

Youngblood, Denise J. *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914-2005*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2007. xvi + 319 pp. Illustrations. Filmography. Notes. Bibliography. Index. £23.50.

In her new book, Denise Youngblood analyses more than 160 Russian and Soviet war films in order to illustrate the evolution of the genre over the course of late imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet periods of Russian history. The book's primary focus is Russian identity as it is imaged in the films about the Russian Civil War, the Great Patriotic War and the Afghan and Chechen Wars. In her introduction, Youngblood explains to her readers why she chose 'Russian' in the title of her book instead of 'Soviet': in her opinion, 'Soviet cinema was "Great Russian" in its orientation' (p. 2).

Youngblood takes the reader through ninety years of Russian war films chronologically, drawing on her extensive knowledge of the films' narratives. She claims that researching film genres is possible either through formal analysis or content analysis, and chooses the latter as a methodology for her project. Drawing on Hayden White's notion of 'historiophoty' ('the representation of history and thought about it in visual images'), she argues that, contrary to popular belief, Russian war films can and do serve, although of course not in a literal sense, as viable historical records (p. 3). Thus, through a thorough thematic analysis of these films, Youngblood endeavours to achieve three goals: to describe the evolution of the Russian war film; to analyse the war film through the prism of White's notion of 'historiophoty'; and

'to interrogate the art/entertainment paradigm in Russian cinematic history' (p. 2).

The author follows the familiar sequence of Russo-Soviet political history periodization: 'The Revolutionary Era', 'Socialist Realism', 'The Great Patriotic War', 'From War to the Thaw', 'The Thaw', 'The Stagnation', 'To Glasnost and Beyond', and 'After the Fall'. Each chapter opens with a historiophoty claim, giving a theoretical framing to the subsequent description of the films of each period. Youngblood then explains why certain wars became ideologically important for a certain period of political history, examines their place in articulating Russian and Soviet communal identities, and considers how these armed conflicts were represented in art and commercial cinema. After reading the book, a student with no prior knowledge of Russian culture could easily describe the major periods of Russo-Soviet political history and comment on the ideological, thematic and stylistic differences between the war films from various historical periods.

Youngblood asks important questions about the place of motion pictures in Russian collective memory, myth-making and in articulating imperial and national identities. However, she leaves future scholars to come up with the answers to some of these questions. For example, Youngblood opens the monograph with the fundamental claim that war became a way of life in the USSR (p. ix) but in these reviewers' opinion, she does not fully exploit this essential notion in clarifying why the aesthetics of militarism and mobilization was so ubiquitous in Soviet visual culture.

Youngblood's thorough description of Russian war films also provokes theoretical questions about the relationship between the official ideology and genre cinema at various periods in Russian political history. Did the war film exist as the principal propaganda film genre throughout Russo-Soviet history? In the 1930s, for example, Soviet cinema produced so-called 'defence films'. Were they a sub-genre of the war film? When Youngblood examines the cinema of the Thaw, she distinguishes entertainment war melodrama (*House I Live In*, *My Dear Man*, *The Living and the Dead*) from such films as *The Cranes are Flying* or *Clear Skies* on the grounds that the latter are art films and the former commercial products. Such a division raises more questions about the relationship between the war film and melodrama, the war film and art cinema, since they all exploit family melodrama conventions. What is the war film and how it is related to such genres as melodrama or comedy? Finally, what is the place of genre cinema within Soviet culture?

Youngblood's history of Russian war films provides readers with a comprehensive introduction to the subject and raises theoretical questions awaiting further research within new theoretical frameworks. One hopes the wealth of material her monograph provides, together with the availability on DVD of many of the films she describes, will motivate professors to design courses integrating Russian war films into wider undergraduate courses on film genres, Russian visual culture, political mythology and collective memory.

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