

Natalia Nikoriak

Aliona Matiychak

Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University

Ukraine, Chernivtsi

Socialist Realism Markers in Biopics "Taras Shevchenko"

The dynamics of the interpretation of Kobzar image in the film biographies "Taras Shevchenko" (1926) and "Taras Shevchenko" (1951) is quite demonstrative in the realm of the general formation specificity of the "pantheon of heroes" of the Soviet regime. Still in the 1926 biopic by P. Chardynin the first attempts to adapt Shevchenko's biography and creative heritage to the needs of Soviet ideology were made. Architectonically the film consists of a series of novellas chronicling the writer's life – from childhood to his death. However, the biographical canvas is filled with socialist realism codes, creating a "convenient" image for the Soviet authorities. Traditional Soviet ideologemes appear in the 1926 biopic: "a prophet-kobzar", "an autodidact artist-serf", "a rebel", "a fighter for the liberation of the oppressed and dejected". This film is believed to start the creation of a new image of Kobzar as "a forerunner of modern communist ideas." The 1951 film by I. Savchenko, shot on the eve of 90th anniversary of Kobzar's death, was a confirmation of the paradigm shift. Here, the attention is focused on the period of Shevchenko's exile, on his sufferings in the captivity. The film creates a heroic image of Shevchenko as "a symbol of the proletarian struggle" and "a fighter for socialist ideals". Soviet mythologemes actively appear in the 1951 biopic – "a poet-fighter", "a 'petrel' of the revolution", "a peasant poet", "a younger brother of the Russian social democrats". The film became a demonstrative example of the embodiment of the ideological socialist realism narrative and cinematographic Shevchenkiana had to be guided by it in the following decades.

Keywords: "Taras Shevchenko", P. Chardynin, I. Savchenko, biopic

The modern revision of both the literary heritage and the film heritage is quite a difficult task. Especially when it comes to the period of Soviet totalitarianism, where many artists had to balance on the edge of party-dogmatic postulates and loyalty to the Art, to make (or not make) forced compromises with the regime in order to preserve national paradigms. Vadym Skurativskyi observes: "Seventy-year history of Ukrainian post-Soviet cinema consists <...> of a dramatic dialectics of loyal, "nationwide" and specifically national and personal-authorial inceptions" (Skurativskyi 2006: 86). On this difficult path, Ukrainian cinema both achieved obvious success and equally suffered obvious defeats: "On the one hand, the unique model of the cinematographic industry of that time allowed it to accumulate a huge technical potential, to concentrate almost unique technical personnel in terms of its quantity and quality; the staff were on par in terms of their professional level to the corresponding workshops of foreign cinema. On the second hand, the totalitarian system sought to use all this potential exclusively for achieving its political goals and ambitions. Resorting to unconditional administration in the realm of cinema, the administration that was often despotic, even brutal" (Skurativskyi, 2006, p. 86). That is why we have a huge legacy of filmmakers, recognized as the "most advanced", "progressive" examples, which today serve only as illustrative material for ideocratic manipulation of the consciousness of recipients with relevant political passwords and ideologemes or vivid examples of the "Aesopian language" used by the artists of the Soviet era.

In the cinematographic legacy, socialist realist "totalitarianism" demonstrably manifested itself in the genre of film biography. Primarily, biographical films are intended to present reliable information about the life and activities of an outstanding personality, and not to be a repeater of the key theses of socialist realism aesthetics or to perform tasks with propagandistic and ideological aim. A special place among biopics was occupied by biographies of writers whose lives attracted a wide audience. Because a writer is not only an interesting personality, they most vividly embody the person type in the context of a certain historical era. The artist of the word is a peculiar character of that time, whose social and spiritual life is reflected in their fate. So, by filming the writer's biography, the author gets closer to the culture of one or another period, allows the audience to clearly feel the atmosphere of the era – not only the general mentality, but also social life in all its concreteness. It was this genre concept that the Soviet ideologues adopted in order to create a new ideocratic mythology.

Hence, the aim of the paper is to analyze the dynamics of the socialist realism methods of interpreting the image of Taras Shevchenko in the film biographies "Taras Shevchenko" (1926) and "Taras Shevchenko" (1951), focusing individually and on the general formation specifics of the "pantheon of heroes" within this political regime.

According to Oksana Volosheniuk, the film representation of Taras Shevchenko should be considered primarily "within the framework of the memorial cult, the Soviet reception of which began to be actively formed in the 1920s" (Volosheniuk 2013: 111). At that time, the Bolsheviks began to actively form a kind of pantheon of heroes of the new political regime, including Shevchenko to these historical and progressive figures. As a result, active popularization of the poet's heritage began in Soviet society not only through monuments that were supposed to glorify the "singer of people's sufferings", "fighter against oppressors", "fighter for freedom", but also through the opening of museums and the publication of the "correct" literature: scientific, pedagogical, popular science publications about his life, art and poetry. In those studies, the traditional ideologemes: "national prophet-kobzar", "genius self-taught serf", "rebel", "revolutionary", "poet of the revolution", "fighter for the liberation of the oppressed and dejected" were articulated and spread; they became indicative markers of the Soviet image of the poet.

Cinematographers also joined the formation of the prophet image and planned to release a film for the 112th anniversary of the artist's birthday, which would become a "monument worthy of the poet." The metaphor of the monument was not chosen by chance; according to the filmmakers, "the stone of the granite monument will never give a full idea of T.G. Shevchenko's genius, and even more so will not give a picture of his environment and those historical events connected with his life. And such a stone bust standing in a certain place, no matter how artistic and skillful it may be, can only be seen by 'pilgrims'" (Fartuchnyi, 1926, p. 21). Therefore, "the role of such a monument film is huge, because it will be seen, understood, felt by millions of people: Ukrainians, Russians and generally working people of the whole world," noted the professional press of the time. "Such a film has an eternal character. As a monument, it will never become outdated and will appear on the screens every year on the anniversary of Taras Hryhorovych, demonstrated to the audience of millions" (Fartuchny, 1926, p. 21). Monumentality, as one of the typical features of socialist realism, is shown here in the fullest way.

Thus, in 1926 the two-part silent film "Taras Shevchenko" directed by Petro Chardynin, was released at the First Film Factory of VUFKU (All-Ukrainian Photo and Cinema Administration) in Odesa; this historical-biographical film is considered to be the "first Ukrainian biopic" (*Taras Shevchenko in cinema...* 2020). The script for the film was written by Mykhailo Panchenko and Dmytro Buzko. The camera operator was Boris Zavelev, the film editor was the famous poet Mykhailo Semenko. The role of Taras was performed by Vasyl Ludvynskyi (childhood) and Amvrosii Buchma, one of the "most outstanding Ukrainian actors at the time" (Trimbach, 2006, p. 59). It is significant that the same team of film artists, in co-authorship with Petro Chardynin's wife Margarita Barska-Chardynina, created a reduced film version for children –

"Tarasove zhittia" ("Little Taras"), where new episodes were added together with those that were not included in of the previous two-part film.

The cinematographers were faced with a very responsible task, respectively the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, the All-Ukrainian Museum named after T.G. Shevchenko, Odesa Museum of the Academy of Sciences, academicians M. Hrushevskyyi and O. Novytskyi, the researcher of the Historical Museum in Kyiv and ethnographer A. Onyshchuk, and other experts of the Shevchenko era were involved in the creation of the "film monument" (Fartuchny, 1926, p. 21). This film was one of the most expensive at the time, as professionals from various fields of science (history, ethnography, literature) were engaged in the filming. The scenery of the film was created by the outstanding modernist artist Academician Vasyl Krychevskyyi, the film was advised by the literary critic Prof. Serhii Yefremov (Okhrimenko). Vasyl Krychevskyyi believed that "all things in the film must be authentic", so he personally looked for them in bazaars in search of costumes, even went to St. Petersburg to find bonds, which were used to redeem Shevchenko out of serfdom. Contemporary film researcher L. Bryukhovetska notes that it was "nonsense in silent cinema to create a film about the poet whose instrument is the word, but this film had an emphasis on visual solutions", "therefore the role of the artist was extremely important here" (Bryukhovetska, 2021).

Architectonically, the film comprises of a series of stories that reflect the life of the outstanding writer with a chronological sequence – from childhood to his death: a difficult childhood in the serf family of the landowner Engelgard, his mother's death from exhausting work on the corvee, beatings and humiliation by his stepmother, the tragic death of his father, his years as an orphan, Shevchenko in his youth, his years as a soldier. However, typical markers of socialist realism were gradually inserted into the real biographical canvas, a "convenient" and "typical" image for the Soviet government was depicted, which was gradually "filled with" an ideological texture. Taras as a serf, the son of a poor peasant, a servant of his master – the landowner Engelhart. A gifted boy seeks to break free from the yoke he hates, so he is looking for "ways to a better life". "Taras begins to understand that the world does not rest on iron pillars, but on <...> the fact that the strong oppress the weak" (*Taras Shevchenko. Montage sheets...*). The scenes of Taras's cruel punishment and the sadness of the lady, the master's wife, grieving for her dead dog are contrasted: "62. And the lady has her grief... 63. And the best artists draw a dying dog. 64. Poor lady... how will she live without her dog now" (*Taras Shevchenko. Montage sheets...*).

In a corresponding perspective the film shows Taras's education with a deacon, for whom he was forced to carry out various errands: "Reading psalms over the dead souls of serfs, thus Taras earned vodka for his teacher <...> Nine copecks – for the deacon, "the tenth copeck" – for Taras..." (*Taras Shevchenko. Montage sheets...*). The anti-clerical marker is reinforced by the depiction of this character's sinful behavior.

The lines of Shevchenko's poetry are also carefully selected in order to more vividly show the oppressed people under the landowner's yoke: "With stark injustice all around / The shackled people silent wait, / While on the apostolic throne / There sits a fatted monk in state."¹ (*Taras Shevchenko. Montage sheets...*). After all, it is known that one of the principles of socialist realism proclaims: art should help to build the society of the future, because "the poet does not only write poems, but helps to build communism with his poems." In the given Soviet vector, the episode of Taras's return to Ukraine after graduating from the Academy is also presented. It is emphasized: he returns, because he is drawn "to his poor people", to the peasantry struggling in poverty. It was then that his "powerful poems of protest against tsarism, serf masters, against God himself were so deep in their revolutionary nature that they still excite and ignite" (Fartuchny, 1926, p. 21).

The film became the most successful cinematographic project of 1926, receiving tremendous support from both the domestic audience and viewers abroad: in Paris, Berlin, and later the USA, Canada, Poland,

1 Taras Shevchenko. THE HERETIC. Translated by John Weir <https://taras-shevchenko.storinka.org/taras-shevchenko's-poem-the-heretic-translated-by-john-weir.html>

Czechoslovakia and Romania. This film was extremely important, as it showed the power of Ukraine, the self-assertion of the national identity of Ukraine, "the affirmation of the Ukrainian poet-genius" (Bryukhovetska 2021). Although the film was distinguished by pronounced pro-Soviet features, for which the consultant of the film Serhiy Yefremov criticized it quite sharply. But in the spirit of Soviet propaganda, the contemporary press pathetically emphasized the importance of such a film: "Ukrainian revolutionary cinematography created this monument, which will be worthy of the poet. In vivid images on the screen, the working people of Ukraine will see the conditions under which this outstanding rebellious talent grew, who was one of the greatest poets of the Revolution" (Fartuchnyi, 1926, p. 23). Modern researchers evaluate it differently: "Unfortunately, the film turned out to be rather modest, a kind of schematic retelling of the poet's biography. In agreement with the ideas existing at that time, the authors resorted to direct oppositions of different social strata, illustrating the foundations of the 'class struggle'" (Trimbach, 2006, p. 59).

Thus, we can state that in the biographical film of 1926, attempts to adapt Shevchenko's biography and his creative heritage to the needs of Soviet ideology can be clearly traced. It is no coincidence that in 1928 the directorate of the Institute named after T.G. Shevchenko addressed with a letter to the board of the VUFKU in which they appealed to domestic filmmakers to focus more on the important social issues that the poet mentioned in his works (hunger and poverty of Ukrainian peasants, serfdom, apparent property injustice) (Doroshenko, 2014, p. 140).

From this film, according to researchers, the formation of a new status of the fiery Kobzar began – in the public consciousness, he gradually turned from a "resilient and consistent revolutionary" of his time into a "forerunner of modern communist ideas." In fact, at the end of the 1920s, such a "modernized" T. Shevchenko became one of the key figures of Soviet propaganda (Pashkova, 2013, p. 121).

O. Volosheniuk notes that at the beginning of the 1930s, the leading Ukrainian experts and connoisseurs of Shevchenko's work, including S. Yefremov, A. Nikovsky, and S. Pylypenko, were removed from office and exiled. After that, "the image of the poet finally becomes a component of Soviet ideological constructions" in 1934, when in "Theses for the 120th anniversary of T.G. Shevchenko" of the Leninism Department of Culture and Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, he was represented as a fellow of the Russian social democrats, a peasant serf poet. From that time, T. Shevchenko became one of the "red icons" and his new biography, intended for the mass consciousness, began to take this shape" (Volosheniuk, 2013, p. 111).

The corresponding propagandistic biographical line continued further. In particular, in 1939, when the 125th anniversary of T. Shevchenko was celebrated, all events took place in the spirit of the Soviet model of honoring progressive artists. Documentary cinematography joined other artistic spheres in the formation of Kobzar's image (monuments, books, paintings). Thus, in 1939, a documentary film directed by M. Kovalev with the telling title "Singer of the Ukrainian People" was released.

During the Second World War, the image of T. Shevchenko continued to be actively exploited by both Soviet and anti-Soviet propaganda. Despite the difficult war years, the poet's anniversary was celebrated every year. Various reports, poetry readings, recitals of quotes from "Kobzar" – everything worked for the active formation of the corresponding cult of Shevchenko. However, this activity of Soviet propaganda revealed nationally-minded representatives, the struggle with them resulted in the so-called ideological cleanse, which began to decrease only in the early 1950s. However, the "cult of T. Shevchenko" as the "father of the nation" persisted, and the monumental Stalinist era even demanded reliance on cultural heritage, on the past, as a certain symbolic resource – thus, a new round of propagandistic Shevchenkiana appeared (Volosheniuk, 2013, p. 112).

In the post-war period, quite few new films were released, so filmmakers did not take risks and focused on biopics, but most of them were marked by a pronounced ideological impact and propagandistic stereotypes: "The post-war period of Ukrainian cinema is marked by its almost complete, extremely brutal engagement with ideological tasks and goals of the regime – in a severe combination with its spasmodic

gestures, with all the illogicality, irrationalism of the late Stalinist dictatorship" (Skurativskiy, 2006, p. 91). At that time, according to S. Yekelchuk, the notion typical of mature Stalinism spread, as if "history is a series of events initiated by great people, which gave rise to the genre of film biographies, which flourished in the post-war decade... These post-war projects were supposed to reflect a new official memory and highlight the leading role of the Russian elder brother" (Yekelchuk, 2008, p. 231).

Thus, in December 1951 another biopic, dedicated to the 90th anniversary of Kobzar's death, was released at the Kyiv Film Studio, but it was shot in color. The well-known and respected director Ihor Savchenko in his film "Taras Shevchenko" focused the main attention on the period of Kobzar's exile and the years that preceded it. However, the image of the poet is clearly presented in accordance with the requirements of Soviet ideology – a socially active person, an ardent supporter of Russian social democrats, etc. Even the color palette, starting with the title of the film, appears as a special ideological code, which is systematically traced: the red hussar's coat, the red clothes of the Ukrainian woman painted by Shevchenko, the red dress of a young lady, the red binding of "Kobzar", etc. This film became clear evidence that the cinematography was turned into a special tool of the totalitarian regime.

This biographical film, like many others of that time, was blamed by film critics for falsity. And this is not surprising, because the process of "supplementing" the biography by ideological leaders took place continuously: both at the level of writing the script and during the process of filming. The director's heart could not withstand the constant brutal administrative and censorial interventions – I. Savchenko died on December 14, 1950. And the scenes where Shevchenko delivers his passionate speech to the peasants, where the Russian social democrats care about the poet in exile, about his "meeting" with M. Dobrolyubov and M. Chernyshevsky (a fact not confirmed at all!), were filmed by the director's students – Oleksandr Alov and Volodymyr Naumov. The final scene of the film was also changed: the scene of T. Shevchenko with Z. Si-erakovskiy, conceived by I. Savchenko, was removed, instead the Russian-Ukrainian line "triumphed" (Volosheniuk, 2013, p. 113). Therefore, both the film and its changed script contain a whole palette of relevant markers. And the metaphor of the movie monument, which was articulated by the artists of the first biopic about T. Shevchenko, found its concrete visual embodiment in the finale of Savchenko's "Taras Shevchenko": schoolgirls recite poems at the monument to Kobzar, the camera takes a panoramic view of the new large monument to Shevchenko.

It is known that every Soviet film had a clearly formulated propagandistic task. In the case of "Taras Shevchenko" by I. Savchenko, it was also articulated – "to show the sense of Ukrainian culture", "its unbreakable bond with Russian culture, its revolutionary pathos, its magical identity" (Yurenev, 1980, p. 14). It was also necessary to expose the Ukrainian nobility, interpreted as a "class enemy" of the Soviet system. Another "general" line was the distancing of "bourgeois nationalists" from the image of Kobzar. To achieve it, the artists resorted to a caricature of the landowners and descendants of the Hetman noble family. If you look at it on a larger scale, this film, according to V. Skurativskiy, "was supposed to testify to Stalin's "Ukrainophilism" for the whole "free world" with its then still so noisy Ukrainian emigration. And remind those post-Soviet Ukrainians about that "Ukrainophilism". To those, who, quite recently, became witnesses-victims of another fierce demonstration of Stalin's extermination of Ukrainians" (Skurativskiy 2004). Therefore, among these ideological tasks, the most important thing was "lost" – to show the real life of the main character. For filmmakers, it turned out to be only a basis for depicting a socialist realism narrative.

This biographical film became a demonstrative example of the embodiment of the ideological socialist realism narrative, by which, as it was proclaimed in 1934, films about Shevchenko were to be oriented in the following decades. The key codes were Soviet mythologemes – "poet-fighter", Ukrainian "forerunner of revolution", "rebel", "prophet of serfs", "peasant poet", "younger brother of Russian social democrats". V. Skurativskiy emphasizes that this film, based on ideological and its genre genesis, "belongs to the quite numerous phenomena of screen pseudo-biographies and the related genre of the quasi-historical film of the

Stalin era" (Skurativskiy 2004). For the reason, the film in the socialist realism style focuses on the heroic image of Shevchenko as a symbol of the proletarian struggle and a fighter for socialist ideals, L. Bryukhovetska calls it a "typical product of the totalitarian era" (Bryukhovetska 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that this film received the prestigious Stalin Prize of the first degree. In particular, the laureates were the script writer and director Ihor Savchenko, the performer of the leading role Serhiy Bondarchuk, actors Ivan Pereverzev and Mykhailo Kuznetsov, cinematographers Danylo Demutskyi and Abram Koltsatiy, production designer Levan Shengelia and composer Borys Lyatoshynskiy (Tsalyk 2023: 38). The Ukrainian-language version of Taras Shevchenko was restored by the Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Center and released in March 2014 as a part of the five-disc DVD compilation "Shevchenko 200" (Tsalyk, 2023, p. 38).

Thus, we can state that P. Chardynin's 1926 biopic shows the first attempts to adapt Shevchenko's biography and creative heritage to the needs of Soviet ideology. Although the film consists of a series of stories chronicling the life of the writer – from childhood to his death, the biographical canvas is filled with socialist realism codes, creating the image "convenient" for the Soviet authorities. Traditional Soviet ideologemes appear in it: "prophet-kobzar", "self-taught serf", "rebel", "fighter for the liberation of the oppressed and dejected". This film is believed to start the formation of a new image of Kobzar as a "forerunner of modern communist ideas". The 1951 film by I. Savchenko, shot before the 90th anniversary of Kobzar's death, was a confirmation of the paradigm shift. Artists consistently formed a heroic image of Shevchenko as "symbol of proletarian struggle", "prophet of serfs", "fighter for socialist ideals". Soviet mythologemes are clearly visible in the film: "poet-fighter", "harbinger of the revolution", "peasant poet", "younger brother of Russian social democrats". This film became a demonstrative example of the embodiment of an ideological socialist realism narrative – a kind of reference point in Shevchenkiana for subsequent cinema artists.

References:

- Bryukhovetska, L. (2013). Nevidome pro fil'm "Taras Shevchenko" [Unknown about the film "Taras Shevchenko"]. Cinema-Theater, 6. https://ktm.ukma.edu.ua/show_content.php?id=1556
- Bryukhovetska, L. (2021). Obraz Tarasa Shevchenka v kinematohrafi: tradytsiynny pohlyad i suchasne pereosmyslennya [The Image of Taras Shevchenko in the cinema: traditional view and modern reinterpretation]. 9.03. <http://nrcu.gov.ua/news.html?newsID=95353>.
- Doroshenko, A. (2014). Between myth and truth: the interpretation of the image of T. G. Shevchenko in Ukrainian documentaries of the Soviet period (1918-1991). Scientific Bulletin of the Kyiv National University of Theatre, Cinema and Television named after I. K. Karpenko-Kary: Collection of scientific works. Ed.: O. I. Bezgin. Kyiv, Vol. 14.
- Fartuchnyi, M. (1926). Pam'yatnyk Shevchenkovi [Monument to Shevchenko]. Kino, 5 (March), URL: <https://vufku.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Kino-1926-5.pdf>
- Pashkova, Olga. (2013). Plastychne vyrishennya fil'mu "Taras Shevchenko" (1926) [Plastic solution of the film "Taras Shevchenko" (1926)]. Ukrainian art history: materials, research, reviews. 13.
- Shevchenko, Taras. (2019). Montazhni lysty. [Montage sheets]. <https://vufku.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Taras-Shevchenko-montazhni-lysty.pdf>
- Skurativskiy, V. (2004). KINO-KOLO-CHYTAL'NYA: "Taras Shevchenko" [CINEMA-READING CIRCLE: "Taras Shevchenko"]. KINO-KOLO, 23 (Autumn). <http://www.kinokolo.ua/articles/516/>
- Skurativskiy, V. (2006). Ukrayins'ke totalitarne kino [Ukrainian totalitarian cinema]. Narysy z istoriyi kinomystetstva Ukrainy. Kyiv: „Intertehnologiya“.
- Taras Shevchenko v kino: vid pochatku XX stolittya do doktora Khausa do "Bezslavnykh kripakiv" [Taras Shevchenko in cinematography: from the early 20th century to Doctor House to "Inglorious Serfs"]. March 29, 2020. URL: <https://www.cinema.in.ua/tarasa-shevchenko-v-kino/>
- Trimbach, S. (2006). Ukrayins'ke kino 1920-kh rokiv [Ukrainian cinema of the 1920s]. Narysy z istoriyi kinomystetstva Ukrainy. Kyiv: „Intertehnologiya“.

- Tsalyk, S. (2023). Koly krolyk z'yiv stsenariy ta inshi epizody z istoriyi ukrayins'koho kino [When the rabbit ate the script and other episodes from the history of Ukrainian cinema]. Kharkiv: „Folio“.
- Volosheniuk, O. (2013). Interpretatsiya postati Tarasa Shevchenka v neihrovomu radyans'komu kinematohrafi: zasady konstruyuvannya v ramkakh radyans'koyi kul'turnoyi polityky [Interpretation of Taras Shevchenko's image in non-fiction Soviet cinema: principles of construction within the framework of Soviet cultural policy]. Ukrainian art history: materials, research, reviews. 13.
- Yekelchik, S. (2008). Imperiya pam'yati. Rosiys'ko-ukrayins'ki stosunky v radyans'kiy istorychniy uyavi [Empire of memory. Russian-Ukrainian relations in the Soviet historical concept]. Kyiv: „Kritika“.
- Yurenev, R. (1980). Yhor' Andreevych Savchenko [Igor Andreevich Savchenko]. Igor Savchenko. A collection of articles and memoirs. Kyiv: „Mystetstvo“.