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VISUALISING HISTORY: NEWSREELS*

Annotation

Modern historiography regards newsreels both as distinctive products of the culture of the twentieth century and as important historical sources in their own right. Newsreels can significantly extend our knowledge of reality and even contribute to changed perceptions of the nature of history itself. Careful investigation of the contents of newsreels certainly confirms their value as an independent group of historical sources. Such an investigation requires researchers to employ new techniques of analysis yet it promises to throw considerable light on hitherto largely unexplored issues associated with the introduction of the film as a means of public and scientific instruction. It is important to stress that, from the 1930s until the 1990s, the newsreel was *the* mass medium for most of the people of Kazakhstan and hence provides a unique window through which we can explore the social and cultural changes of the XXth century. Only now is the true significance of newsreels coming to be appreciated. Until recently they were largely disregarded by historians preoccupied with traditional (written) sources. In reality, examination of newsreels can often reveal more about what was happening in the world of ideas and society than can ever be extracted from printed or written sources. Thus, newsreel examination can reveal the most important ideas of this period.

Keywords: historical sources, film-documentaries, newsreels, audiovisual documentaries, film magazines, cinematography, ideological tools, political propaganda, cinema production, Soviet culture.

Creation of the Kazakh newsreel

The Filmphoto/phonodocuments that constitute such an important source for the study of national history are to be found mainly in specialized and other institutions, often the same institutions that created the material in the first instance. They contain audiovisual information about the socio-political, economic and cultural life of society. Most are concentrated into a single archive and cover the period from the 1920s onwards. At that time the new Bolshevik authorities were highly appreciative of the value of film in providing an exact record of events and in offering an efficient vehicle for public instruction that could be used alongside periodicals and newspapers. Indeed, film seemed to have a mass character appropriate for a socialist society. As early as 4 March 1918 the Presidium of the Moscow Council of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies had passed a resolution placing film enterprises under official control.

In subsequent years, this resolution laid the foundation for the passage of a number of laws, defining the relationship between state and cinematography. It certainly marked the first step towards the establishment of state control and censorship over all aspects of cinematic production and distribution. Hence, on 1 April 1918, the Cinema department of the People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros) RSFSR was set up – the first specialized agency of Soviet power in the field of cinema. Production and ideological issues were now increasingly determined centrally [1]. By the end of 1918, the Bolshevik authorities had gained control of the vital elements, including ownership of materials needed for film making - films, stock and equipment- while subjecting all foreign made films to strict censorship. The production or hire of any documentary or other films were forbidden within the country without the permission of Narkompros's Film committee.

In the Party program accepted at the VIIIth Congress of Russian Communist Community Party (RCP) (b), in March 1919, the cinema was identified as one of the main means through which the ideological work of the Party could be furthered. Special priority was to be given to the making of newsreels, a genre that was to become the party's faithful servant in the dissemination of its propaganda for many decades. There can be no doubt that the nationalization of the motion picture industry represented a key element in the social, economic and transformation upon which the Bolsheviks now embarked. A decree issued by SNK RSFSR on 27 August 'Concerning the transition in the roles of the photographic and cinema industries in supporting the work of the National commissariat on education' led to the production and distribution of the first Soviet films.

Despite highly centralizing intentions of these measures, in the 1920s, the Communists were still experiencing difficulty in collecting and preserving photographic and film material relating to the Revolution and the earlier history of the Party. Thus on 4 February 1926 SNK RSFSR published a decree "Concerning the transfer to the Central archive RSFSR of negatives of pictures and the movies having historic-revolutionary interest". This measure proved crucial and ensured that material was properly stored and hence survived to be available for study by later historians – who came to recognize their value as a sources of remarkable significance and value.

Of course, the Bolsheviks saw the need locate, collect and preserve audiovisual documents through the prism of their strategy of spreading their ideology through the tools of propaganda. Thus the Bolshevik leader, V. I. Lenin declared, '... of all the branches of the arts, the most important is cinematography: it is necessary to be engaged in it first of all'. Indeed the assertion "... of all the arts, for us the most important is the cinema" became axiomatic in Soviet society. The social and cultural role of the cinema was defined in very similar terms in subsequent Party directives:

"The political role of the Soviet cinema is to promote the display of new socialist elements in the economy, in public relations, in life, in the identity of the person and in the fight against the remnants of the old system, in order to further the education of the masses and their organization towards the achievement of the cultural, economic and

political tasks of the proletariat and its party ..., to cover historical events and public phenomena from a class perspective; to the distribution of general knowledge and the international education of the masses; to overcoming nationalist prejudices and provincial limitations, through the cinema, familiarizing the masses with all the achievements of Soviet culture, to provide leisure and entertainment but in such a way that the material used in the cinema organizes the thoughts and feelings of the viewer in the direction necessary for the proletariat ..." (From the resolution of All-Union party meeting on cinema at the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) Central Committee of March 21, 1928) [2]. It was also clear that the areas, where cinematic propaganda was most likely to be successful was in areas where the people had not yet seen films. Above all that meant "in the villages and in the East".

Of the various types of cinematic productions, the authorities gave preference to the newsreel. Without the cinema, the new regime would have found it difficult to get its message over in areas where literacy levels were low. The newsreel appeared to be the answer – providing pictures and later pictures and sound, accessible to all. In other words, the newsreel was the universal medium of propaganda. In May 1918, a group of workers in the Film department of Narkompros RSFSR released the first numbers of *Film week* which covered events of political importance that had occurred anywhere in the country.

A newsreel was the ideal instrument to put forward the party's plans and to show how these plans were being realized. The new and exciting medium could be used to present the party in the most attractive way possible and to convince the rest of society of its vision, heroism and competence. It is hardly surprising that the authorities gave newsreels such priority.

In the years after the Revolution, there were no film making facilities in Kazakhstan, but, in 1927, a newsreel department was created in the "Sovkino's" film studio. In 1931 the department was reorganized into an All-Union studio for newsreels and given the name "Soyuzkinokhronika". Today, about 18 releases of newsreel and sound recordings from 1925, 1927, 1929-1932 are stored in the Central state archive of film documentaries of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 1925, 1927, 1929-1932. Some newsreels, for 1935-1936, appear to have been removed by employees of the film studio. The incomplete run of newsreels suggest that the national film fund was only interested in newsreels that had a direct bearing on the republic's history. The facts of the loss of these film materials should not be kept hidden. Here it is worth noting that films made in the territory of Kazakhstan were produced in two separate Sovkino studios: the Middle Volga studio served the southern part of the republic and Siberian studio served the northern region. Today, as part of the 'Cultural heritage program' the staff of the National audiovisual archive is conducting an active search for film and other material relating to the history of our fatherland in the 1920s and 30s. Surviving newsreels contain material about the construction of the capitals of Kazakhstan, Kzyl-Orda (1925) and Alma-Ata (1930) and celebrations to mark the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution (1927). Some stories highlight the building of the Turksib (Turkestan-Siberia)

railway, cotton cultivation in southern Kazakhstan and the breeding of top quality horses at the Kegensky stud in the Almaty area. Industrial subjects also figure prominently, including the development of the Karaganda coal basin and the Embanefit oil field. .

Responsibility for the release and distribution of regular newsreels was assigned to the All-Russian trust – to the Vostokkino Joint-stock company which besides production of films also engaged in mass observation projects. According to some researchers, "Vostokkino's" Kazakhstan studio was used to produce regular regularly releases of the newsreel "*Latest news*". However, the author managed to find only a limited number of films in this studio including "*Fifth anniversary of Kazakhstan*" (1925), "*Turksib*" (1929), and "*A national regiment*" (1930). Judging by the conclusions of the commission of Kultprom of Regional committee of All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) set up to monitor the implementation of directives on the cinematic industry in KASSR and which reported on 31 June 1931, Vostokkino's Kazakhstan studios had not been particularly active in the previous half year. The studios had been idle for much of the time and work was limited to a chronicle sketch entitled "*Turksib is going*", some stories about the work of VII congress of Councils of KASSR, May Day celebrations, a pioneer meeting and a sowing campaign [3]. But it is also possible that much more had been done and that this was now removed or sent to Moscow for recycling, a practice common at the time due to lack of material resources. It is also possible that material was incorporated in the all-union chronicle "*Soyuzkinozhurnal*" as similar plots were needed there. Perhaps most intriguingly, part of the problem seems to have been that 'message' of some of the newsreels did not coincide with the current ideological stance of the Party; offending material was particularly likely to be removed or destroyed. The problem is likely to have been particularly acute in 1928 when the policies associated with the NEP were abandoned in favour of rapid collectivization and industrialization. The maintenance of ideologically correct content was a constant preoccupation with the authorities. Thus a meeting of the Secretariat of Kazkraykom of All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) held on 23 April 1928 expressed concerns about the differences between the ideological stance of the party and the contents of newsreels, which did not accurately reflect the and the recent economic progress of the country. Narkompros was instructed to ensure that these issues should be addressed appropriately, while it was stressed that care must be taken to avoid including filmed extracts of sensitive discussions and meetings [4].

The technical, material and personnel problems which arose in the production and distribution of newsreels was bound to affect their impact on audiences. Thus the authorities in Kazakhstan were forced to admit that, at least for the time being, the newsreel had not yet become "a loud-hailer and the tool of ideological re-education of workers". Insufficient attention had been given to party and government attempts to educate 'backward cultural minorities' and give them greater involvement in 'socialist construction' by means of cinematic propaganda. The Kazakhstan authorities were so concerned that asked for help from the central government to set up their own film production. This idea had been under discussion since 1927 but was only realized in

1934, when the Almaty studio made a newsreel. From this beginning a regular series of newsreels were developed under the title of "The Soviet Kazakhstan". The newsreels consisted of short clips covering important events in all spheres of activity in Kazakhstan. The following facts reveal the high value placed on newsreels in ideological education and objectives. Having declared itself the agency of the Regional committee of All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) and SNK KASSR, the government of Kazakhstan resolved to allot 75 thousand roubles to pay for the production of six newsreels. Additional finance came from other state institutions, including the People's Commissariats for Education, Supplies and Agriculture. [5]. In the following year – 1935 - the authorities financed the making of a sound newsreel on the fifteenth anniversary of Kazakhstan [6]. The Almaty studio was now producing twelve numbers of "The Soviet Kazakhstan" per year. Its contents of these newsreels focused on events reflecting the political and ideological climate of the time.

“The Soviet Kazakhstan” as a reflection of reality

In the Issues of the “The Soviet Kazakhstan” the most significant political events were highlighted. These included the celebration of the 21st anniversary of the October Revolution, the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan, the Third congress of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, the Third congress of the Lenin Communistic Union of Youth and election campaigns. The newsreels also contained reports of party and workers’ meetings, the sentencing of a ‘group of Trotskyists by the Military Board of the Supreme Court of the USSR, granting independence of Finland, the entry of the Baltic republics into the USSR and celebrations marking the issue of labour books and passports. There was great emphasis on economic developments; coal and mining projects, light industry, railway construction all featured. The propaganda element was always strong with great emphasis on the achievements of industry and agriculture. Collective farms received special attention – how they were reaching their targets early or producing more food than planned, how their workers were participating enthusiastically in seasonal campaigns and taking part in wonderfully successful exhibitions. In short, the newsreels were seeking to promote the key features of the new Soviet way of life.

The same message was advanced in other areas of life. There were pieces on the building of kindergartens, schools, hospitals and movie theaters, on improvements in literacy and on the opening of institutions of higher education and their activities, etc. were regularly highlighted in magazines. Each newsreel had a sports section – in the context of ‘the fight against the external and internal class enemy’. There were also items on air defences, shooting competitions, mountaineering and pilot training. .

Each newsreel consisted of between five and seven stories reflecting one overall theme. The subjects and outline of the newsreel were always subject to close control and needed the approval first of regional party committees and then of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. Items on industry, transport and agriculture were subject to particularly close scrutiny and comments. A typical response was ‘Use of colour in excess of the plan’ on a piece about the work of the engineer Oleg Sabitov. Furthermore the studio was instructed to consult the Balkhash city party

committee". Apart from control of story lines, intervention in the technological aspects of film making was commonplace. In other words the authorities controlled not just the story lines but also how these would appear on the screen. For example, when in 1946 N. Kanonov planned an item entitled 'Water wheels for the village' for newsreel no 14, he was told to revise the project in a way that "would allow it to emphasize the large-scale production of the new five-year plan, and also stress the drama and heroism of construction.' The existing plot was 'unreal' because it did not adequately reflect national progress [7]. When filming, directors had to be careful about all aspects of the subjects in front of their cameras. In particular, films about economic progress could never include shots of dilapidated farmyards or people wearing worn out clothes [8].

Directors preparing the next release of a newsreel, had to adhere strictly to their instructions. In archival deposit No. 1708 – Film studios "Kazakhfilm" of the Ministry of Culture of KAZSSR – there are documents that illustrate the process. Thus M. Sagimbayev, the director of newsreels 21-41 of 1951 was told that an item about the Karaganda region entitled "By winter we are ready" had to be produced in coordination with the party Regional Committee. The film dealing with cattle farming in remote region should begin with a general plan of the area, followed by pictures of new and repaired accommodation for cattle, fodder storage facilities, workers' housing, a red yurta and the veterinary centre [9].

Newsreels had to highlight actions by the authorities in specially designated areas. Thus following a letter from the Resettlement Department of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, the Ministry of Cinematography of KAZSSR undertook to produce regular newsreels featuring the development of industry, agriculture, culture and construction in the new settlements. Film studios were required to provide monthly reports on their work to the Ministry of Cinematography of the USSR [10]. Themes of newsreels tended to follow official resolutions. Thus on 1 April 1952, the Central Committee of KP (b) of Kazakhstan issued instructions 'Concerning measures for the improvement of training and education of Kazakh girls at schools and special colleges and higher educational institutions". Soon after newsreels appeared with titles such as: "Pathway to knowledge" - about pupils at the Chimkent boarding school No. 7; "Future teachers" - about the training of teachers at the Kazakh Female Teacher Training College of M. Mametova; "Young talents" - about examination honours achieved by students at the State Conservatory [11].

Inevitably, rigid regulation of the themes and structures of newsreels compromised the professional skills and integrity of the film makers. In essence they were compelled to produce a distorted image of reality. They were given very precise orders as to the kind of reality they should display. In stories about harvesting they were told not to include shots of the secretary of the district committee, the agronomist or the chairman of the collective farm, pouring wheat from palm to palm." Instead, they should concentrate on what really mattered; to portray events and life in terms of the work, struggles and achievements of the advanced *Homo sovieticus*. [12].

The close, even stifling control of film making lifted somewhat in the 1960s. There was then something of what researchers have called a 'Thaw', a time when a degree of criticism was possible and national schools of cinematography were founded. Modern film experts, when discussing the cinema of the 1930s to the 1950s use such terms as "mythological productions of Stalin's ideology", "grandiose front doors" and "glossing over the truth". They argue, however, that in the 1960s, Soviet cinema came under the influence of "a new wave" in the cinematography developed in France and Italy. This 'cinema verite' involved the abandonment of decorative effects, overblown rhetoric and magnificence in favour of a search for reality. Now the call was for democratization in art, as cinematographers shot their films in a free and natural documentary manner, with real interiors, implicitly and sometimes explicitly rejecting the "decorative" cinema of the Stalin era. They also paid greater attention to the deep psychological analysis of the personality rather than to the simple portrayal of events.

As in earlier times, the newsreel, reflected the current trends in Kazakh society. Some aspects, notably lighting techniques and subjects - party, industry, agriculture, cultural life and sport - remained unchanged. But there were also significant differences, Story lines now included criticism of the bureaucracy, and revelations of formalism and mismanagement. Some went too far for the authorities and the scripts of special newsreels, such as "Protect the honour of the city" (1957-1961, 1965) were considered "not typical" and "alien" phenomena for a socialist society. Yet it was in the 1960s that Kazakh documentary film makers realized their plans through thematic newsreels including: "Our Magnitogorsk" (1960, 1962-1965), "Virgin Edge" (1962-1965) "Kazakhstan Sports" (1965-1970), "Art" (1966-1970,1972), "Pioneering" (1966-1968). These circulated quite widely newsreels and helped to acquaint audiences in neighbouring areas with news of developments in Kazakhstan.

These newsreels often featured interviews with leaders of industry, scientists and artists and representatives of various professions. This was in marked contrast to the emphasis of earlier newsreels where the main objective had been to create images of collective work - that is in line with the prevailing Soviet ideological stance which played down the significance of the individual personality. Previously, the individual personality was seen only as an element of social production and a reflection of the values of socialism. Now story lines began to include more than discussion of the professional qualities of individuals and their contribution to social production. Now subjects were placed in a broader context with references to family life, living conditions and leisure activities. Some of these trends were linked to technical innovations - such as lenses with a focal length of 18 mm., narrow movie camera for 16 mm. films, new sound recording systems - which facilitated such things as slow motion or accelerated, synchronous filming, etc.).

An important resolution was passed at an All-Union meeting of film directors and writers held in Moscow in April 1959. The meeting discussed the problems of the all-Union and local film and periodical press in the light of decisions of the 21st Congress of CPSU. Having noted the prevailing thematic monotony and standard covering of events

in film plots, the meeting appealed to directors to do more than make films about new buildings, factories and cities or the plan to modernize agriculture – ‘the tselina epopee’ – that would bring about a massive increase in grain output by 1965 by bringing the virgin lands of Kazakhstan under the plough. It was hope that directors would find a place in their newsreels items on the lives of the hitherto invisible ‘little people’ – the post man, the hairdresser, the newspaper seller, etc. [13].

An appeal like this would have been inconceivable in the days when story lines had to conform to a very narrow range of themes and treatments. The initiative was discussed step by step and in detail in film studios, arts councils and in the department of cinematography in the ministry responsible for the promotion of science and culture reporting to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan.

Yet how much had really changed? Using administrative levers of thematic planning of plots, the authorities presented proletarian and collective-farm cycles as the main repertoire priority in newsreels. The new orders were interpreted in a fairly conservative way. The lasting impression of newsreels made in the 1970s and 80s is of images of ‘ranks of smoking chimneys, forests, avalanches of coal and ore, construction cranes and columns of combine harvesters.’ Some film makers protested against continued interference in the film making process. Later Resolutions of the Central Committee of CPSU on measures for further development of Soviet cinematography spoke of:

... A rise in quality, in ideology and art levels in documentaries, popular scientific and educational movies and newsreels, displaying communist creativity, furthering the education of the new person and implementing the ideas of the immortal Lenin leading to historic success in the social transformation of the world.

But for all the partial liberalization of the 1960s, the state still felt entitled to issue instructions to film makers – perhaps a little less blunt than in the past, but still requiring them to follow the official ideological line [14].

Conclusion

Throughout the period from the 1920s until the end of the Soviet Union, documentary cinema remained a powerful instrument of propaganda. The general model of official ideology defined its main objective, which consisted of inculcating the minds of the masses with an appreciation of the excellence of the principles of Communism and the magnitude of the achievements of the Soviet system while holding out the prospect of an even better future. The role of the communist cinema was well summed up by Paul Schaffer, film correspondent of *Berliner Tageblatt* Schaffer declared «The movie made by the state serves to depict a not yet existing world and as well as as providing instruction in the everyday rules to be observed in such a state of ideal perfection ...», [15]. It is certainly true that the progress and achievement of Kazakhstan Soviet society are newsreels that tell us much about the enthusiasms, hopes and beliefs of the millions of people who were ready to work so hard to build a good and fair world.

For almost the whole of the Communist period, from the 1930s to the beginning of the 1990s, the main objective of "*The Soviet Kazakhstan*" was to function as an agitation and propaganda tool to sustain and strengthen the exist political, social and economic

system. Together with other branches of the mass-media it brought news of what was happening inside and outside the country to the people of Kazakhstan. Given that newsreels provide short versions of our history, it is entirely correct to place them in the category of historical sources with considerable potential to reveal more about Kazakhstan in Soviet times.

Even if they are 'authoritarian' and ideologically conditioned, the newsreels record real facts, involving real people and clearly delineated times and locations, and hence those who see them should not be too skeptical as to their authenticity. In any case, through their ability to create a visible, dynamic image of real life, the film was the imprinted history of the time, the invaluable screen chronicle. Today it is impossible to overestimate the importance of the events, the shape of historical people, figures of culture and science, the different traditions and callings, the landscape and environment all captured on the screen. The historical value of documentary filming increases over time: the film stores in itself the movement of lost times, the image of people in their originality. Thanks to the truth of film documents, the past becomes the spiritual property of the present, although often perceived and interpreted differently by successive generations. The live reality and its screen image come into the closest time contact. Thus the documentary cinema not merely preserves the past – as it were mummifying lost time, but actually includes it in the present and serves as a transmission medium of historical and cultural information.

Of course, like other historical sources, film documents require a reliability check. The well-known critic and historian of cinema, George Sadoul, when emphasizing the value of a newsreel, also reminds us that «it is necessary to define the chronicle controlled directly or not directly by the government as reproducing the official point of view of an era in which it appeared». The essential paradox that film materials «criticized with all severity ... become in the future the main source for historians» [16].

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**Работа выполнена в рамках научной стажировки по программе «Болашақ»*

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ВИЗУАЛДЫ ТАРИХ: КИНОШЕЖІРЕ

Түйін

Қазіргі тарихнама киношежіресін ХХ ғ. мәдениетінің жеке өнімі және өзіндік құқығы негізінде аса маңызды тарихи дерек ретінде қарастырады. Киношежіре көріністері шынайы өмір жайындағы білімді кеңейтеді, сонымен қатар тарихтың өзі туралы түсінігіміздің өзгеруіне ықпал етеді. Киношежіренің мазмұны тыңғылықты зерттеу, тәуелсіз тарихи деректер тобы ретінде құндылығын нығайта түседі.

Талдаудың жаңа әдістері қолданылатын бұндай зерттеу қоғамдық және ғылыми білімді оқыту құралы ретінде фильмді енгізу, осы уақытқа дейінгі аз зерттелген мәселелердің ашыла түсуіне мүмкіндік береді. ХХ ғ. 1930 жылдарынан 1990 жылдарына дейінгі киношежіре Қазақстан халықтарының басым бөлігі үшін жаппай ақпарат көзі болған жоқ, сондықтан зерттеуші ХХ ғ. әлеуметтік және мәдени өзгерістерін зерттеу барысында теңдессіз деректік мүмкіндіктер көзіне ие болады.

Кілт сөздер: тарихи деректер, киноқұжаттар, кинохроника, аудиовизуалды деректік фильмдер, пленкалы кассеталар, кинематограф, идеологиялық құралдар, саяси насихат, кино өндірісі, кеңестік мәдениет.

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ВИЗУАЛИЗИРУЯ ИСТОРИЮ: КИНОХРОНИКА*

Резюме

Современная историография рассматривает кинохронику как отдельный продукт культуры XX века и как важный исторический источник в их собственном праве. Кадры кинохроники позволяет существенно расширить наши знания о реальности и даже способствовать изменению представлений о природе самой истории. Тщательное исследование содержимого кинохроники, конечно, подтверждает их ценность как независимой группы исторических источников. Такое исследование, при котором должны применяться новые методы анализа, обещает пролить свет на доселе мало изученные проблемы, связанные с введением фильма в качестве средства общественного и научного обучения. Важно подчеркнуть, что, с 1930-х до 1990-х годов XX века, кинохроника не было массовой информацией для большинства народа Казахстана и, следовательно, дает уникальное окно, через которое мы можем исследовать социальные и культурные изменения XX века. Только теперь это истинное значение кинохроники становится зримей, чтобы оценить его как источник прошлого. До недавнего времени они в значительной степени игнорировались историками, озабоченными применением только традиционных (письменных) источников. На самом деле, исследование кинохроники может обнаружить больше, что происходит в мире идей и общества, и, что, никогда не может быть извлечены из печатных или письменных источников. Таким образом, оценка кинохроники может выявить наиболее важные идеи этого периода.

Ключевые слова: исторические источники, кинодокументы, кинохроника, аудиовизуальные документальные фильмы, пленочные кассеты, кинематограф, идеологические инструменты, политическая пропаганда, производство кино, советская культура.