

DOI: 10.20535/2522-1078.2023.2(14).291637

УДК 007:304:002

Надходження до редакції: 27.11.2023

Прийняття до друку: 02.12.2023

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The research has been made under the project of «The evolution of images of Ukrainians in Polish documentary and feature film» (POLONISTA — Program stypendialny dla naukowców, Poland) grant BJP/PON/2023/1/00011.

A HISTORICAL FILM IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS (BASED ON THE FILM «DOVBUSH»)

ІСТОРИЧНИЙ ФІЛЬМ В КОНТЕКСТІ СУЧАСНИХ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ КОМУНІКАЦІЙ (ЗА ФІЛЬМОМ «ДОВБУШ»)

The article provides a narrative analysis and specifies main directions in interpreting the Ukrainian historical film of «Dovbush» (2023) in Ukrainian, Polish and English-language media of other countries. The analysis has demonstrated that the estimation of the film goes beyond the borders of artistic characteristics of the product. Instead, the reviewers focus on the narratives determining for the country. They come either from its social situation (emphasized value of fight for freedom in the Ukrainian media) or from peculiarities of international relationships (triggering issues in reflections of Polish viewers), or predominantly from the position of cultural understating the other people and its current and historic values (absolutely neutral or positive reviews in English-language media). The analysis of the publications proves that a cultural product on a historic theme is not perceived as the one depicting the epoch but instead, it is an ideological, and for some viewers propagandistic, material of the modern time that has to represent current contexts of interaction between peoples. The analysis is based on the reviews and feedback to the film available as of research conducting.

Keywords: a historical film, media, review, narrative.

У статті проведено наративний аналіз та визначено основні напрями інтерпретації українського історичного фільму «Довбуш» (2023) в українських, польських та англомовних ЗМІ інших країн. Аналіз показав, що оцінка фільму виходить за межі художніх характеристик твору. Натомість рецензенти зосереджуються на визначальних для країни наративах. Вони походять або з її соціальної ситуації (підкреслена цінність боротьби за свободу в українських медіа), або з особливостей міжнародних відносин (що викликають проблеми у рефлексіях польських глядачів), або переважно з позиції культурного недооцінювання іншого народу та його сьогодення та історичні цінності (абсолютно нейтральні або позитивні відгуки в англомовних ЗМІ). Аналіз публікацій доводить, що культурний продукт на історичну тематику сприймається не як такий, що відтворює епоху, а як ідеологічний, а для деяких глядачів і пропагандистський матеріал сучасності, який має відображати актуальні контексти взаємодії між народами. Аналіз базується на рецензіях і відгуках на фільм, наявних на момент проведення дослідження.

Ключові слова: історичний фільм, медіа, огляд, наратив.

Problem setting. The possibilities of modern film demonstration platforms allow their creators to appeal to huge, almost transnational audiences, which, in its turn, allows monitoring different levels of this product receptions. It is extremely interesting in the context of perception of historical films especially if they enlighten historic circumstances hard for the people.

The problem of perception levels, topicality of historical cinema and those social triggers which it may cause, the same as a possibility to use certain interpretations of film material to sharpen international or other confrontation are, in fact, not studied in the mass communication area. In particular, these studies are absent in general in the national discourse of historical cinema influence. In the Polish scientific discourse one can distinguish a fundamental monograph by M. Białous [1]. In English-language discourse, the researches of historical cinema include the works by J. Staiger, D. Binns [2,3], B. Flueckiger [5], and others.

Such theoreticians in the field as M. Chion, L. Malvey, philosophers V. Sobchack, F. Jameson, M. McLuhan also explored the peculiarities of social being and sentiments in cinema.

The purpose of research is to demonstrate how a historical film product is subject to interpretation by viewers and critics who base their thoughts on peculiarities of current social reality, prove that current contexts influence the perception of historic material and determine narratives on

its perception, using the narrative analysis of feedbacks and reviews to the historical film «Dovbush».

Research results. M. Białous specifies that each historical film is, first of all, a social construct and it becomes a part of public discourse after its completion generating new directions in its interpretation and formation of topical triggers of its perception [1]. The historical film «Dovbush» also concerns the historic period hard for interaction both for the Poles and Ukrainians. This factor could become an additional trigger for the Polish viewer, that is why researches of public feedbacks to the artistic product, responses of mass media can give an opportunity to estimate how the film has been perceived in the country. We can compare feedbacks to the film in Ukraine and Poland as the countries immediately involved into the historic context, as well as in other countries.

In Ukraine the feedback to the film has been ambiguous, which we can see in several reviews on online media. It generally relates to quite high expectations from the national film products being released during the war. It was caused by several factors: firstly, by the issue concerning appropriateness of providing finances for such products; secondly, a necessity to conquer the cinema market with Ukrainian films; thirdly, expectations of the viewer to the implementation of important narratives actualized in current media environment. That is why each new film is subjected to a rather high level of critical scrutiny. Taking into account that it took 5 years to make «Dovbush» but it was released exactly in 2023 and was announced as one of the most expensive film products, the viewer might have expected more than any film can offer. Instead, there are hardly any sharply critical reviews; that will be considered in details below.

Several reviews suggest to interpret the film in the context of a leading narrative — a fight for independence, rather than in terms of historic correspondence. On one side, it meets the historic moment depicted in the film and on the other one, it relates to the current events. The viewers tend to perceive a film product on a historic theme in the worldview context of their time. That is why, even moderately critical reviews to the film demonstrate a notable emphasis on topicality of its narratives. Let us consider several ones:

Aliona Shilova: *«The significance of the film increases several times in the context of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine (it is topical for the works in any area of the Ukrainian art). Watching a brightly screened legend about the Ukrainian hero fighting for independence of the people*

against the invaders, undoubtedly, evokes a wide range of emotions in today's environment» [16];

Mykyta Kazimirov: *«The film also contains the senses that have not become obsolete since the times of Olexa Dobbush... Moreover, some ideas come into the geopolitical territory, reminding that the Russians have imprudently intervened into Ukrainian affairs almost all the time... They wanted to premiere the film after the end of the war with Russia but, perhaps, this is when «Dobbush» will be the most appropriate» [10];*

K. Slipchenko: *««Dobbush» unites romanticism and myth creation of a historical action as well as an attempt to remain authentic in the genre which does not allow for that» [18];*

Valeria Muskharina: *«The name of Olexa Dobbush, an outstanding leader of the opryshky¹, is an example of a common Ukrainian legend. Besides, it is also a reason to think about what the Ukrainian defenders are fighting for now, what values we stand for and what we are ready to sacrifice for the sake of free life in their land?» [13];*

I. Kromf: *««Dobbush» has become a good example of balance between «historic correspondence» and «artistic reasonability»» [12].*

The film director Oleh Sanin has also repeatedly underlined that the film messages are important, in particular, fight for independence. For example, *«This story provides an idea that freedom cannot be withdrawn from people: they will still want to aspire for it and look for it, even at the cost of their own life. This story is about our freedom — both internal and external. This is about defense of our motherland, our principles, our honour ...About the Motherland which is becoming more and more significant for us. The Motherland for us is already not just a territory but an internal spiritual notion and an emotional experience. It is exactly now when it is becoming more and more real and the one which we will not be able to live without any more, we will not be able to respect ourselves. It has already become more important than the life itself» [6].* Actor Serhii Strelnikov, who played the hero, also emphasizes: *«Dobbush was a person who went to defend his land from the invaders! Hard times give birth to real people!» [6].*

¹ Oprishky (also opryshyna, levenets) were participants in the Ukrainian peasant insurgency in Galicia, Transcarpathia, and Bukovyna against the Polish gentry, Moldovan nobility, and Hungarian feudal lords, and later against the Austrian administration. They acted from the sixteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century.

Thus, for the Ukrainian viewer the film has become, first of all, an important achievement and inspiration in today's reality of war and fight for independence against the aggressor due to the fact that film emphasized Russia's intention to enslave Ukrainians.

Instead, for the Polish viewers «Dovbush» might become challenging for perception because the characters of the film — Poles — also arise as the oppressors of the Ukrainian people. On one hand, confrontation between Ukrainians and Poles in that period is a historic reality, on the other hand, taking into account changed intentions in the current relations of the two countries, the feedback from the viewers show that they expected other narratives in the Ukrainian cinema. That especially drew attention in the first feedbacks to the film at the Polish websites. Among them there are quite sharp ones, demonstrating offence and dissatisfaction with representation of such a historic context.

In particular, the viewer specifies that in the situation of current military aid to Ukraine from Poland the film is going to encourage disrespect of Ukrainians to Poles because they are shown as traitors and the fact that the film was not released in 2022 because Ukraine needed Poland is also ingratitude.

In the next comment we can see how the offence grows into score-settling and moves into economic issue: *«they are using economic aid from the West, including Poland, to a great extent, but they themselves make films, and as for other issues the viewer blames the government of Ukraine: in this way its official position concerning Poland is broadcasted in this way».*

Thus, we can see that the response is completely specified by the understanding of history from previous centuries in the context of modernity, moreover, it is being reduced to everyday interpersonal statement of «we help you but you show us so unattractively». We shall not consider this comment as an attempt to incite a conflict between two peoples but these moments can completely meet a propagandistic assignment to create a cultural split. Instead, we shall notice that in the scientists' opinion, a historical film can transmit certain positions, which are demonstrated in leading narratives. For example, Dr Piotr Kroll in his interview says that difficult times in the history of the two peoples can be used for propagandistic collision: *«In this way, they tried to put an end to the national aspirations of Poles and Ukrainians with the other people's hands»* [7]. The same way, in his research Bohdan Hud demonstrates how a social situation influences the international

context, that «it led to the polarization of the whole social system and had catastrophic consequences» [9, 99].

Maciej Białous points that all historical films can be considered as a certain representation of a policy of memory, «however, it should be remembered that the process of creating and then of social reception of films is more complicated» [1,5]. Thus, this process of perception can include both a national tendency of perception and an individual bias, a stereotypical perception of characters or history in general, simplification or complication of contexts.

At the other website there is a following feedback: «*It is seen in the trailer that the film spreads the stereotypes about «Polish gentry» that «oppressed Ukrainians»... This is also confirmed by the words of the actor Serhii Strelnykov who played the main hero. He told Derzhkino¹ that Dobbush «defended his land» from «occupants» told to Derzhkino» [20].*

The media Kresy.pl provides the feedback to the film twice: one time before its release and the other one — after it. In this feedback it is also underlined that the characters of Poles are stereotyped, they are demonstrated unambiguously as negative characters, oppressors: «*the trailers to the film show that the role of “scoundrels” is played by Poles and the film depicts Ukrainian stereotypes about “Polish gentry”. New trailers confirm that. The character of a Polish gentleman threatens the “robbers” from Dobbush’s (Dowbusz) gang that he “will find and kill all of them”, including “their women and children”. In his turn, the hero declares that his people will gather their own army, “will stop the enemy and will give people freedom”*». The author also appeals to interpretation of the film by the Ukrainian media: «*The feedback in the Ukrainian media and new agencies also certifies on how the Poles are represented in the film. As State Agency of Ukrinform notices, in the film “Dobbush heads a rebellion of hutsuls against the harsh rule of Polish gentry” that «do their best to destroy Dobbush but he euchred them»*» [20]. This interpretation allows speaking about historic opposition of the peoples which, in this feedback author’s and previous commentators’ opinion is unacceptable in the current situation of common resistance of the peoples to the Russian aggression. The Polish viewers identify the film narratives in the comments as lack of respect to Poles by Ukrainians and stereotyping of characters by a nationality.

¹ State Film Agency.

It is noteworthy that one of the Ukrainian reviewers, N.Kis, says about a danger of creating and broadcasting national stereotypes: «*It would be desirable to work with historical stereotypes more thoughtfully, especially at this time... It is about refined Soviet Polonophobia, pure, like a tear of a Komsomol member...The clear division into Polish oppressors and Ukrainian victims surprises... It looks as if there were no Ukrainians serving to rich masters, no Poles who were not a part of elite. Moreover, where are the ambiguous characters? Even real Ivan Honta, not a film character, worked as a guard for Polish lords before becoming a national avenger*» [11]. Pay attention that such feedback about the film made the director emphasize in different interviews that he did not aim at creating a story about confrontation between Ukrainians and Poles, instead he tried to present their common enemy — Russia. With this regard it can be assumed that as film making process started before 2022 it was impossible to take into account a social request for certain narratives. Instead, the Polish-Ukrainian context has changed so significantly since that time that some narratives of the film could not help but cause misunderstanding.

In fact, the review by N. Kis in the Ukrainian media environment is the only devastating review for the film and appeals exactly to inadmissibility of broadcasting national stereotypes. Correspondingly, this sharp review to have appealed trigger issues caused by complicated historic contexts could not be left without attention from the Polish audience. In particular, there is a following comment: «*That review by the Polish researcher is the first known article from Ukraine emphasizing anti-Polonism of the film about Dvobush. I have not seen it yet but heard the same opinion in Kyiv: the film director uses Soviet clichés...*».

The viewers expect anti-Polish narratives and influence of «Soviet propaganda» from the film even before the actual watching it. Moreover, one more comment appeals to the notion of propaganda: «*Ukrainians behave like the ones implementing propaganda, same as Russians...*».

Appeal to the propaganda constructs is completely understandable, as propaganda often manipulates by stereotypical images, in particular, national stereotypes, to create the images of political «enemies» and «friends».

Thus, it can be stated that in the current historic period the film falls into the problematic area of Ukrainian-Polish relationship and can cause a reaction of rejection among the Polish viewers. This completely confirms the concept of perceiving any artistic content, on historic

themes particularly, exclusively in the context of the current reality, current narratives of interaction. Polish media also pay attention to that: «However, not everybody liked the time for the film release. The comments at Filmweb website had critical words concerning the time of film release at the cinemas», referring to the above-mentioned comment at Filmweb. The authors are trying to smooth sharp criticism from the viewers, specifying that the film production has taken several years and has been planned for release in other realia. The media also appeals to the statement of the Polish actors played in the film: «*Agata Buzek... says Onet, that from the Polish point of view this is not the best time for premier. — This is the film which we started to make at neutral times. A story that can cover very different nations. When we were working at the film, I had an impression that it showed a universal truth, that there were the things which were worth fighting...*», «*Mateusz Kościukiewicz... specifies that work at the film started about four years ago, at absolutely different reality. — Sometimes it happens that certain films are shown in another historic period, different from when it was made*» [15]. Agata Buzek's comment is also cited in another online media where she also says that the film was being made in other reality and appeals to the universal truth. The actress lines parallels in the national context, offering not to interpret the events depicted in the context of opposition [15].

Critical comments appeared in the Polish media and social networks in the end of October, instead, in the later publications, in November, it was seen an attempt to analyze the context more thoughtfully and to ease the tension around the film as a trigger in the Polish-Ukrainian relationships.

Ihor Usatenko provides the most detailed response to critical comments and accusations on the Polska Agencja Prasowa portal, consistently working with critical narratives:

- accusing Ukrainians in ingratitude («*It is also worth noting that in the beginning of the film there is a text of gratitude to Poles not only for their help in production — Agata Buzek and Mateusz Kościukiewicz play in it — but also for their support of Ukraine in its fight against the enemy*»);
- comment that the film was not released in Poland until the Parliamentary election on purpose («*It is interesting that the producers re-scheduled the date of the premier in Poland for the film to be released after the Parliamentary election because it contains the elements which for some Poles can look like anti-Polish. Without any need...*»);

- accusation in anti-Polonism (*«The film makers, in particular, Oleh Sanin, emphasize themselves that they tried not to make a bone of contention between Poland and Ukraine of the film. This may be a reason why one of Dovbush's companions speaks Polish and the fight of the gang is driven by social rather than political motifs»*) [21].

The author emphasizes that the main narrative is resistance to the enemy that violated the international law: *«Dovbush» is not a story between Poles and Ukrainians but a story about the fight against those who decided to break the law»* [21].

In Ukrainian media reviewers K. Nekrecha, O. Haliv assumed that the film could be interesting for foreign viewers because it helps them *«understand the history of current Ukrainians, current Ukraine that have been occupying top in the news for a very long time»* [14]. The relevance of this is underlined by several English-language reviews, in which the authors also emphasize the importance of the film for the current situation in Ukraine, the connection between historical narratives and narratives of resisting to the aggression in 2023. For example, here are the extracts from two reviews: *«The popularity of «Dovbush» provides a window into Ukraine more than a year and a half into Russia's brutal invasion... [Dovbush] lines up with current events in a really important way, especially considering how much Russia is trying to deny Ukrainian history»*; *«The 18th-century action drama, “Dovbush: The Mystery of the Black Mountains”, has struck a chord in Ukraine, echoing themes of self-determination and resistance against foreign rule... The film's success offers a glimpse into Ukraine's indomitable spirit amidst the ongoing Russian invasion»* [19]. The reviewers mostly assess the film as a major event in Ukrainian cinema and say about its timeliness, as it brings to the fore the struggle of the Ukrainian people for freedom. Instead, the reviewers do not pay attention to the context of Ukrainian-Polish relations, and this topic does not attract attention as a problematic one, it is perceived as being in line with historical reality.

Conclusions. Thus, this analysis proves that every artistic product made in a certain social or political situation is perceived by the viewer primarily through the prism of this situation as a certain message, an important narrative of current time, and only in the second place through the prism of historic correspondence or artistic value. At the same time, the more distant the viewers are from the context of the film's events, the more they are inclined to perceive it primarily as an artistic product.

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