nor a piece of cynicism. The goal of Liznev who makes alternative cinema in the era of glamorous TV skits and buffoonery is to study the life of face (*myth* as interpreted by A. Losev) in concentrated form (Kataeva, 2014). He thus takes the regiment's *collective memory* to show the development of the world, captured in a *model of history* (Bazin). Liznev takes a close look at the faces of the soldiers: each of them is someone's son, husband, or brother and has a unique character, thoughts, and lifeline. The cinematographic close-up makes it possible to produce the imprint<...> of the unique human experience of the kind (Bogachev, 2007), and show the transfigured appearance and soul. Unlike many films, where old-time pictures are shown in photo collages with narrations at the background (Liznev has also shot such films), *Polk, Smirno!* is static and dynamic at once: it combines pictures with film frames and thus visualizes the soldiers in the photograph as people involved in real events, i.e., war, captivity, and even death.

We should say that long takes and the reconstructive and dramatized trends developed by Liznev to their absolute maximum are common features of documental historical films (Bergan, p. 33), that go back to the early days of silent films.

The Director reconstructs the recollections of the soldiers from the renowned regiment. Thus he draws the line of historical acceptability to lead the viewer to self-consistent thinking about the principles that have formed historical and patriotic concepts at all times: the viewer can once again think over the events of the past and understand the role of common soldiers at war.

Developing his cinematic concept on expertise and experience of documental traditions Liznev doesn't reject opportunities of *new electronic era*. He (in: Era Novogo Kino) considers that smart use of new technologies combined with history, experience, ideal and past is able to hit mainstream hackneyed phrases like a wracking ball, and also provides a better approach to Man, "zoom" his mental and inner world. However, awareness and understanding of Man and Life is still off to do.

2. INTRA-FRAME EDITING AS A NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Intra-frame editing is intended to attain the feeling of action in motion pictures. *Polk, Smirno!* has been made by the complex technique of continuous filming, i.e., one shot, extended take, long take. It has long been a directors' dream to make a film without cuts but 20 years ago that was technically impossible. The first attempt was made by Alfred Joseph Hitchcock in 1948 who shot his famous crime thriller *Rope* with only nine cuts. The first feature film without cuts was made in 2002 by Russian director Alexander Sokurov who shot his legendary *Russian Ark*. In April 2014 director from Kazakhstan Alexey Gorlov presented his outstanding full-length social drama *Istoriya Odnoy Starushki* shot without cut-ins and cuts, from 23 camera locations. Long-take filming of episodes or whole-length motion pictures is a special form of art and trademark feature of such cinematographers as J.-L. Godard, Cl. Lelouch, M. Kalatozov, A. Tarkovsky, M. Antonioni, M. Scorsese, T. Angelopoulos.

Modern musicians and representatives of show-business sometimes use one-shot technic as a concept for video clips, advertising and humorous shows. For example, a Canadian rock band Sum 41 shots their music video *Some say* (2004) in one continuous shot featuring reverse editing of people doing various things and objects flying in the reverse order. A famous promotional video *Philips Carousel* created by Stink Digital and Adam Berg and won at "Cannes Lions" (2009) runs as an endless loop representing an epic frozen moment cops and robbers shootout sequence (running time – 00:02:19). Andrew Thomas Huang's music video for Bjork's *Stonemilker* (2015) featuring 360 degree virtual reality of a small island put in the one shot, *Kiesza – Hideaway Parody* by Bonya & Kuzmich (2014) popular in Russian social networks, and many others do share some creative similarities with one-shot pieces posted in the past but characterize the frequency of these types of projects are increasing.

This technology allows every director to embody his artistic objective and try create his unique image. However, all one-shot and long-take films have a common feature which is the feeling of integrity of time and space and unity of all participants in the action.

Liznev following his teacher of film photography A. Galperin (and, of course, ideas of A. Tarkovsky) considers cinema sculpting of time and of space. He claims (in: Era novogo kino) that the documentary intra-frame editing as a fixing the stream of time by itself is not an achievement if the author does not summarize it to the conceptual metaphor. This is the characteristic essence of the *loving observation* technique typical of all soil-bound Russian documental filmmakers: flexible view of life, where truth and beauty coexist (Donets, 2001).

Boris Liznev had no doubts when he had to choose the technique of historical filmmaking and creating a dramatic narrative effect: "The one-shot technique was the only condition for getting into this photograph, with continuous panning of people who talk about their lifetime and themselves. Any disruption or, in cinema terms, cut would have broken the unity of time, space, and participants in the event. The uniqueness of the epic photo work, that had captured not only the people but the spirit of the times, would have been lost (Ermakova, 2013, p. 221).

Liznev's camera works in constant motion, carrying away into the mental structure with a stream of associations and helping to weave the artistic texture of the picture. The film does not have any single still frames and extreme close ups (Italian shots). The stop frame and extreme close up have always been integral features of filmmaking; they can redirect the viewer's focus from the world of the film proper to its fixer (film's completeness and delusiveness of its world) and are thus unnatural for the director who animates history in real time. The camera is getting closer to the soldiers' faces, thus making their image more lyrical and individualized, and then moving farther away when it is necessary to expand the limits of the real and memorial environment; panning is applied only when it is necessary to capture the regiment's unity (episode with the marching song: 00:08:09.-00:08:30).

It is interesting that the film was made without a camera in the usual sense and without animation stand, just in After Effects 6.5 and Photoshop CS2 on a common Pentium IV PC. Together with the film director, the operator and art-director of computer graphics and animation Nikolay Shiroky would virtually outline the course of the camera on the computer so as to attain the virtual camera effect and shoot by photographs.

The production team had to resolve technical difficulties both, while scanning the photograph from the thick silvered plate, where each warrior was captured exceptionally sharp and clear, and when restoring the computer image: the faces and the service shirts were cleaned of dust and scratches millimeter by millimeter, missing parts of the clothes were reconstructed... After they had watched the film, some professional photographers called this technique *creative thuggery*; they would say the director had no right to make such violent modifications to the historical document (Ermakova, 2013, p. 223). However, Liznev is not a restorer, he is a cinematographer. The photograph composition was dramaturgically converted into the film composition, where the key task was to show the spirit of the unity and patriotism of the warriors.

3. SOUND EDITING

Sound editing bears special significance for the considered film: it makes use of regiment songs, monologs, dialogs, natural sound, and narrator's voiceover. The soldiers' characters are created, first of all, by voicing the correspondence with their families and friends. The lines from the battle front and home front are united in a single film image. The letters are authentic and date back to the early twentieth century. However, the faces on the photograph are different from the true addressers.

The sound makes it possible to create a very strong counterpoint: the flat silent figures from the photograph begin to talk with us, sing and tell their jokes, the characters are becoming stereophonic, and the action is developing. It is interesting that the professional narrator tells only the story of the regiment in the beginning of the film, whereas the film in general is voiced not by actors but by voices from everyday life that complete the intimate atmosphere of the correspondence and combine with the

striking faces of the warriors. A structure is developing that is read at two levels: the working plot together with its historical background makes us consider the director's idea from the standpoint of the dominant social ideal of those days.

Another feature of the film is interactive background music. The soundtrack created by a composer Lyudmila Volkova includes instruments different in their origin and classification: accordion, balalaika, cello, chorus with vocalize and bells and divided into pieces where three main themes prevail: Unity, Dreams of the Village, Dreams of Death. The theme of Unity enhanced with a speech of characters includes concepts of comradeship, togetherness, unity of nations, minds, of high and low. Story of the Turkish child Ayşe found at her dying mother's side by one of the soldiers begins against the background of quick intra-frame motion, tint of a photo becoming bloody and sound description of the advance on Adrianople where the Turks were defeated and fled: "...Once I see at the side of the road – there's a little girl-Turk, barely alive lying on the ground <...> I picked her up, gave her to our fellows from regimental convoy. So we were having the daughter of regiment Ayşe, or Masha of Kexholm. We took care of her as our own daughter. And recently we have been seeing her off. Mary has married ..." The global concepts of mercy and humaneness embodied in the image of Mary Kexholmsky who really worked as a nurse during the First World War, begin to resound in the final memories about the angel of mercy embroidered with a "red cross on her bosom" visiting soldiers in the Austrian captivity and caring about Peter the soldier.

The film reaches its pinnacle when the wounded Russian soldiers captured by the Austrians are singing Russian anthem *God, Save the Emperor!* when they are in the infirmary – a true fact from the history of WWI. They knew they would be put to the solitary confinement unit to die. However, the want to feel the unity and the comrades' shoulder for the last time in their lives is stronger than the fear of death. They do not succumb to the state of captivity, otherwise they would have betrayed their ideas of duty and honor. "We are going to die but we do not care...we shall live on in peoples' memories... a Russian nurse with a red cross on her bosom will come back to the homeland and tell everybody that we are not traitors and would never have surrendered to the enemy had we not been wounded..." According to the authentic recollections at the heart of this episode, the singing of the wounded Russian warriors brought into tears even one Austrian officer; feeling the victory of the spirit over death, cowardliness, and betrayal, he *lifted his sword as a sign of respect* (Zhogolev, 2009).

Music, effects, songs, upsound of battle and distinguish voice of soldiers – all these allow to capture in time "frame by frame" not only the audience's attention, but to explain Liznev's idea (in: the Interview Pir Rusofobov) about making a documentary as storage of history: "The big lie of feature films requires a lot of money. But it's very difficult to buy a documentary. <...> Documentary is dangerous. At least, it gives an opportunity to speak out, to fight for the truth".

4. COLOUR SYMBOLISM AND IMAGE DEFECTS AS CINEMATIC TECHNIQUES

From fiction films and television we traditionally got used that screen colour mimetically represents chromatic diversity of the world; in documentaries world is mainly depicted as black and white – palette of History and Newsreel. Lotman (1973, pp. 26-27) has noticed that in modern movies where colour and black-and-white pieces of tape are combined, the first one is linked with the storytelling as *art*, and the second one is used as a *reference* to reality on the other side of the screen.

The poetics of colour in *Polk, Smirno!* by Boris Liznev needs a special case study. Although the antique photograph and the film are black and white, various hues, chroma and lightness appear with the development of the action: yellow, grey, different shades of red, and blue filters are used to match some episodes and express director's thinking (see Figure 1. Palette and Colour Dynamics in the Film *Polk, Smirno! (Regiment! To Attention!)*).

The noted Slavonic scholar from Poland Jerzy Faryno (2004, p. 323) claimed that "not being a mandatory and being always optional colour term implemented into the creative work is always significant". Colour on the screen as well as in fiction in some cases provides ideas and outlook of a concrete cultural paradigm, in others, gets its own meaning within a specific artistic universe of an

author or a specific singular system of signs. Faryno (2004, p. 322) instances *Człowiek z Marmuru* (1977) by Andrzej Wajda as a film having 3 colour systems: hyper-realistic; propaganda poster-shooting; black and white newsreel penciled by censors in 1950th.

Liznev's cinema combines traditional chromatic knowledge and with individual colour perception of the world. The art director of *Polk, Smirno!* Nikolay Shiroky also took a leaf out of his teacher V. Kobrin's cinematic experiments with colour. Each change in colour appearing in the movie *Polk, Smirno!* becomes the focus of its main themes. When the soldiers are talking before the decisive combat the picture is painted in light burgundy. The symbolism of red is simple, it shows the sincerity and kindness, which persists in the hearts of men in spite of severe wounds and contusions. However, red is ambivalent in film and combines meanings of love, struggle and death. The turning-point of a film when the soldiers go into battle is mostly saturated with colours: burgundy red turns into scarlet colour associated with blood and battle, then changes to ice blue when soldiers die (00:14:35). Liznev shows death as the line between the scarlet and the ice blue color, on which their conversion occurs.



Figure 1. Palette and Colour Dynamics in the Film *Polk, Smirno! (Regiment! To Attention!)*

The symbolism of red installs in the narration a picture of the world destruction as described in the Apocalypse: the colour of blood and fire has poured heaven and earth (John 8:7, 8, 10). In mythopoetic traditions red is also a symbol of fire. According to popular eschatological views, the world was created and will be destroyed by fire (Serov, p. 397). Several modern-age authors treated the red colour as the symbol of the chaos that would make Russia suffer for decades (A. Bely). The description of war as the red *doomsday on Earth* is intensified by the soundtrack, when the roll of drums, shouts, and screaming of shells serve as the background for the prayer and meditation of the padre (00:13:30): "I was watching the banner throbbing and leading the harmonious and close march of our renowned regiment. My heart was low. I was badly yearning for joining the warriors, entering their rows, and going to the place from where I could never come back. Surely, God could not have let that war happen. But he did allow this doomsday on Earth. And now...O, Lord Jesus Christ, please, save us! O, Our Lady, please, help us! O, Saint George, please, support us!"

The ice blue colour and alarming music introduce the concept of eternal sleep and point to the other world: "It was really creepy. I was alone among thousands of dead bodies of our brothers...Suddenly I

felt the dead began to stir. They would get up and go. Then I heard heartbreaking moans of the wounded...It was really a nightmare in waking. I was about to fall unconscious when somebody came up to me.” Blue is generally perceived as the colour of the skies, calling for eternity. In this case, however, it is endowed with bad connotations; this is typical of folk culture, where blue water and whirlpool are perceived as places, where devils hide (Vasisilevich, p. 53). Blue is also the color of emptiness, the glassy blue light that covered the Unified State in Zamyatin’s dystopy *We*. It is also used by some auteur filmmakers to symbolize superhuman sadness. For example, soldiers from *The Tunnel* episode in the film *Dreams* (1990) by Akira Kurosawa are having light blue faces, signifying that they are dead.

Sunny warm colour marking the first and the last moments of the film (regiment’s picture and the picture of the forest) help to visualize the patriotic idea that “we shall live on in peoples’ memories...”

The Liznev’s experience shows also that at the current stage of the film-making and film memory of its own history as black and white achromatic origins are still functioning as a sign of the most true or unfabled (as the grey achromatic world of an old photograph, whereas colour shots relate with either composed and modeled reality, or else with a special (fabulous, sacral, ideal, etc.) hyper-reality.

In *Polk, Smirno!* photographic defects are used as artistic devices. For example, the director lays emphasis on a torn piece of picture when he wishes to create a vision of battle and an image of war. He makes use of the blurred silhouettes in the middle of the picture, sharp changes in roughness, and closed eyes of some soldiers to create a specific film text locus for soldiers who will never come back from the battle fields: the faces of the dead are blurred and static.

5. STORYLINE OF PETER THE SOLDIER

Themes of Unity, Dreams of the Village, Dreams of Death focus in the character of Peter the soldier (Petyenka) impersonated in the portray of unknown young man shown at the photo three times (00:02:27; 00:09:10; 00:18:11) at the background of his letters and the letters of his family. United with the stream of images rising out of voices of ordinary soldiers, officers, general and the priest, a storyline of Peter makes the global image of People and Warrior.

Officer is writing: “To understand your soldiers – you should love them. Otherwise, how to command?”

Soldier is writing: “Grandfather, I’m a bit offended! Why don’t you write anything about the news and harvest?”

Divisional General gives a riddle to one of the soldiers: “What if they kill me, then put in a coffin, and you will be put as a safeguard. And then I will rise up from the grave. What then will you do?”

Peter’s father is writing: “We are having disaster, the horse kicked mother. I took her to the hospital. Would to God that she could recover. I am very lonely now”

Peter is writing: “Dear parents! I am wounded, I am in captivity. Here, in the barracks, there are lots of us lying, and many are dying every day. I’ll die too”.

The camera chooses the person that seems to be: that’s it, this soldier, this officer who wrote this letter. The camera moves slowly and endlessly shooting faces, faces, faces ...

The author is aimed at not making an information or historical film. He develops historical analogy by a free combination of close-ups of faces and diaries of soldiers until 1914 (Ermakova, p. 224): “After all, the regiment captured at photo is accidental. It could be Semyonovsky or Pavlovsky Regiment. ... that’s why the reflections of the warriors about life and war were the most important in film. We have tried to integrate the correspondence from the battle front and home front in a single cinematic image”.

The storyline of Peter the soldier not only expands the concept of the patriotic but also helps to show the mindset of a Man of the People. The letter of Peter’s father to the front is repeated several times as a symbol of fatherly love and amor patriae. In the beginning of the film we hear lines from the letter from Peter’s parents: his father writes they have sold the cow and bought him a jacket with a chevron

because they are sure that the war will end soon and Peter will be back. Peter gets wounded in a battle and falls ill with tuberculosis. He will not last long and asks to be returned home for burial in his home ground. It seems an impossibility but he is really let go to die in the fatherland. Having come back home, Peter lives only three more hours. His father writes: "We are Peter's mother and father, and we are writing to tell you that we do not regret that we have given the life of our son for the Faith, Czar, and Country."

After these words the final scene crossfades from the picture of the regiment and shows trees in a Russian forest standing in the sun at the background of the music (the only cut in the film). The forest embodies the country, its firmness, unity, and continuity of generations. The death of the only son, who was possibly the only child of his parents, does not make them disappointed or reconsider their values. This family perceives itself as part of the people.

Forest, sky and water – these three elements appear at the end of all movies by Boris Liznev and relate to eternity, to the original mythological event where people have no power to change anything.

CONCLUSION

In his film *Polk, Smirno!* Boris Liznev identifies the exceptional place of common people in the continuum of history.

The film is made in two poetic manners: documentary and feature film devices produce harmonic coexistence in the one-shot film environment. The polyphony of music and voices helps to reconstruct the artistic canvas without any intra-frame editing, actors, effects, and intricate illusionist techniques. The string of images produces the single image of a heroic soldier and the story of the life and views of a man involved in making the history of his country. This image is far more impressive than dozens of wordy and full-length narrations.

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