

# ACQUIRING RUSSIAN CULTURAL MARKERS THROUGH THE WORLD CINEMA ON THE LESSONS OF RUSSIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the issues related to the way of teaching Russian cultural markers on the lessons of Russian as a foreign language through the application of the world cinematography as a didactic material. The author argues that cinema is an universal tool for transmitting of cultural phenomena from different prospects. Cinema offers a complex view on cultural concepts that may help in profound acquiring of cultural markers.

*Keywords:* Russian as a foreign language (RFL), cultural markers, world cinema.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en las cuestiones relacionadas con la enseñanza de marcadores culturales rusos en las clases de ruso como lengua extranjera a través de la aplicación del mundo de la cinematografía como material didáctico. El autor sostiene que el cine es una herramienta universal para la transmisión de los fenómenos culturales desde perspectivas diferentes. El cine ofrece una visión compleja de los conceptos culturales que pueden ayudar en la adquisición profunda de marcadores culturales.

*Palabras clave:* ruso como lengua extranjera (RLE), marcadores culturales, el cine mundial.

Changing methodological paradigms in modern foreign language teaching leads to search for innovative approaches that can be effective for the international pedagogy. Up-to-date approaches have to be adopted for cultural mixed groups of students and answer to the requirements of different learning styles. Moreover, teachers have to pay more attention to the development of the process of acquiring of a foreign language [Krashen, 1981] and not only use traditional rule-based models.

Introduction of cultural markers on the lessons of Russian as a foreign language is a challenge to overcome. As cultural marked vocabulary, attributes, symbols, gestures, expressions, etc. have their own background, for non-native speakers it is difficult to perceive their cultural polyphony (“В символе всегда есть что-то архаическое” – A symbol has always something archaic (Lotman, 1996:148).

Some descriptions proposed by teachers and text books are not always able to transmit real meanings of cultural markers. It would be not effective to ask students

to learn about cultural markers just as facts without illustrating of a set of situations where they are explicitly expressed.

The world cinematography is an universal career that reflects cultural phenomena from different prospects. Cinema provides a wide specter of implicit messages that make possible to illustrate multifaceted cultural concepts. Adopted as didactic materials, old and modern films are good sources for developing of pragmatic competence in a foreign language.

*The barber of Siberia* (*Sibirskiy tsiryulnik*, Nikita Mikhalkov, 1998) is a film that richly reflects the Russian mentality of the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and identifies a huge variety of typical Russian cultural markers.

The events of *The barber of Siberia* take place within the period of the reign of a czar Alexander II (1885). One of the principle heroes of this film is an American citizen, Jane, who is traveling from the USA to Russia.

A spectator has a chance to observe the Russian reality with Jane's eyes. A number of episodes of the film depict the first contact of a foreigner with the life of Russians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A spectator meets Jane in a train's cabin where she is reading "Anna Karenina" of Lev Tolstoy. In numerous scenes Jane tries to repeat new for her Russian words, to wear Russian clothes, to describe the Russian way of life in her diary. Jane has not a specific purpose to study the Russian language; she does it organically, absorbing the reality and the language at the same time. In several situations, the words that Jane pronounces in Russian are the names of Russian cultural attributes such as "икра", "сушка", "бублики", "блины", etc. as well as some connotative expressions – "запой", "Великий пост", "Бог простит", etc.

One of the culminating events of the movie is a day of Maslenitsa (Pancake week), a traditional Russian holiday. It represents the end of winter and the last chance to partake of some products and social activities that are not appropriate during the Lenten season. This episode introduces a great variety of Russian cultural markers. Old Russian general and Jane are entering the fun-fair in the Troika (a sleigh pulled by three horses). They see bears are drinking Russian vodka; children are sliding down Russian mountains, people in national Russian clothes are playing and singing folk music. A spectator can listen to the sounds of accordion, watch a full market of typical Russian attributes and food, and observe the fighting of men. This is a very deep and emotional moment for Jane. She faces something unreachable. One day after, Jane is writing in her diary: "...Of course, in this extraordinary country everything is decking to its extreme. Half naked men on the frozen river bit each other black and blue, and then back each other for forgiveness. They go after war singing, to the wedding in tears, and everything is serious, every last thing".

In fact, the analysis of *The barber of Siberia* may be proposed for the purpose of acquiring of Russian cultural markers on the lessons of Russian as a foreign language for different levels of language proficiency (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001). The topics for discussions may be the following:

1. What kind of Russian cultural attributes Jane gets to know for the first time (their names in Russian and meaning)?

2. What are the new Russian words and phrases that Jane pronounces during her being in Russia? What kind of Russian attributes does Jane use and for what purposes?
3. What are traditional Russian events *The barber of Siberia* demonstrates? Explain their meaning.
4. Explain some utterances about Russian characters that are introduced in the film. For instance, "Ordinary Russian envy drives the country like a steam-engine in Britain" (Junker Polievsky).

Artistic representations, images, comparisons of American and Russian comprehensions of life make *The barber of Siberia* transmit a deep nature of "Russian soul" that remains mysterious and unconquered. The first and the last episodes of *The barber of Siberia* confirm this fact: Jane's son is dourly fighting for his point of view before a command officer of the military American academy. When a commander has got to know that the young man is a fruit of love of Jane and a Russian Junker, he proclaims: "It means much!" It is the proclamation that marks Russian identity in the movie.

*K-19: The Widowmaker* (Kathryn Bigelow, Christopher Kyle, 2002) is also a film-source for producing of some didactic materials for introducing of Russian cultural markers on the lessons of Russian as a foreign language. It is a thriller that portrayed a story about trials of a Soviet submarine named K-19 during the period of the Cold War (1947 – 1991). This film offers a vision of the Soviet reality from the international point of view (co-production: USA, UK, Germany and Canada).

In spite of fearful scenes of suffering and death, the film demonstrates extraordinary features of Russian patriots of the Soviet period. One of the key markers is an expression "Motherland" («Родина-мать»). It has a symbolic meaning that makes the history of events move forward.

*K-19: The Widowmaker* uncovers Russian characters whose identity was actualized by the Soviet regime. In spite of Captain Vostrikov possesses some typical traits inherent in the nature of a leader of the communist era, he does not put his duty to the Motherland above the price of lives of his comrades. Risking of being deported to the GULAG (ГУЛАГ), Captain Vostrikov saved the surviving members of the submarine, asking for help from the American side.

*K-19: The Widowmaker* opens the Soviet reality very natural. There are not implicit discourse or scenes in the film. It transmits a message of natural life of the people who know the value of their duty and human relationships.

Preparing RFL didactic materials, teachers may ask learners to think and discuss the following episodes:

1. The first meeting of Captain Vostrikov with Soviet General:
  - My orders were to prepare K-19 for sea trials, and they'll begin on schedule. But until the trials are complete...to undertake an exercise of this scope... may be, with respect, premature...(Captain Vostrikov).
  - I promised Comrade Khrushchev...that the American president will receive his message before the end of the month...(General).

2. The conversations of Captain Vostrikov and Captain Polenin:

“The boat isn’t ready, Captain. The problem is Moscow. They organize party VIP tours... while we’re stuck with incompetent yard crews and defective parts” (Captain Polenin).

- I was told there are two versions about your father. The first one, he was a hero of the Revolution. The second one, he died in the GULAG” (Captain Polenin).

- Both are true (Captain Vostrikov).

3. The speech of Captain Vostrikov on the cemetery:

“For their courage I nominated these men for the title ‘Hero of the Soviet Union’. But the committee ruled that because it was not wartime...because it was merely an accident...they were not worthy of the title ‘Hero’. What good are honours from such people? These men sacrificed not for a medal...but because when the time came...it was their duty. Not to the navy or to the state but to us – their comrades” (Captain Vostrikov).

4. Author’s afterwords:

“The Captain of K19 was acquitted but never commanded a submarine again. He and the surviving crew were sworn to secrecy for the rest of their lives. The seven men who worked on the reactor died within days of returning home. Within a few years, twenty more crewmembers died from radiation. Not until the fall of communism could the survivors mourn their lost comrades and break their silence”.

Another film that presents a colorful overview of the modern Russian society is *I love you Moscow!* (Ivan Ohlobystin, Ekaterina Dvignybskaya *et al*, 2010). The film consists of eighteen novels – short stories with their own plot that are all happened in Moscow in the present time.

*I love you Moscow!* has a specific digital format. It creates an image of a spectator who is searching for different places in Moscow indicated on the Google map. After clicking the mouse on a chosen point, the events begin at the place.

There are two novels – *Он и она* (*He and She*, A.Razenkov) and *Письмо бабушке Уйне* (*Letter to Granny Uyna*, G. Natanson, E. Konchalovsky) – that may be suitable for acquiring Russian cultural markers on the lessons of RFL.

*He and She* consists of a very simple dialog for the comprehension in a foreign classroom. This authentic conversation would be interested for analysis to RFL learners from A2 to C1 levels of language proficiency (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001). It demonstrates a night meeting of a man and a woman on a Moscow’s street. He asks a woman to marry him. There is an abstract from their dialog:

– Что ты молчишь?

– Думаю. Осторожно, шипы (кивком головы указывает на розы, которые подарил).

– Я вижу... О чем?

– Не знаю как-то, пугается.

– Ты все общежитие разбудил, уговорил меня встретиться, я вышла и ты молчишь.

Странно.

– А чо странного, мы больше года не виделись.

- И...что...соскучился.
- Я думал о тебе. Ты не выходишь у меня из головы.
- Интересно.
- А ты? Как жила все это время?
- Училась. Диплом защищала. Замуж не вышла.
- А ты женат?
- Нет. Даже не думал об этом.
- Ну и правильно. Конечно, дело серьезное.
- До сегодняшнего дня...
- Не понимаю, что?
- Стань моей женой.
- Никогда не просыпалась так рано, спасибо тебе...(пытается уйти).
- Ты не ответила мне.
- Что с тобой? Ты не заболел?
- Нет, я проснулся, как током ударило, как озарение какое-то. Ну и сразу позвонил, хотел тебя до работы увидеть, чтоб сказать тебе это (берет ее руку и одевает обручальное кольцо. Кольцо соскакивает и падает на землю).
- Ну вот видишь, примета плохая.
- Я не верю в приметы.
- Да ты сумасшедший!
- Да!..

In spite of the fact that the vocabulary of this dialog is very simple and clear, all utterances are authentic. This conversation “sounds in Russian”, it produces Russian perception of the reality. Furthermore, the lexis and gramatical structures of *He and She* present a good foreign language material for learning by heart, for instance, the following expressions: «ты не выходишь у меня из головы», «да тебя убить мало за все те слезы, которые я выплакала, целое море», «не делай глупостей», «какой же я все-таки...», etc. Their application may be relevant in different kind of communicative discourses.

A film-novel *Letter to Granny Uyna* is a letter to a granny from a grand-daughter who has come to Moscow to find her destiny. Watching *Letter to Granny Uyna* on the lessons of RFL, learners have the possibility to listen to a voiced authentic sample of an informal letter to a person. In addition to an audiovisual demonstration of the modern Moscow’s reality, this film-novel is a good source for acquiring modern Russian language. It is a helpful task to ask learners to transcribe and analyze the letter: «Дорогая бабушка, Уйне, ни о чем не беспокойся, я устроилась в Москве, живу в центре города, играю на скрипке, вообще, все, как я хотела, как хотела ты бабушка, Уйне. У меня новая Московская жизнь. Все началось еще с ... Ну что сказать, заканчивая свое письмо, моя дорогая бабушка, Уйне...Вот что, бабушка Уйне, если верить в мечту, она сбудется. Если верить в мечту, она обязательно сбудется. Ведь это Москва!»

For acquiring Russian cultural markers on the lessons of RFL it would be useful to compare Russian and international screen versions that based on the Russian classical literature. For instance, *Евгений Онегин* (Roman Tihomirov, 1958) and *Onegin* (Martha

Fiennes, 1998); *Анна Каренина* (Sergei Solovyov, 2008) and *Anna Karenina* (Joe Wright, 2012); *Война и Мир* (Sergei Bondarchuk, 1967), *War and Peace* (Robert Dornhelm & Brendan Donnison, 2007).

The application of didactic materials based on the world cinema on the lessons of RFL provides perception and acquisition not only the language but as well as the behaviors and traditions of individuals who speak in it.

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