

## The Artistic Presentation of Cultural Symbols in Contemporary Russian Film Design

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**Abstract:** This research examines the artistic presentation of cultural symbols in contemporary Russian film design, focusing on four films. Through textual and visual analysis, the study reveals that Russian filmmakers are effectively employing narrative structures, visual motifs, and thematic elements with significant cultural implications. The artistic choices made by these producers include the use of symbolic imagery, cinematography, and colour palettes to reflect the sociocultural and political contexts of Russian society. The selected films utilise symbolic imagery to challenge established narratives, addressing themes such as power dynamics, masculinity, trauma, and resilience. Additionally, these films suggest a hybridisation of symbolic imagery, integrating core values of Russian culture with progressive ideals from Western society to foster a more inclusive and improved social landscape.

**Keywords:** Cultural symbols in Russian films; contemporary Russian cinema; visual storytelling; symbolic imagery; narrative structure

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The creative industry plays a significant role in communicating cultural narratives and sustaining national identity (Wu & Fu, 2024). The creative industry has gained greater importance in the backdrop of globalisation, where different nations are looking for the improved means through which they could better establish their cultural identity *Leviathan* (Leviathan., 2014). In the cinema industry, filmmakers have been leveraging art designs with the aim of communicating the cultural identity and sociocultural development that a particular country has witnessed (Berger, 2014). In the cinematic art, greater attention these days is placed on cultural symbols with the aim to convey collective memory and the unique cultural image of a society. Hutchings (Hutchings, 2021) is of the view that although in the past, the art designers placed the least attention on cultural symbols, the author believes that now the core belief is that cultural symbols are the

means through which linguistic barriers could be overturned, and Russian filmmakers are placing greater attention on cultural symbols. Sturkov (Strukov, 2021) is also of the view that since cultural symbols offered a universal language that is understood by a diverse global audience. Russian filmmakers, following their Western counterparts, are not leaving even a single stone unturned to use artistic logics reflecting the unique interplay between the country's historical legacy and contemporary socioeconomic development. Over the years, cultural symbols have evolved in the art design in Russian films, reflecting unique cinematic aesthetics of the country. Although there are different cultural symbols found in Russian films, Ivanov (Ivanov, 2022) has pointed out that some of the most widely used symbols include folk art, the Orthodox cross, and the birch tree that symbolise the unique cultural traditions and national ideologies of the country. Sturkov (Strukov, 2021) is of the view that many of the symbols in Russian films aimed to establish a long-lasting struggle for identity, resilience, and spirituality that could be found. Kovalova (Kovalova, 2021) are of the view that the Russian filmmakers are perfectly following the principles of semiotics and visual storytelling, and as a result, they have been leveraging thorough design and different frames that ensure the desired cultural symbols and established aesthetic narrative. In other instances, Rees (Rees, 2021) is of the view that Russian filmmakers are integrating traditional Russian aesthetics with the modern sociocultural and economic development to establish the unique national identity of the country in a globalised world. Realising the significance of the cultural symbols that Russian filmmakers are utilising in the art design in contemporary Russian films, this study aims to critically analyse the core theme and logic behind the use of cultural symbols in the art design. The research will analyse how the artistic presentation logic of cultural symbols in the art design is utilised by Russian filmmakers. The research will identify the recurring cultural symbols and their thematic importance in the backdrop of contemporary Russian cinema. The research will also critically analyse the semiotic strategies that the Russian filmmakers are using and examine the impact of art design used in the Russian films with respect to cultural discourse.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

For analysing the artistic presentation logic of cultural symbols in the art

design in contemporary Russian films, there are different theories that could be adopted. One of the first approaches in this regard is the semiotics theory presented by Barthes (Barthes, 1972), which could help in understanding how cultural symbols could be used for functional connotations in films. Barthes (Barthes, 1972) concept of 'myth' as a second-order signification denotes that cultural symbols are created and interpreted, whereas the context plays the most significant role in the construction and interpretation of such cultural symbols. By experiencing different cultural symbols within a film, the audience can gain a deeper understanding of the film's theme and cultural context. Furthermore, Ivanov (Ivanov, 2022) is of the view that the theory of semiotics could also be used to analyse the ideological message conveyed within films. In the cinematic words, the producers used different symbols to create and foster certain stereotypes; particularly, Berger believes that Russian film producers are using different symbols to promote a particular political and social agenda (Berger, 2014). In addition, Kaganosky (Kovalova, 2021) is of the view that Russian film producers are using different cultural symbols that are based on the Barthes (1972) 'myths' that helped in establishing the national identity, promoting the rich history of the country, and pointing towards the religious belief. Another core theory that could be used is Gilles Deleuze's (Deleuze, 1986) theory of time-image to understand the historical significance and evolution of cultural symbols used in the Russian films. As per this theory, Russian producers could be using time images, whereas cultural symbols could have been used in the films to represent a particular historical period. This in turn means that the symbols used in the films to establish the narrative needed for establishing the desired context. In particular, Kovalova (Kovalova, 2021) is of the view that Deleuze's (Deleuze, 1986) theory is the means to stress the relationship between past and present. A sense of immersion and contemplation could also be created through the use of cultural symbols, whereas the user is engaged in constructing the meanings and identity. In particular, Tupitsyn (Tupitsyn, 2020) has pointed out that Russian producers are leveraging Gilles Deleuze's theory, whereas cultural images are used to create desired emotional and intellectual responses. This in turn means that through the use of cultural symbols in films, Russian producers have been gaining the capacity to manipulate ideas and images and convince audiences to perceive a concept from a particular angle. Furthermore, another core crucial theoretical framework that could be used for analysing the artistic presentation logic of cultural symbols in the art design of contemporary Russian films is Mitchell's (Mitchell, 2019) 'picture theory'. The theory

could help in analysing visuals as a cultural text. Russian film producers have been relying on the 'pictorial turn,' whereas the use of cultural symbols in the art design has been now going through a transformation process, as McGrath (McGrath, 2019) is of the view that rather than merely targeting Russian audiences, Russian film producers are targeting global audiences. As a result, a shift from Soviet to post-Soviet visual images could be witnessed in the use of cultural images in the Russian films. Furthermore, Strukov (Strukov, 2021) is of the view that Russian film producers are increasingly relying on the use of digital technologies in contemporary films, whereas the latest technology is deployed to create cultural images. This in turn has been providing greater opportunities for the use of cultural symbols, whereas the traditional symbolic system that Russian film producers were once using has now changed into a modern and more sophisticated system providing greater opportunities to Russian film producers.

## 2.2 Historical Context and Evolution

According to Dobrenko , the socialist realism philosophy has a significant impact on cinema heritage, as he has significantly analysed the socialist realist perspective in his classical work 'Political Economy and Socialist Realism.'. According to Dobrenko (Dobrenko, 2007), socialist realism continues to influence Russian cinema, as the cultural symbols and aesthetics found in the Russian films are significantly influenced and shaped by socialist realism. The author has documented that even directors producing contemporary films are engaging with socialist realists; however, Dobrenko (Dobrenko, 2007) has strongly supported the idea that transformation has now been taking place as Russian cinema has been focusing on global audiences rather than merely reaching Russian audiences. Accordingly, ideological symbols and cultural markers that Russian filmmakers were once relying on have been going through significant transformation these days. However, unlike Dobrenko (Dobrenko, 2007), Clark (Clark, 2017) has earlier pointed out that the cultural symbols in the Russian cinema have been more persistent, whereas Russian producers have been leveraging the cultural symbols as a means to arouse nostalgic emotions. Thus, the cultural symbols most commonly used are the means through which Soviet-era cultural memory is aroused, and the visual design reflects more of the artefacts that were common during the Soviet era. However, Clark (Clark, 2017) has also pointed out that in the globalised world, such cultural artefacts and symbols that were related to the Soviet era have been fast-changing, and there is greater

flexibility in terms of visuals and key design that can be found in Russian cinema.

### 2.3 Post-Soviet Transformation in the Use of Cultural Symbols in the Russian Cinema

There are different authors who have found that significant transformation in the use of cultural symbols and visual design in the Russian cinema has been taking place in the post-Soviet era. In this regard, Beumers (Beumers & Zvonkine, 2017) has highlighted that significant transformation in the use of symbols and visual aesthetics has been taking place, which marked the dissolution of Soviet-era visual language and the emergence of new symbolic systems. In particular, the Beumers (Beumers & Zvonkine, 2017) have demonstrated that as Russian filmmakers are appealing to a broad-based global audience, increasingly western visuals are integrated. The research stressed that although Russian producers are struggling hard to establish the new visual paradigm in Russian films, the transformation has been marking collective cultural trauma taking place in Russian cinema. However, unlike Beumers (Beumers & Zvonkine, 2017), Efimova & Manovich, (Efimova & Manovich, 1993) has asserted that Russian filmmakers have not yet completely discontinued using cultural symbols and aesthetics of the Soviet era; rather, the process of reinterpretation of historical narratives could be witnessed in Russian cinema. The author has also demonstrated that leading filmmakers from the Russian film industry, including Alexander Sokurov and Aleksei German, have worked on the development of distinctive approaches, whereas Soviet imagery in contemporary context could be found in the cinematic world. On the other hand, Prokhorov (Prokhorov, 2019) has found that the nationalisation movement could be readily witnessed in the use of cultural symbols and art designs in Russian films. The authors have found that the most vital cultural elements that Russian filmmakers are stressing are national identity visualisation, whereas not only traditional Russian symbols and contemporary design elements have been integrated, but also new aesthetics have emerged that demonstrate 'Russianness.'. The 'Russianness' demonstrates the formation of national identity through visual images.

### 2.4 Symbol System in the Contemporary Russian Films

The analysis of contemporary cultural symbols could reveal that various developments have been taking place within Russian cinema and films. In this regard, Hutchings and Vernitski Fedorov & Levitskaya, (Fedorov &

Levitskaya, 2022) have noted that increased hybridisation trends could be witnessed in terms of cultural symbols and art design, whereas global value combined with unique Russian cultural artefacts are effectively integrated. The authors have noted significant influence of global cinematic aesthetics in Russian films, while at the same time efforts are also directed to preserve the local visuals and traditions. As a result, hybrid visual language in the art design could be readily experienced. Such hybridisation trends have also been noted by Monastireva-Ansdell (Monastireva-Ansdell, 2021), who found that Russian filmmakers are mixing various visual traditions with global artefacts, which has been resulting in the development of a unique Russian postmodern style. The postmodern style label that the author has used denotes the emerging trends, whereas global values integrated with unique Russian traditions are combined and integrated. Accordingly, multiple cultural references with respect to cultural symbols and art design in Russian films could be thus witnessed in the changing Russian film context. Another major trend that Condee, (Condee, 1995) has noted in his study is that international festivals have been affecting the visuals and art designs in Russian films, whereas festival-orientated aesthetics are increasingly emerging within Russian cinema. Accordingly, a balanced perspective integrating the national identity and global appeal could be witnessed in the Russian films. On the other hand, Jolly Stites, (Stites, 2010) has noted religious imagery in the Russian cinema, whereas Russian filmmakers are increasingly challenging the orthodox symbols. As per the findings of the author, secular context adaptation has been gaining popularity, which demonstrates visual theology in the contemporary Russian films. Furthermore, Strukov (Strukov, 2018) has noted that changes within the Russian cinema could be noted in the Russian films, whereas an increased number of Russian filmmakers are relying on digital tools. The emerging trends that are thus taking place demonstrate a new approach to visual effects that were once limited to Hollywood alone. In particular, the author has noted the evolution of cinematographic techniques that the Russian filmmakers are using that have been enabling such film producers to leverage for creating better cultural images and aesthetics.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

In order to investigate the artistic presentation logic of cultural symbols in the art design in contemporary Russian films, this research adopted a

qualitative research approach. The qualitative research approach has been adopted with the aim of ensuring effective exploration and deeper digging that could not have been possible using quantitative research methodology. For executing qualitative research, the research adopted textual and visual analysis, whereas cultural symbols and art design aesthetics have been analysed in the contemporary Russian films, and implications have been drawn from such analysis.

### 3.2 Data Collection

For the sake of data collection, purposive sampling methods have been used, and four films have been selected that were released after 2015. The criteria that have been observed for the selection of the films in the study, in addition to release data, include diversity in genre and style, critical acclaim and audience reception, and thematic relevance to cultural symbolism in the art design. Four films have been thus selected, which include '*Leviathan*' by Andrei Zvyagintsev, released in 2014; '*The Student*' produced by Kirill Serbrennikov and released in 2016; '*The Man Who Surprised Everyone*' by Natasha Merkulova and Alesksy Cupov, released in 2018; and '*Beanpole*' produced by Kantemir Balagov and released in 2019.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis techniques that have been used in this study include textual analysis and visual analysis. The textual analysis process employed in the study includes the analysis of script, dialogue, and key visuals in the set designs to analyse recurring cultural symbols and in what manner such have been employed with cultural narrative. In particular, while carrying out the textual analysis process, particular attention has been given to engaging in thematic content analysis of the selected films, whereas significant efforts have been directed to analyse how cultural symbols used in these films are relevant to broader societal norms and values of the Russian society and how global values have been integrated. Furthermore, visual analysis has been employed in the study, whereas shot-by-shot analysis of the selected films have been conducted with the aim to analyse cultural artefacts, colours, composition, aesthetics, and design setting. While carrying out such analysis, particular attention has been given to analysing visual motifs and what such motifs symbolise in the Russian culture. Furthermore, visual analysis that has been conducted also entails the analysis of symbols and how such symbols have been framed in the visual narrative.

## 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Leviathan (2014) by Andrei Zvyagintsev

The textual analysis of the film could reveal that the film elaborates a story of Kolya, who has been engaged in efforts against a corrupt mayor, who grabbed his land. The narrative of the film exhibits the power dynamics that are found in Russian society; thus, it signifies the range of powers, treacheries, moral issues, and existential hopelessness. Moral ambiguities found in Russian society have been significantly highlighted, which is evident from Kolya's relations with his wife and friends. The writer of the film has heavily relied on Biblical references in the film, which in turn engaged the audience to consider the philosophical consideration. The screenplay has been significantly criticising the social norms and values found in Russian society and has presented an elaborated version of how political corruption in the society could be linked to the value found in Russian society. While criticising the existing culture, the writer of the film has also suggested how the social evils found in the society could be overturned; particularly, the author has used visuals to suggest stressing faith instead of using institutional religion as a means of overcoming social problems and issues found in the Russian society. On the other hand, the film contains many cultural symbols, as it starts and closes on Barenta Sea, whereas majestic landscapes have been incorporated in the film. Another notable visual in the film is Philip Glass haunting, which denotes isolation and struggles that the Russian nation as a whole has made, thus reflecting the protagonist's philosophy. The visual analysis of the film could reflect that the producer has widely used the natural elements and symbols in the film, largely pointing towards the powerlessness of the country against the societal values, particularly the orthodox principles that the Russian society has been following that are difficult to change. Furthermore, the key visual in the film contains photos of Soviet leaders, which largely emphasise the national identity of the country. The visual analysis of the portraits of such leaders exhibits critique of the political landscape found in Russia and how the corrupt political system and cycling powers in the country have contributed to its powerlessness in the global arena. A beached whale has also been used as a symbol in the set design, reflecting the falling-off and the remnants of what was once the world's power. Additionally, the analysis of visuals used in the film also exhibits that the use of a muted colour palette, whereas grey and blue colours have been significantly emphasised. Such a colour palette largely symbolised the bleakness of Kolya's situations. On the other hand, the natural light has been used in



the film, which largely symbolises the stark realism philosophy followed within the country by the political authorities. The stark realism approach thus symbolised in the film exhibits the moral falling-off of the corrupt mayor. Furthermore, the visual dichotomy found in the film also has symbolic significance as the producer has introduced the visual to emphasise natural and human corruption that has led to the powerlessness of Russia.

#### 4.2 'The Student' (2016) by Krill Serebrennikov

The textual analysis of 'The Student' could highlight that essentially, the core plot of the film is an exploration of faith, authority, and what dire consequences could be witnessed by individuals who have been suffering dogmatism. The story is of Veniamin, who has been engaged in religious education and has reached a level that his religious convictions are resulting in conflict with teachers and classmates. Philosophical themes have been significantly incorporated in the film, which include Nietzschean morality and the nature of truth. At the same time, Serbrennikov has criticised the religious extremism and the bureaucratic education system followed in Russia as the core foundation of the social unrest in the society. In the process, the film writer has criticised the moral values, particularly institutional authority and societal hypocrisy found in the society. On the other hand, the visual analysis of the film could highlight that greater care has been observed in the set design and cultural symbols have been thoroughly highlighted in the film. The set of the film is that of a Russian high school, whereas stark and sterile interiors have been incorporated, which denotes the significant oppression and subjugation witnessed in the schools. The differences between individual faith and social conformity have been highlighted in the film through the use of wide-angle shots. The core cultural symbol used in the film is the Bible that Veniamin has been using as a clutch throughout the film. The use of clutch thus symbolised the struggle that he has been making as he has been contradicting the core belief of the society. The set has been designed to reflect the emerging tension between tradition and modernity, whereas societal repressive actions have been highlighted in the film. For highlighting such tension, the film used a muted colour palette that is dominated by grey and blue. Additionally, the producer has relied heavily on harsh lighting with the aim of symbolising the moral dilemma and repressive practices found in Russian society. In particular, cultural symbols in the film demonstrate the struggle between progressive practices and conservative values and in what way the existing status quo could be changed.

#### 4.3 'The Man Who Surprised Everyone' (2018) by Natasha Merkulova and Aleksey Chupov

The core brief of the film is of a middle-aged man who has been diagnosed with a terminal disease. The core character, Egor, has challenged established norms and values in Russian society, whereas the core plot of the film is the complexities that he experienced as a result of the identity and family relations challenges. Essentially, the writer of the film has not only showcased issues related to masculinity, self-discovery, and morality. Egor has been challenging the established norms and values as he adopts a female persona. The transformation that he has experienced is elaborate fluidity of identity and social constraints, whereas the core dialogue in the film has been challenging the societal prejudices and partialities. The film thus elaborates on the challenges and issues that individuals who challenged societal norms and expectations witnessed. Essentially, the writer has stressed progression and global value adoptions as the means to fight against the evils found in Russian society. Particularly, the writer and production team have challenged the traditional Russian values and rigid structure and have pointed to the fluidity of identity that has been taken from the Western cultures. The visual analysis of the film could reveal that the set design reflects a remote Siberian village that has a stark and rigid landscape. Essentially, the core images of the film reflect recurring imagery of the nature, whereas forests and wildlife have been symbolised in the film. The symbolic representation thus found in the core set design of the film reflects the freedom and entrapment of nature that a protagonist like Egor has witnessed. Additionally, the analysis of key visuals could reflect the internal struggle of identity that Egor was making and the constraints that have been placed by societal expectations and the natural environment. Furthermore, bear has been used in the film symbolically, exhibiting primal instinct and rawness of life. In addition, the visual analysis could also reveal that a muted colour palette has been used throughout the film with earthy tones that have been employed to reflect the bleakness of the environment that the core character witnessed. The lighting effect has been widely employed in the film with the aim to showcase the struggle between vulnerabilities and hopes. Additionally, shadows have been employed in the film symbolically, exhibiting the conflicting Russian values and the progressive values that are emerging because of increased global values.

#### 4.4 'Beanpole' (2019) by Kantemir Balagov

The core plot of the film revolves around Iya, a nurse who is war-psychic, and her interaction with a war survivor, Masha. Essentially, the

textual analysis of the film's core idea reflects the complexities of relations and associated trauma that are witnessed in a war-torn society. In particular, the film highlights the challenges that psychological patients like Iya witnessed during the healing process, emerging largely because of the disequilibrium of individual and collective values. The dialogues of the film exhibit the unjust expectations that the society placed on women in war-affected regions, particularly pointing towards the gender-led biases and superstitions. At the same time, the core theme of the film highlights the resilience and strengths that Russian women have been showing in overcoming social traumas. While challenging established rhetoric of the Russian society, the film also emphasises and values female solidarity in terms of crisis, which is a distinguished feature of the Russian society. On the other hand, the visual analysis of the film could highlight that the set has been designed as post-World War II Leningrad, where striking visuals have been used throughout the film. The long takes and close-ups employed in the film exhibit the intimacy and the emotional state that Iya and Masha witnessed. In particular, the green uniform of Iya has been used to symbolise her role as a caretaking nurse in the Russian society, while the red colours that have been used in the background symbolise the extreme level of dangers and risks that she was witnessing along with the gender-based violence in the society. One distinguishing image in the film is the use of a puppet that has been used throughout the film. The puppet has been used to symbolise emotional fragility and the struggle that Iya was making to cope with the situations. Additionally, the analysis of visuals could also reveal that muted tones and colours have been used in the film that demonstrate the sombre environment in the war-torn country. Essentially, the key aesthetics in the set design and the symbolic artefacts in the film demonstrate the struggle that women are making in society against the range of stereotypes and biases that are practiced against women. While at the same time, the film demonstrates the openness of the society. Particularly, the film highlights the significance of the hybridisation of cultures, whereas the Russian values of care and attention could be integrated with the progressive Western value, as such integration could help in better contesting and challenging the social evils found in the society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Summary of Research

This research analysed the artistic presentation of cultural symbols in

contemporary Russian film design, which is based on the analysis of four contemporary Russian films: *Leviathan* (Leviathan., 2014), *The Student* (Student., 2016), *The Man Who Surprised Everyone* (Everyone., 2018), and *Beanpole* (Beanpole., 2019). As per the textual and visual analysis presented in the study, Russian producers are using narrative structure, visual motifs, and thematic elements in a more effective manner that have significant cultural connotations. There are different artistic choices that the producers of these films have made, as they have employed symbolic imagery, cinematography, and colour palettes to demonstrate the sociocultural and political context of Russian society. The selected films have largely employed symbolic imagery to contest and challenge the established rhetoric found in Russian society, whereas they have been challenging the power dynamics, masculinity, trauma, and resilience. These films have demonstrated the social issues through the symbolic imagery, while at the same time they have been suggesting the hybridisation of symbolic imagery, whereas some of the core values of the Russian culture could be integrated with the progressive values that have emerged in the Western society to create and foster a better society.

## 5.2 Implications of the Research

The core practical implications of the research are that contemporary Russian cinema has started efforts to raise its voice against social evils witnessed in the society. However, the Russian filmmakers have been enhancing their appeal through the use of visual storytelling, where narrative techniques coupled with cultural imagery and colour palettes are effectively used in such films. On the other hand, the core literary implications of the study are that deeper understanding of the Russian cinema landscape could be made through understanding of relevant context, whereas the understanding of the cultural imagery could contribute to more effective understanding and valuation of the artistic presentations. Furthermore, the policy-level implications of the research are that the cultural hybridisation has been taking place, whereas Russian filmmakers are showing greater openness to the Western norms and values that are effectively integrated with the unique cultural imagery of the Russian culture.

## 5.3 Limitations of Research

There are different limitations of the study that need to be considered before generalising the finding. This includes the lack of scientific and

objective research tools in the research, whereas the findings of the study could have suffered from personal bias as it has solely relied on qualitative data and techniques. Furthermore, the findings of the study are based on the analysis of just four films that may not be the true representatives of contemporary Russian cinema. In particular, as the Russian cinema has broadened in the recent past, the four selected films may not be presented as the representative sample of the entire industry. In addition, the analysis carried out in the study comprised textual and visual analysis, whereas other core elements like sound, graphics, and audience receptions have been ignored in the study that could have negatively affected the findings of the study.

#### 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

For future research regarding the artistic presentation of cultural symbols in contemporary Russian film design, that research should be based on the quantitative analysis and techniques. In particular, positivist research where primary studies using survey research could be conducted to question relevant stakeholders about how the artistic presentation of cultural symbols in contemporary Russian film design. Furthermore, for future research, it is also recommended that a broad range of films should be selected that should go beyond social films. Additionally, for future research it is also recommended that rather than merely using textual and visual analysis, the future research should employ a variety of analysis techniques, including sound analysis, graphic analysis, and audience receptions. Using these multiple techniques could help in the better analysis of the artistic presentation of cultural symbols in contemporary Russian film design.

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