

The Construction of Russian National Identity in Mikhalkov's Films

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ABSTRACT

The collapse of the Soviet Union plunged Russians into a crisis of national identity. The national elements in the famous Russian director Mikhalkov's films have an important impact on the construction of Russian national identity. This paper uses text analysis to interpret the films created by the director after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and explains the profound connection between national identity and film from a new perspective. It is found that in the trilogy of *Burnt by the Sun*, *12*, *Sunstroke*, and *The Barber of Siberia*, Mikhalkov constructs national identity by building hero images, revealing and resolving social contradictions, reproducing and reflecting on history, and promoting national culture. This study not only explores the pluralistic construction of national identity in Mikhalkov's films, but also provides inspiration for Chinese filmmakers and lays a foundation for future related studies.

Keywords: *Film, Mikhalkov, Russia, National identity, Text analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian people fell into identity anxiety and crisis, and it was urgent to construct a new national identity. National identity is of great significance to both individuals and the country. For individuals, it is a confirmation of national status and a source of stable security and belonging. For the country, the national identity of its people is the basis and guarantee of its existence and development.

Film is a popular form of entertainment and an important representation of national culture, influencing people's ideology. Douglas Kellner once said, "As one of the most important expressions of media culture, movies provide material that constitutes people's worldview, behavior and even identity." [1] Nikita Mikhalkov is a well-known Russian national film master. "From the exploration of humanistic spirit to the philosophical reflection of natural scenery, from the revelation of social problems to the criticism of the Stalin period, as well as the comparison of Eastern and Western cultures and ancient and modern times" [2], he writes about Russia from various perspectives and tells the world about Russia in his screen works. Therefore, it is feasible to study Mikhalkov's national identity

through his films, and the path and mechanism of national identity construction through films is the main problem to be solved in this study.

2. MIKHALKOV AND FILM STUDIES

Nikita Mikhalkov is the president of the Russian Film Association and a world-renowned film master. He was born into a famous artistic family, and most of his family members made great contributions to the educational and cultural cause of the country. The superior family environment gave Mikhalkov a good cultural literacy, a strong sense of social responsibility and patriotism. When writing films, he usually made them closely combine with social reality, deeply reflect on history, and root in local culture, with his unique thoughts on life and human being.

2.1 Mikhalkov's Film Creation

Over more than half a century, Mikhalkov created more than 20 films, including *Slave of Love* (1975), *Five Nights* (1978), *Several days from the life of Oblomov* (1979), *Dark Eyes* (1987), *Burnt by the Sun* (1994), *The Barber of Siberia* (1998), *12* (2007), *Burnt by the Sun 2: Escape* (2010), *Burnt by the Sun 2: The Fortress* (2011), *Sunstroke* (2014), etc. His

films have huge influence both at home and abroad, winning more than 30 awards, such as the Tehran International Film Festival Best Director Award, the Russian Nikka Award for Best Director, the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, the Russian National Literary Prize, the Grand Jury Prize of the Cannes Film Festival, the Venice Film Festival Special Golden Lion, the Russian Film Golden Eagle Award for Best Film, the Shanghai International Film Festival Golden Eagle Award for Best Film Nomination, etc. [3]

2.2 Study of Mikhalkov's Works

At present, domestic scholars' researches on Mikhalkov's films mainly focus on the contents and directing style, such as Mikhalkov's film style in *Burnt by the Sun* (Liang Yufeng) [4], the narrative style and symbolic Interpretation of *Sunstroke* (Pan Lin) [5], Nikita Mikhalkov's Director Art Research (Li Qian) [6] and so on. Only a few scholars have studied national identity in his films. In *Mythological Creation in The Barber of Siberia: Text Strategy and Cultural Function* (Wu Yuming) it is said that The Barber "can guide those who have the corresponding symbolic experience to identify the image of Russia according to the preset mythological schema, in order to construct the so-called collective identity and experience of Greenblatt", "the film's text strategy actively participates in the reconstruction of national identity and the construction of national ideology in the Post-Soviet period." [7] In *Analysis of the National Ideology in The Barber of Siberia*, Tang Yanling discusses the embodiment of national ideology in the army and national festivals, "the director connects love clue and national elements, basing on accumulation of traditional culture and mature grasp of the film". [8]

There are few researches on this issue by foreign scholars. Susan Larsen, in *National Identity, Cultural Authority, and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhalkov and Alexei Barabanov*, delves into the hero images of the two protagonists in *Burnt by the Sun* and *The Barber of Siberia*. Their moral qualities and masculinity construct audience's national identity and ease their identity anxiety among Russians. [9] In *Tsarist Russia, Woodcut Style: Nikita Mikhalkov's The Barber of Siberia and Post-Soviet National Identity*, Stephen Norris argues that the director has reproduced in the film the history, culture and traditions of Tsarist Russia, this useful past is part of the Post-Soviet national identity. [10] In addition, Mikhalkov published his autobiographical memoir *The Territory of Love* in 2015, which is an important

material for this paper to study his concept of national identity. In the book, he writes about his family, sums up his experience as a film director and reviews all his works. [11]

3. CORE CONCEPTS

Before defining the concept of "national identity", we must first clarify the concept of "identity". "Identity" is a widely studied topic in the field of humanities and social sciences. According to Stuart Hall, "Identity is based on a cognitive foundation of common origins or characteristics that are shared with another person or group, or with an idea, and with the circles built upon it." [12] Fundamentally, identity is a response to the question "Who am I?" and "Who are we?", is the orientation of one's own and group identity.

3.1 National Identity

In the study of identity, the focus of academic researches has gradually shifted from micro self and individual identity to macro national identity. Jiang Yihua believes that national identity is "a person's spiritual activity to confirm which country he belongs to and what kind of country it is." He divides national identity into three levels: ethnic kinship, historical and cultural tradition, social, political and economic system. [13] An individual's national identity may be one of these levels, or it may contain several levels at the same time. It can be seen that the construction of national identity is pluralistic, including region, blood, society, economy, system, history, culture, value, ideal and belief.

3.2 Film and Identity

As a comprehensive interdisciplinary theory, identity is also the research object of modern film circles, and there is a profound internal connection between film art and identity theory. As a form of media culture expression, film provides people with materials to establish identity through audio-visual elements such as images and sounds, and influences the audience's ideas and behaviors.

The connection between film and identity is its creator and audience. On the one hand, film is the presentation of the creator's idea. The author attaches his understanding of society, the country and even the whole world to the story plot and camera language of the film, and penetrates his emotion and value into the screen picture. Every representation of the world in a film contains a world view, so every scene scheduling and camera angle means a change or an

adjustment in people's hearts.[14] On the other hand, movies shape the audience's concept, and the process of watching and understanding movies is the process of constructing identity. Film leads the audience into the conceptual world created by the creator, and it makes the audience believe that the situation on the screen is the real world around them. The infiltration of this situation makes the audience's ideology change subtly. From this, we can see that the psychological identity of the creator to the country presented in the film also constructs the national identity of the audience.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF FILM

Text analysis has the function of exploration in the potential influence and consciousness guidance of mass media on the public.[15] Text analysis requires interpretation of the film from the surface to the deep level. It not only excavates the creator's intention and opinion from the aspects of character language and story plot, but also considers major historical events, cultural trends and social conditions at that time in combination with the historical background, excavating the off-camera subtext.

4.1 Object of Study

This paper studies the national identity in films. The selected research object should not only fully reflect the national identity concept of the creator, but also consider the influence of the films on the audience. The urgency and necessity of constructing national identity is the primary basis for choosing films. George Lahren said, "In relatively isolated, prosperous and stable environments, problems of cultural identity do not usually arise. For identity to become an issue, there needs to be something turbulent or crisis, where established ways are threatened." [16] Therefore, drastic changes in the social environment are most likely to trigger a crisis of national identity.

The collapse of the state system made Mikhailov worried about the fate of the nation, and he often chose subjects of great significance during film creation to shape and show the grand image of Russia and express his deep patriotic feelings. For the Russian people, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Russian Federation made it urgent for them to complete the transformation of the old and new identities and construct a new social relationship and cultural psychological model. At this time, the national concept and patriotic feelings presented by the director on the big screen have a

more far-reaching impact on the audience and revise people's understanding and positioning of the country. Therefore, this paper takes the films created by Mikhailov after the collapse of the Soviet Union as research object (except documentaries) to interpret the concept of national identity contained in these films, including *Burnt by the Sun*, *Burnt by the Sun 2: Escape*, *Burnt by the Sun 2: The Fortress*, *The Barber of Siberia*, *12*, *Sunstroke*.

4.2 Research Method

The research method adopted in this paper is text analysis, because national identity is not the direct theme of the above-mentioned films, and the hidden concept of national identity needs to be revealed through the analysis of specific content. To study national identity in movies, we should find and determine the point of penetration in national identity construction is the premise of this thesis. So the author sorts out the story plots of the six films, combining them with the historical background of their occurrence, and extracts keywords that can best highlight the national identity, as shown in the "Table 1" below. According to the results, this paper takes hero, society, history and culture as the point of penetration, excavates the specific materials of constructing national identity through intensive reading of the text, forms a multi-dimensional vision and establishes effective argument for the construction of national identity.

Table 1. Story plots, historical backgrounds and national identity keywords in films

Film Title	Historical Background	Story Plot	Key Words of National Identity
Burnt by the Sun	Stalin Period	The hero Kotov is on vacation with his wife and daughter at his country house. Internal Affairs agent Mija arrives on a secret mission to arrest him. In the end, Kotov is framed and persecuted, and his family is imprisoned.	Hero, Political Struggles
Burnt by the Sun 2: Escape	World War II	Kotov is not executed, but held in a prison. After the outbreak of World War II, he fight on the front lines with many distinguished service. His daughter Nadya also becomes a battlefield nurse.	Hero, War
Burnt by the Sun 2: The Fortress	World War II	Kotov is vindicated and promoted to lieutenant general. Stalin asks him to organize 15,000 civilians to attack the German bunkers and fortresses in order to use up enemy ammunition. Kotov eventually reunites with his daughter.	Hero, War
The Barber Of Siberia	Russian Empire	An American woman Jenny is sent to Russia to confuse the general of the Royal Military Academy in order to get funding to invent a giant lumberjack. She falls in love with cadet Leo Tolstoy, who is exiled to Siberia after a conflict with the general.	National Culture
12	Chechen War	A 12-member jury has been heard in the case of a Chechen boy accused of murdering his Russian adoptive father. The boy is eventually acquitted and placed under protection of the crowd.	Social Contradictions
Sunstroke	October Revolution	Soldiers loyal to the Tsar are rounded up to await trial in Soviet Russia. One of them, an Army captain, recalls a romantic encounter with a mysterious woman. Eventually all the men are herded onto barges and buried at sea.	Revolution

5. ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MIKHALKOV'S FILMS

Through text analysis, it is found that Mikhalkov establishes national prestige by shaping hero images in films *Burnt by the Sun*. In film *12*, the director builds social identity by revealing social contradictions. *Sunstroke* and *Burnt by the Sun* both reflect history and guide national rejuvenation. The director also stimulates the national pride of people with rich cultural elements in *The Barber of Siberia*.

5.1 Building Hero Images

Heroes have a noble and tenacious character with the power of example. Literary works often choose such heroes to promote the noblest and most representative of the overall interests of the social group in a particular period of the grand goal, call and motivate the whole society.[17] Mikhalkov also said that movies should portray heroes, because heroes can instill patriotism in the audience and thus promote national identity.

Kotov, the protagonist of *Burnt by the Sun* series, is a spiritual individual. He fully conforms to the characteristics and requirements of the times. In the first film, *Burnt by the Sun*, Kotov is a hero who cares for the people and his daughter, which is in stark contrast to the dark and brutal political environment of the time. When the tanks of the military exercises were about to destroy the fields, Kotov immediately came out of the bathhouse, mounted his horse and galloped to stop them. He said "Don't you know me?" and made the young tank master reverent. He majestically called a halt to military exercises, tanks and planes were withdrawn, wheat fields were protected, and farmers cheered. When doom is imminent, Kotov bid farewell to his daughter with a white lie: "We're not going to the zoo tomorrow, I have to work, don't be angry with me." Nadya thought her father would come home after work, and eagerly helped him put on his military uniform, "Then go next time!" However, it was the last moment between father and daughter.

Burnt by the Sun 2: Escape and *Burnt by the Sun 2: The Fortress* portray Kotov as a patriotic hero on the battlefield. Stalin sent tens of thousands of civilians with wooden sticks to the enemy bunkers

and those who tried to resist were killed. With no choice, Kotov took a wooden stick and led the way out of the trench, and one by one, the civilians went out under his example. The people played accordions and sang their way forward, following the general to the fort. At this time, they had only one goal in mind: to capture the German bunkers and defend the motherland. Melodious accordion sounds surrounded the hero and people, this tragic scene has moved countless viewers.

5.2 *Revealing and Resolving Social Contradictions*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia encountered a series of severe social problems, which are important contents of Mikhalkov's screen creation. While revealing social contradictions, he also proposed ways to solve them, thus providing models and myths for the new society[18]. In this way, members of society establish common ideals, beliefs and values, and realize the emotions and value meaning brought to them, so as to construct the identity of society[19].

The Chechen problem is the most prominent social problem in Russia, and *12* is centered on this problem. The victim in the film is a Russian military officer who fought in the Chechen war, and the suspect is a Chechen orphan he adopted. Rooted in prejudice and hostility toward Chechnya, 11 jurors unanimously found the boy guilty of murder, with only the last voting against. At his insistence, the other jurors revisited the case and found the boy not guilty. When he was acquitted, the boy danced excitedly in the courtroom, and everyone present smiled. This detail fully embodied the spirit of introspection of the Russian nation to put aside stereotypes and hatred.

In the end, when all the other jurors voted for the boy to be not guilty, the juror played by the director himself insisted on a guilty verdict because he thought the boy would be safer in prison than outside. This expression showed Mikhalkov's humanistic care vividly. At the end of the film, the director said in the subtitles, "The law is eternal and supreme, but what if mercy is above the law?"[20] When jurisprudence and human feeling contradict each other, Mikhalkov's answer is to protect the weak with morality and conscience, and good humanity is the fundamental point for solving social contradictions.

5.3 *Reproducing and Reflecting on History*

Historical memory refers to the collective memories of history shared by people. Historical memory is closely linked to identity, because the perception and interpretation of one's own past and that of the larger self to which one belongs is the starting point from which individuals and groups design their own identities and decide what actions to take.[21] Film has the function of storing and reproducing history, and it is an important way for people to obtain historical data and information and reconstruct historical memory. Mikhalkov is good at creating in the grand historical background, he faces history, criticizes history and reflects on history. As he said, "We cannot live in our country if we do not have a correct understanding of what it is going through. If we ignore history, sooner or later, we will be punished by reality." [11]

Sunstroke reflects on the history of the October Revolution with the fate of a Tsarist Russian army captain. Mikhalkov tells two stories at the same time in a two-line narrative: the prisoners awaiting trial and the captain's passionate encounter with a mysterious woman. The former is a brutal political event that tells the grim reality of the early Soviet period; the latter is a romantic love story set on a palatial Tsarist cruise ship. The title *Sunstroke* refers both to the passion night, as the hostess said, "We both seem to be heatstroke", and to the great disaster that the country suffered during the Civil War. On the great land of Pushkin, Chekhov, Tolstoy there is a bloody conflict, "How did it all begin?" The director does not directly express the indulgence of the era, but lets the camera switch back and forth between the two lines, allowing the audience to think about revolution, war, life, and love for themselves.

Burnt by the Sun criticizes the oppressive social atmosphere and cruel political environment of Stalin period with the tragic ending of Kotov. The director set the story in Kotov's beautiful country house, where there are forests, rivers, wheat fields, parades of young pioneers and leisurely vacationers. The film ends with Kotov being shot, his wife and daughter in prison, and Mija committing suicide. The director contrasts the horror of the great purge with countryside scenery full of harvest joy. The symbolic burning fireball and the hot air balloon with a huge portrait of Stalin hanging in the field symbolize the tragedy of that era, and have a shocking sense of historical changes.

5.4 *Promoting National Culture*

Russia lies across the Eurasian continent. In the exchange and collision of Eastern and Western cultures, it has formed a unique Russian national culture with multiple elements such as Slavic nationality, nature worship, Orthodox faith, Mongolian culture and Western European culture. National culture is of great significance to national identity. "When collective identity is mainly based on cultural components such as caste, ethnic group, religious sect and nation, the identity is the strongest, because the cultural components of the construction of cultural communities tend to be durable and stable and tight"[22]. Mikhalkov regarded himself as a nationalist in art. In his films, he not only recorded the natural scenery and customs of Russia, but also paid attention to exploring the national character, focusing on the expression of the national spirit and temperament, and carrying forward the national culture.

The Barber of Siberia is Mikhalkov's classic work to promote national culture, and he has skillfully directed the audience to "reproduce a real Russia"[11]. The Russian landscape in the shot is covered with snow and ice, and there is beautiful winter scenery everywhere. Burly men fight shirtless in the ice and snow, then wipe off blood and celebrate with each other; In the church square, the swearing in ceremony of the cadets of the military academy is held, and the setting and the Tsar's admonitions are the same as in ancient times. These traditional cultural elements are presented on the screen with great expressivity, telling of Russia's glorious past. In the film, Mikhalkov also portrays a Tolstoy who perseveres in the pursuit of love, the loyal and tenacious maid Luya, and the military students who clung to friendship, all of which are typical representatives of the traditional virtues of the Russian nation. The director believes that the national image of the work, which is full of fraternity and noble emotions and has self-dignity, "will cheer people up like vitamins"[23].

In the film, Mikhalkov also reflects on the collision of Eastern and Western cultures and the relations between Russia and the West. In the film, the giant logging machine with multiple arms, like a monster, fells Siberian forest resources on a large scale, invades and destroys Russian land, representing the fierce impact of Western industrial civilization on Russian traditional culture. One critic said the logging machine "couldn't cope with the hard Siberian hair"[24]. Hard hair is the vast white birch forest standing proudly on the Siberian plain, symbolizing the endless Russian nation and the long-standing Russian culture, which implies that Western

culture can't ultimately affect the core values of the Russian nation, can't shake the Russian people's identity of national culture.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper takes Mikhalkov's six films as research objects to explore the construction of national identity in them. When creating films, Mikhalkov presents his own concept of national identity on the big screen through character language and story plot, thus shaping the audience's national identity. Through text analysis, it is found that the director constructs national identity from four perspectives: hero, society, history and culture. *Burnt by the Sun* series establish national prestige by portraying Kotov as a hero in times of revolution and war. *12* is a concentrated embodiment of social and ethnic contradictions, and the humanized outcome of the case builds the public's identity to society. *Sunstroke* and *Burnt by the Sun* look back on the history of the October Revolution and Stalin period, and evoke faith in the revival of Russia in a sad historical journey. *The Barber of Siberia* intersperses rich elements of national culture in the main line of love, and stimulates the national pride of Russians by reproducing the splendor of the Tsarist Empire.

Mikhalkov's construction of national identity in the films also has some enlightenment for Chinese film workers. Under the background of globalization, it is of great practical significance to construct national identity through films. National identity can not only promote ethnic unity and strengthen the sense of community of the Chinese nation, but also enhance cultural self-confidence, let Chinese culture go out, and shape the image of China in the new era. Therefore, it is an important mission for Chinese filmmakers to make full use of the cultural construction function of films on mass psychology, maintain and enhance the centripetal force and cohesion of Chinese national identity, give full play to the powerful cultural communication function of films, and improve the influence of Chinese culture in the world.

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