





Representation of World War II in the Narrative of Russian War Films

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Abstract. War cinema is a film genre focused on war, with World War II being the most depicted conflict. Due to Hollywood's influence, Western audiences are more familiar with American war films and their perspective on the conflict, while there is a few or null familiarity with the perspective of Russian war cinema. Therefore, to broaden the understanding of World War II, it is relevant to investigate how its representation has evolved in Russian war films. A qualitative approach was employed, and a case study was designed. A content analysis guide was applied to ten scenes from the films *Liberación: El Bulto de Fuego*, *Ven y Mira* y *Estrella*. The investigation was based on three categories of analysis: character construction, transformation arc, and the contexts in which they are situated. The main findings of the research indicate that the wartime period as a historical context influences the type of narrative in the analyzed films. Additionally, the representation of enemy forces has evolved over time towards their humanization and a deeper portrayal of military units' participation in the confrontation and crimes against humanity. This research contributes to the History and Cinema research line, as well as the study of films as cultural products.

Keywords: Russian Cinema, World War II, Narrative, War Films

1 Introduction

World War II (1939-1945) was the military conflict that pitted the Allied powers (USSR, USA, UK) against the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, Japan). Due to its magnitude and duration, it has been the subject of numerous films, approximately 1,409 [1]. Cinema has documented testimonies and historical events, though often with perspectives influenced by the filmmakers' ideologies [2]. It has also functioned as a political and ideological instrument to create collective memory and shape narratives [3]. Film genres, which classify narratives, can be defined as standards for themes and characters in movies [4]. They also guide the narrative structure and decisions in the production, distribution, and exhibition of films [5]. War cinema focuses on war, sometimes merging with other genres such as romance, and is divided into two sub-

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genres: pro-war and anti-war [6]. It is an extension of the adventure genre, possessing a common narrative system but with different character constructions [7]. War cinema emerged after World War I, initially prioritizing productions from Western Europe and the United States [8]. The American film industry grew significantly due to its initial neutrality in the conflict [9].

1.1 The "Good War" in Hollywood War Cinema

During World War II, films were propagandistic, later adopting a "pseudo-propagandistic" approach, honoring the participants of the conflict and serving political interests during the Cold War [1]. After two world wars, European industries were devastated, giving way to Hollywood's global hegemony, promoting the American perspective of the conflict [10]. This perspective presents the conflict as the "good war," glorifying victorious moments and portraying Americans of that era as the "greatest generation" who sacrificed for the common good [11]. This viewpoint serves as a moral justification for the actions of the United States, suggesting that they fought on the right side with good intentions [12].

1.2 Violence and Survival in Russian War Cinema

In Russia, this conflict is known as the "Great Patriotic War," being one of the largest and most painful conflicts in its history, filled with stories, myths, and memories [2]. Soviet-era Russian cinema is distinguished by depicting the harsh reality of the Soviet Union facing the then most powerful army in the world on its own territory [13]. It portrays a harrowing vision in which the people fought for their survival against invaders who sought to subjugate the Russian/Soviet population. Consequently, the content of these productions depicts brutal violence, in contrast to Western European cinema, which often addresses the moral issues of war [14].

1.3 Representation of World War II in Soviet-Era Russian War Cinema

In Russian war cinema, two main narratives about World War II have been identified: the Stalinist and the humanist [15]. The Stalinist narrative highlights the Soviet victory due to Stalin's leadership, which inspired society [16]. This narrative depicts large-scale battles and death as part of the heroic sacrifice, showing the Soviets as victims and with victory overshadowing individual suffering [15]. As a result of the propaganda system, this vision constructed a collective memory among Russian citizens, with cinema playing a crucial role in this [17]. The humanist narrative, emerging after Stalin's death, ceased to glorify the war, focusing on human experiences and individualizing characters through themes of love and death, with less emphasis on epic battles [16]. Over time, these narratives would merge, incorporating new elements [15].

1.4 Representation of World War II in Russian War Cinema After the Fall of the Soviet Union

After the fall of the USSR, Russian cinema faced a crisis, drastically reducing its production while coinciding with an influx of American cinema into the Russian market, raising concerns about the survival of national cinema. To counteract this influence, state support was increased, and new narratives emerged in the representation of World War II [18]. The post-Soviet Russian narrative challenges the traditional view of the war by presenting characters stigmatized in that narrative, blurring the line between "Us" and "Them," and depicting the war as a human experience [19]. In these films, individualism and pragmatic patriotism are highlighted, showing characters acting out of necessity imposed by circumstances, missions, or tasks, with their primary motivation being to survive the war [20].

2 Methodology

The research was conducted from an interpretive paradigm [21]. A qualitative approach was employed [22], and a case study was designed [23] with the objective of analyzing the representation of World War II in the narrative of Russian war films.

Table 1. Technical Data Sheet of Selected Films for Analysis

Title	Year	Country	Director	Synopsis
<i>Liberación: El Bulto de Fuego</i>	1971	Soviet Union	Yuri Ozerov	A five-part war epic, considered the Soviet response to the American film "The Longest Day" (1962), which depicts the Normandy landing. "Liberation" narrates the major victories of the Soviet army in World War II, including the Battle of Kursk, the Battle of Berlin, the assault on the Reichstag, and the raising of the red flag over its ruins.
<i>Ven y Mira</i>	1985	Soviet Union	Elem Klimov	A film commissioned to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Allied victory in World War II. Through the eyes of a child hardened by suffering, it depicts the systematic massacre of the inhabitants of more than 600 Belarusian villages during the war.
<i>Estrella</i>	2002	Russia	Nikolay Lebedev	Summer of 1944, Russian front. After bloody battles, the Red Army has pushed the Germans back to the western border of Russia. The Germans are planning a major counterattack. The Red Army Headquarters sends young soldiers, aged 23 to 25, behind enemy lines to report on their movements. Their call sign will be "Star."

Note. [25]

The technique applied was content analysis [24] based on three categories: character construction, transformation arc, and the contexts in which they are situated. Ten scenes were analyzed from the films *Liberación: El Bulto de Fuego*, *Ven y Mira*, and *Estrella* (see Table 1). These films were selected for representing different stages of the World War II narrative in Russian war cinema, identified through a review of the background literature (see Table 2), and the chosen scenes correspond to the plot's turning points in the selected films.

Table 2. Stages of the Narrative in Russian War Cinema about World War II

Years	Description
1949 – 1955	The characters would immolate themselves without hesitation for the motherland and for Stalin, who was portrayed as the architect of the victory. This perspective is classified as Stalinist narrative.
1955 – 1960	The war is depicted as a tragedy, focusing on the struggles and emotions of ordinary people. This perspective is referred to as the Humanist Narrative.
1960 – 1980	The films of this period combine elements of the Stalinist narrative, such as large battles and historical figures, with the Humanist narrative, which focuses on individual dramas.
1980- 1991	With Perestroika, new narrative approaches and ways of understanding the war emerged.
1991 – 2000	After the dissolution of the USSR, the crisis drastically reduced Russian cinema and allowed for the massive influx of American films.
2000 -	Increased state support under Vladimir Putin has led to an "explosion" of Russian films about World War II.

Note. [15] [16]

2.1 Ethical Considerations

To access the analyzed films, the official YouTube channel of the Russian state production company Mosfilm was used, which provides free access to Russian films subtitled in English and Spanish, while respecting copyright.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Influence of Historical Context on Cinematic Narrative

The film *Liberación* [26] takes place in 1943 during the Battle of Kursk, representing a turning point in the war with the Soviet victory. It depicts large-scale battles and, by portraying a real historical event, it combines historical figures such as generals and high-ranking officials with fictional characters representing soldiers and lower-ranking officers [15]. Despite the inclusion of high-ranking officials, the narrative continues to emphasize that the triumph would not have been possible without Stalin's leadership [16]. It shows a heroic struggle and a victory costly in human lives. The story of *Estrella* [27] takes place in 1944, during the Soviet advance into Western Europe, and continues with the heroic narrative. However, at this point, the soldiers

are not fighting for Stalin or the Soviet state, but for themselves and to fulfill their mission while trying to survive the war [18].

The story of *Ven y Mira* [28] also takes place in 1943, though it occurs during the period preceding the Soviet offensives that liberated territories from German occupation. In the German-occupied Belarus depicted in the film, Soviet authorities are absent, and there are no military actions from their side, leaving the struggle primarily to the partisan militias. The film portrays the sufferings of civilians under the punitive actions of German soldiers, including scenes filled with violence, cruelty, and death, reflecting a harrowing and painful vision of the war [14]. The war is depicted on an individual level, showing characters fighting for their survival after being abandoned by both the army and Soviet authorities, left at the mercy of a barbaric invading force.

3.2 Evolution of the Representation of the Forces Involved in the War

After viewing, the different ways in which the forces involved in the conflict have been presented have been identified (see Table 3).

Table 3. Representation of the Forces Involved in the War

Soviet/Russian Forces	Enemy Forces
Red Army	Wehrmacht (regular German Army)
Partisans	Schutzstaffel (SS)
Civilians	Soviet Collaborators

In *Liberación* [26], Soviets are depicted as soldiers and officers fighting against the Germans on the battlefield through collective effort and heroic sacrifice for the motherland [16]. In *Estrella* [27], this representation continues but emphasizes the specialization of soldiers whose motivation is to complete the assigned mission [20]. In *Ven y Mira* [28], partisan militias are highlighted, engaging in guerrilla warfare and defending civilians in occupied territories.

The German forces in *Liberación* [26] are shown as a disciplined army without distinction among its members, similar to the collaborators who aim to demoralize the Soviets. In *Ven y Mira* [28], the Germans are described as "beasts" who abuse and massacre civilians [14], specifically depicting the SS, who, driven by Hitler's racial fanaticism, commit these crimes. Collaborators are portrayed as traitors who abuse their compatriots and are direct participants in the massacres. In *Estrella* [27], the Germans are humanized, showing that they carry photos of family members and engage in acts of camaraderie similar to the Soviets, blurring the distinction between "Them" and "Us" [19]. A distinction is made between the regular army and the SS, without mentioning massacres or civilian abuses [18]. Collaborators and partisans are not mentioned, reducing the conflict to the Soviet army and the German forces.

3.3 National and Ethnic Origins of the Characters

In *Liberación* [26], the characters' national origins are not explored in depth and they are presented solely as Soviets. In *Ven y Mira* [28], the story focuses on Belarusian characters, broadening the perspective on the diversity of nations within the Soviet Union. *Estrella* [27] includes Russian protagonists from different social strata, a Ukrainian soldier, and an Asian soldier, showcasing cultural closeness among Slavic nations and ethnic diversity. The Asian soldier stands out for his religious rituals, rustic behavior, and marksmanship skills, reflecting the perception of inhabitants from Asian regions of Russia.

3.4 Participation and representation of female characters

The character of Zoya in *Liberación* [26] is a nurse in the Battle of Kursk, who tends to the wounded with care. Although she feels fear amidst the devastation of the battle, she does not hesitate in her duty to assist the injured. Her courage shines through when she crosses amidst explosions to rescue her partner, a disciplined wounded Soviet officer. Despite her bravery and resilience, her role in the story is secondary, serving a supportive role (see Table 4).

Table 4. Female characters

Character	Film	Nationality	Occupation	Goal
Zoya	<i>Liberación</i>	Sovietic	Soviet Army Nurse	Caring for wounded soldiers
Glasha	<i>Ven y Mira</i>	Belarusian	Civil	Survive the war
Katya	<i>Estrella</i>	Russian	Soviet Army communications team.	Transmitting reconnaissance platoon information

In *Ven y Mira* [28], the character of Glasha begins as a victim alongside the story's protagonist, the teenager Flyora, both being part of the vulnerable population. Both display determination in their struggle to survive the punitive incursions of the Germans and their collaborators. However, Glasha's role, along with that of other surviving women, becomes supportive and secondary as they care for the partisan camp and the elderly and children sheltered there. This representation of women's roles in the war shifts towards the end of the story, portraying a woman as a member of the partisans who has taken up arms and participates in military operations alongside them. She is the first to fire, executing the captured Germans and their collaborators after an ambush.

In the case of *Estrella* [27], Katya is portrayed as part of the army's communications team, serving as the link between the reconnaissance platoon and its officers. Although she does not engage in direct combat, her role is crucial to the platoon's mission. Like Zoya, the character is depicted as being in love with a disciplined Soviet officer who leads the reconnaissance platoon. The character is portrayed as a

dreamy and affectionate individual. Nevertheless, she dutifully carries out her military duties with determination, demonstrating her commitment to the mission and not allowing herself to be guided by her emotions.

4 Conclusions

Russian war films about World War II are conditioned by the historical context and the period of the war in which the story takes place, determining whether the narrative will focus on the heroic struggle of military forces for liberation and/or on the individual impact on vulnerable characters during the occupation by invading forces. While initially the representation of war was simplistic, depicting it as the clash between two armies, the inclusion of Soviet civilian partisan militias in the narrative, as well as the humanization and differentiation of enemy units between the regular German army, the SS, and their Soviet collaborators, has expanded the portrayal of war to showcase its complexity, magnitude, and social impact. Moreover, there is an increase in the depth, evolution, and relevance of female characters, also showing the participation of women in combat and resistance, although these characters mostly continue to fulfill a secondary supportive role to male characters. Despite gradual changes in the depiction of war in Russian war cinema, following the collapse of the USSR, characters in general became more "flat," abandoning the depth of the humanist narrative. This research contributes to the History and Film research line, as well as to the study of films as cultural products.

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