

***Matil'da* (2017) as a Political Event. Towards Scandalization of Royal Sanctity**

EGOR LYKOV, *Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich*
egorlyk@gmx.at

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ABSTRACT

Scandals accompany and belong to public debates about Russian identity, past and present. Although they seem to be “public”, there is a lot of state influence, especially when the state stages scandals in the mass media in order to control discourse production in dealing with Russian collective memory and its past. This paper deals with the scandalization of the film *Matil'da* (Uchitel', 2017) owing to its “wrong” interpretation of the character of the last Russian tsar Nicholas II. The scandalization is accompanied by legitimization of a powerful state and a powerful ruler for the modern Russian Federation. Moreover, it is committed to Russian collective memory as well. The reasons, methods, and forms of scandalization and marginalization of the film in Russian media space will be discussed, and the political motives contributing to the marginalization of the film will be shown. Based on various sources (newspapers, film reviews, posts on social networks), the dynamics, actors and interest groups of the scandal will be analyzed. Factors of prohibition and release of the film will be in the foreground of consideration. The research method is critical discourse analysis.

Keywords: sacralization of public space, censorship, marginalization, scandal, Russian cinema, Matilda.

Cinematography is a social practice and closely connected with the political life of the country in which films are produced. Especially in Russia, the social and political preconditions are decisive for the perception and understanding of modern cinematography, where the “growing ideological homogenization of the public sphere” and the social need of belonging to the majority has reached its climax (Kukulin, 2018: 223; Smola, Lipovetsky, 2018: 3).

The methods of dealing with film and cinema in Russia are determined by the state’s “soft-authoritarian control”, ideological agenda-setting in cinema since the 2000s and the appearance of new taboos since 2012 like “falsifying history” and “insulting the feelings of religious believers” (cf. Wilmes, 2018: 297–300). At the same time, the imperial idea has become increasingly popular, and the connection of orthodoxy and authoritarianism as constitutive elements of the Russian nation (following the 19th century Russian ideological doctrine of the official nation) has been upgraded and adopted to modern Russian relationships (cf. Kukulin, 2018: 226). The close connection between the imperial idea, authoritarianism and orthodoxy is thereby linked to the construction of sanctity of the royal Romanov dynasty, when the last Russian tsar Nicholas II and his relatives were beatified in the early 2000s. This sacralization of the royal family is supported by the state and serves the legitimization of a powerful state and a powerful ruler for the modern Russian Federation. The mystification and idealization of the last tsar thus remains connected to Russian collective memory, old myths of the “good tsar” and “bad persons around him”. Russian history, cultural memory and identity therefore come together in the figure of the last tsar, whose positive image has been used in modern Russia for political purposes.

Cinematography reflects these developments in Russian politics, culture and society,

so there are many (documentary) films discussing the tragic fate of Nicholas II. The popularization of the last tsar in contemporary Russian collective consciousness can be considered as sacralization of the public space and nostalgia of the imperial past, which have been functionalized for the construction of new historical narratives and commemorations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time “wrong” (less positive) depictions of the last tsar get marginalized as part of what can be understood as a modern form of censorship. Especially in recent years, the crisis of symbolical orders and the homogenization of norms have taken on such large dimensions that the main principle of the new state ideology has been openly formulated (not least in the habilitation of the Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskiĭ and the scandal around it): history should be rewritten in accordance with the current national political interests of the Russian Federation (cf. Kukulin, 2018: 222). The high impact of digital media on the spreading of these ideas should also be mentioned (cf. Burkhardt, 2018: 19; Smola, Lipovetsky, 2018: 7).

Regarding these observations, this paper will try to figure out the reasons, for which modern Russian films get socially and politically marginalized in media and public space, and identify the methods and forms of marginalization. How the films become political events or scandals will be investigated. These research questions will be exemplified by the film *Matil'da* (Uchitel', 2017) which became a scandal in early spring 2017 because of its “wrong representation of the person of the last Russian tsar and Russian history” (cf. Za otmenu, 2017). The involvement of state politics of memory culture, the Russian Orthodox Church, conservative political powers and the opposition in the dynamics of the scandal makes this film suitable for a case study on the marginalization of films with content unwelcome for contemporary Russian national identity.

It is worth underscoring that *Matil'da* is only a feature film without any claim to truth. The film tells a love story of the future Emperor Nicholas II with a ballet dancer Matil'da Kshesinskaia, which has been understood as providing a wrong interpretation of the character of the last Russian tsar. Although the film is a fiction and product of fantasy, it has been considered by some viewers as reality and representation of a real story, which enables the film to be considered as an example of the specific scandal culture, representing power relations in contemporary Russian society. In this regard, this paper neither strives to provide an interpretation and evaluation of the “historical truth” of the film plot, nor to offer a review and discussion of its artistic value, nor to make a plea for any of the actors involved in the scandal. Above all, it aims to analyze the dynamics of the scandal: the reasons for its scandalization, trouble spots, the interests of various political groups involved in the scandal, and the methods and forms of marginalization of this “unwelcome” film. These dynamics will be investigated along the turning points of the scandal (announcement, expert enquiry, premiere) and the political interest groups involved at each stage of the scandal.

In the research literature, it has often been emphasized that nonconformist culture, which “reflects the extremely negative transformations of the Russian political regime”, gets marginalized in contemporary Russian public space (Smola, Lipovetsky, 2018: 9). Although *Matil'da* has been harshly criticized, it cannot be seen as a “nonconformist” film. The film production was state funded, and the film director Alekseĭ Uchitel' is loyal to the political regime (Baklanov, 2017). Moreover, the film is not explicitly directed against the state ideology. Although the film reached an audience of two million and the exhibition of

costumes used in the film was successful, it brought less financial income than expected, in spite of the strong scandalized presence of the film in the print and online media. These ambivalences led to the understanding of the film as a “failed scandal” (Krashennnikov, 2017).

The scandalization of *Matil'da* can be considered as a modern strategy of censorship which aims at controlling discourse production in accordance with social rules, because “every scandal has a normative function” and reflects a “historically grown concept for the public negotiation of norms” (Burkhardt, 2018: 26). This enables us to investigate the scandalization of the film from the critical discourse analysis point of view and to focus on the social and political implications of the scandal. The marginalization of “unwelcome” films is therefore an effect of authoritative control practices which keep under surveillance the spread and reproduction of social discourses, so that “welcomed” discourses are supported by authorities while “unwelcome” discourses are crossed out. While Foucault distinguishes between three types of control through exclusion (prohibition) (Bachleitner, 2017: 22–26; Foucault, 2007: 16–17), new approaches criticize this binary opposition between the accepted and the excluded and consider discourse as a “polyvalent constellation” with various perspectives and forms (Smola, Lipovetsky, 2018: 9). This observation is especially appropriate to *Matil'da* because of its complex entanglement in state funding mechanisms, various political actors and interests, national consciousness, religious debates etc. and an unclear position between loyalty to the Russian state and subversion, between showing “historical truth” and provocation and profanation.

The sources relevant for this investigation are newspaper articles, film reviews, interviews with officials of the Russian Federation (above all, with Nataliia Poklonskaia), television and online programs of various interest groups involved in the scandal (the National Duma, the religious fundamentalists, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the central government, art critics, journalists etc.). Particular attention should be paid to the representation of moral and political values, and social norms by the different interest groups involved in the scandal (cf. Burkhardt, 2018: 33, 36). In our case, we can distinguish between three areas of protection through censorship: religious feelings, moral values and state interests (cf. Bachleitner, 2017: 27–32).

The scandalization of Russian films is not a rare contemporary phenomenon. It has a long tradition from Soviet times, where the most prominent example is the film *Agoniia* (Klimov, 1982) (*Agony*), which had a religious content. But films discussing religion were not held in contempt for a long time in the modern Russian Federation (specifically until 2012). With only a superficial study of the Russian filmography since 2000 (the so-called Putin era) we can easily find some approaches similar to the scandalized and marginalized *Matil'da*. The film *Liubov' imperatora* (Grigor'ev, Orlov, 2003) (*Love of the Emperor*) tells a love story of the tsar Alexander II and princess Dolgorukova, and the film *Zvezda imperii* (Mazurenko, Sokolov, 2007) (*Star of the Empire*) even has the same plot as *Matil'da*. None of these films caused a sensation or scandalization. These examples show that the Russian audience should be familiar with such cinematic topics as illegitimate love of the Russian rulers, so *Matil'da* should not have provoked a shock.

There are many reasons why *Matil'da* has become so explosive. Although all the films mentioned were produced in the Putin era, since 2012 new socio-political goals,

national interests and challenges have been formulated and have caused a crisis of social norms and polarization of the society. These sociopolitical changes have contributed to a new understanding of history and its role in the present so “what was acceptable yesterday, becomes sensationally nonconformist today” (Smola, Lipovetsky, 2018: 9).

The scandal began with a public petition on Change.org in March 2017, half a year before the premiere of the film, to ban *Matil'da* because it insulted the religious feelings of the orthodox believers (cf. Za otmenu, 2017). Nataliia Poklonskaia, a member of the National Duma, supported this petition appealing to moral values and initiated an enquiry of the film to gather “objective” arguments for prohibition. The grounds for that were protection of children and young persons, protection of religious feelings and the collision of the film’s representation of Nicholas II with his official canonical image. At the same time, some other reasons were implied: the film should have produced an analogy between ecclesiastical and mundane power, and the sexuality represented in the film should be suppressed. Poklonskaia went from being only an official at the beginning of the scandal to becoming personally involved in it. Her opinions were transmitted as a kind of “truth” through various print and digital mass media. Although she saw only the two-minute trailer and not the whole film, her “right” interpretation massively influenced the discussions about the film. The German actor Lars Eidinger, who played Nicholas II in the film, was wrongly considered by Poklonskaia as a “porn actor” and “Satanist”. According to Poklonskaia, the film is anti-Christian and extremist because it insults the feelings of religious believers and discredits Russia by showing magic and occultist rituals, falsifying historical facts and profanation (Car’grad TV, 2017, June 6).

The wrong depiction of Russia is thereby the main argument at the beginning of the scandal. Poklonskaia sees herself as the sole “rescuer” of Russian culture and society, a phenomenon in contemporary Russian society known as “messianic cynicism”. She applies the “unique historical mission [of Russia] to implement universalist moral values forgotten by the West” to her own activities as a member of parliament (Kukulin, 2018: 231).

One of the most important interest groups who fought against *Matil'da* were orthodox fundamentalists, who have little to do with orthodoxy but functionalize it for their nationalistic purposes. The methods of contempt were intimidation, violence, arson, and threats. Appealing to the collective memory of Russians, orthodox fundamentalists are a destructive factor in the public understanding of Russian orthodoxy. The staging of public prayers against the film in front of cinema centers was almost the only legal method used by this interest group, so the belief was directly connected to authoritarian political goals. The slogan “Za veru! Za Otechestvo! Za narod i caria” (“For belief! For fatherland! For people and tsar!”) converted such prayers into political demonstrations where the interests of the right wing were articulated (cf. Za veru, 2017). Therefore, not only church and religion but also contemporary Russian cinema have been used flexibly as instruments for nationalist purposes.

The Russian Orthodox Church claimed the right to assess works of art, spoke from a position of protection of religious feelings and demanded the banning of the film. *Matil'da* was understood by the church as a lie providing a caricature of the tsar and non-canonical depiction of saints. The tastelessness of the film and the “wrong” approach of the film director were criticized (Car’grad TV, 2017, October 12). At the same time, the Russian

Orthodox Church distanced itself from the orthodox fundamentalists and underlined that they cannot speak in the name of the Russian Orthodox Church (Futur'e, 2017). The voices of various clergymen during the whole scandal were mostly repetitive and brought no other plausible arguments to the discussion. The involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in the scandal around the film shows that the church not only has ecclesiastic but also political interests regarding collective memory and strengthening of authoritarianism. The church is therefore seen as an "institution with political functions" and a political technologist which fights against Western liberalism as heresy (Knorre, Kharish, 2018: 365–366, 370, 373). The reciprocal relationship between Russian politics and the church finds its expression within this scandal because the political actors need religious arguments to articulate their critique on the film, while the church develops activities in the political field (cf. Knorre, 2014: 42).

The enquiry of the film initiated by Poklonskaia built a belated basis for arguments by enemies of the film. Conducted by leading scientists of the Russian Academy of Sciences and published online by Poklonskaia, the thirty-page report was based on the method of semiology, so the research interest was directed to details of the film and single signs. When reading the text, the exact and methodologically correct analysis of the single signs appears convincing; however, the lack of their generalization in the context of the film as a work of art makes the research results tendentious and implausible. The experts presupposed that the film has "religious content" which has been contaminated through vulgarity and sexuality. The report also speaks about antinormativity, provocation and profanation in this "ahistorical film", although there was never a claim of historical exactness. The title of the enquiry was formulated very carefully. This text was considered by its authors only as a "mnenie spetsialistov" (opinion of specialists) and not as an "objective assessment" of the film, but this was ignored by enemies of the film. They only considered the enquiry as a basis for further actions (Slobodchikov et al., 2017: 1–39).

Officials of the Russian government gave only neutral assessments of the film. Vladimir Putin appeared not to be involved in the scandal and said in one of his interviews that there were no attempts to ban the film. However, the various interests of multicultural and multi-religious Russian population should be respected, so he pleaded for productive dialogue between the different interest groups involved in the scandal (Novosti na Pervom Kanale, 2017, June 15). Dmitrii Medvedev called the critique of the film an expression of intolerance and aggression (Car'grad TV, 2017, April 25). Vladimir Medinskii spoke about a "bacchanalia of democracy" regarding the scandal around *Matil'da*. He also mentioned that he did not know anything about the enquiry initiated by Poklonskaia (Filimonov, 2017). It should be mentioned that this enquiry was not taken into account for approval of the film by the Russian Ministry of Culture. These statements show that the Russian government did not recognize the supposed danger of the film as perceived by church-related political powers.

The religious fundamentalists were not satisfied with the reserved commentaries of the Russian officials and developed new methods of showing their contempt for the film. The YouTube video "Lozh' Matil'dy" (The Lie of Matilda) as answer to neutral and positive statements about the film was their initiative. The video "Stop Matil'da. Pravoe delo Natal'i Poklonskoï" (Stop Matilda. Nataliia Poklonskaia's Right Thing) continued the resistance of religious fundamentalists against *Matil'da*. These videos contain compensation of the "wrong" depictions provided in *Matil'da*. They presume to tell the "whole truth" about

the tsar and explain the history of the whole Romanov dynasty while brightening up the depictions of Russian tsars (Car'grad TV, 2017, April 18; Pervyi Mezhdunarodnyi Pozitivnyi portal, 2017, October 3). Such a reproduction of old imperial narratives has been promoted as a form of patriotism.

The defenders of the film are also heterogenous. The constellation was compared with the ban of Pasternak's novel "Doctor Zhivago" (Pervyi kanal, 2017, February 14). The art critics assessed the film as a "beautiful melodrama" and "adolescent love story", rather than a work of art dealing with fundamental problems of Russian history and culture, and did not see any religious content, although many art critics emphasized the weakness of the film plot. The large dimension of the scandal around *Matil'da* was considered as a factor for increasing interest in the film (Didenko, 2017, October 26). There were also some defenders in the National Duma who claimed that Poklonskaia functionalized *Matil'da* to wage an information war and to distract the society from relevant current problems (Tot, 2017, September 18).

The answer to enemies of the film manifested itself in a satirical cartoon produced by a regime-critical YouTube channel "Zapovednik" ("Nature reserve"). The plot of the cartoon contains allusions to events concerning the scandal and various references to Poklonskaia's speeches, while Poklonskaia is represented as a mad person jealous of the last Russian tsar (Zapovednik, 2017, October 25). The satire is considered as a resistance strategy providing a comic look at the scandal and explaining its absurdity through allegory and elements of fairy-tale.

Observing these dynamics of the scandal, we can define some methods and forms of marginalization of the film because of its "unwelcome" and "controversial" content. In addition to legal mechanisms to ban the film like petitions, appointed protest actions (and even public prayers), enquiry etc. there are some subtle forms of marginalization, such as non-legally binding recommendations issued by regional governments addressed to cinema centers to cancel screenings of *Matil'da*. This mechanism can be considered as a pressure of cinema centers. Due to the escalation of the scandal, some cinemas cancelled the screenings on their own initiative (Radio Svoboda, 2017, September 11). The main trend is that the Russian Federation is developing more direct mechanisms of control of the cinema whereby the prevention of the film screenings is essential for understanding state strategies of discursive surveillance (Wilmes, 2018: 301, 310). Thus, a part of the audience lost interest in seeing the film because of its negative (controversial) image in the mass media. Illegal methods to ban the film were also present during the scandal around *Matil'da*. Those were threats, intimidation and force, although the police stopped these riots very promptly (Krashennnikov, 2017).

There were various motivating issues to act against the film. The religious issue was about the protection of religious feelings of orthodox believers; the moral one about the protection of children and young persons. From the state perspective, the extremist content of the film had to be banned. However, the film neither contains any reference to religion, nor shows any obscene scenes, nor has extremist content. The main problem of *Matil'da* is that the film is dealing with a sensitive point of Russian imperial history which is relevant for the contemporary collective memory and essential for the legitimation of the new political order. The activation of collective memory contributed to the escalation of the scandal; nevertheless,

none of the involved parties saw the film. The scandal around *Matil'da* resulted in a fight for the Russian past and the Russian national pride, whose leader was undoubtedly Poklonskaia. The orthodox activists even saw in the fight against the film “the consolidation of Russian population” (Car’grad TV, 2017, April 17). The real content of the film therefore did not matter, and public discussions about the film were conducted without any knowledge of it.

The case study on the scandalization of *Matil'da* in Russian online media mirrors current socio-political problems of the Russian Federation. The rapid socio-political changes provoked a crisis of norms which led, on the one hand, to a re-evaluation of imperial narratives and their deeper incorporation into narrative frames of the contemporary Russian collective memory. On the other hand, the strong presence of the imperial past in the present is a destructive factor and burden which inhibits the search for new narratives and ways of dealing with history and national identity. These conclusions show that the scandalization of the film was pre-programmed from the very beginning of its production, because of its complicated culture for Russian memory and the multi-layered content and characteristics of the Russian political regime since 2012.

Apart from the crisis of norms and their homogenization, there are some other trouble spots. We can observe a change of idea as to who is allowed to judge on works of art, whereby the church and religious fundamentalists have become more important in discussions about works of art, but nevertheless lack the necessary expertise in this field. The next problem of contemporary Russian cinema is whether national interests’ point of view should prevail in the production and review of works of art as the only “right” perspective and to what extent the self-censorship of filmmakers might influence Russian cinema. Due to this turning point of Russia’s (cultural) politics, many works of art have become sensationally “nonconformist” and have been marginalized in the Russian public space. The censorship is complemented through self-censorship of filmmakers, and the category of madness becomes more important for marginalizing unwelcome content.

Observing the dynamics of the scandal around *Matil'da*, it is impossible to figure out to what extent public opinion in modern Russia is really “public”, because most of the protagonists of the scandal have a close connection with the Russian central government. There are no clear answers to these questions in the Russian media space. Diverse ideologies, concepts and strategies of dealing with the new social order are present, although the main trend is the increase of the state ideological and patriotic control of the cinema. Thus, the director Alekseĭ Uchitel’ stands in an in-between space and pivots between the state national interests and a critical look at the roots of the contemporary Russian memory culture. This location allows him to reach success in dealing with state bureaucracy and funding without manipulating the film as a work of art.

Although *Matil'da* had been approved by the Russian Ministry of Culture, the scandalization of the film demonstrated the potential to act of various interest groups involved in the scandal. The strongest actor was the Russian central government which has the power to decide about the approval of films. Although each interest group had its own truth and “alternative facts”, the film was mainly used as a way of strengthening the royal sanctity and sacrificing of the last tsar. It would be naïve to see in the approval of *Matil'da* a positive sign. The film was approved not least because of the state funding, corruption and support of the Russian government. Therefore, the state determines what should (can) be a scandal, given

that some other films have been banned without any public discussion. The strong presence of officials and actors closely connected with the Russian central government implies the state surveillance of the scandal, which was not really a free discussion about the Russian memory culture. The scandal not only contributed to more attention to the film but also to a positive image of the state, which instead of banning the controversial film approved it and therefore engaged for the “freedom” of the arts in the Russian Federation. In fact, the film contains neither social critique nor any reference to contemporary Russian politics and society, so it could not be dangerous for the current political regime. Therefore, it is questionable whether another (more critical) film will (would) be treated in the same mild way as *Matil'da*.

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