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A review of the PhD dissertation titled
The Evolution of the Myth of Kim Il Sung as Reflected in North Korean Film 1949-1994
by Roman Husarski

The politicization and ideologization, as well as the mythical and at the same time mythical character of cinema, are nothing unusual even in democratic countries, the best example of which is the American Western. In totalitarian regimes, however, the scale of this phenomenon and the subordination of both films and various elements of the film industry, more or less clearly, to them, are of fundamental importance. Cinema creates a myth and becomes part of it. These relationships also apply to creating film images of leaders. This phenomenon has already been quite well described, it is enough to mention Iosif Stalin. Yet Kim Il Sung and North Korea are unique for various reasons. North Korean cinema is a fascinating phenomenon for both a researcher of totalitarian culture and a film historian. However, the specificity of this culture requires special competences and skills related to studies on film, culture, religion, and also history and politics of this country. Reading the dissertation titled *The Evolution of the Myth of Kim Il Sung as Reflected in North Korean Film 1949-1994* has proved that Mr. Roman Husarski meets all these requirements.

As regards the construction and impact of texts of totalitarian culture, including films, what Husarski writes about religion, political religion, and myth in totalitarian culture is convincing and functional, which is a value that cannot be overestimated considering that one has to do with the concepts of such a broad meaning. In this way, the author proves that this difficult matter has been well thought out by him. However, I will leave a detailed analysis of the use of methods developed in the sociology of religion and especially by the cognitive science of religion to specialists. I will look at his dissertation from the perspective of a cinema historian studying totalitarian and authoritarian cultures, especially the on-screen images of leaders. I will focus on these aspects in my review.

The author focuses on researching the transformation of the Kim Il Sung's image on the screen. It proves that he is turning from a great patriot and liberation hero into a sacred object of worship. This image was changing, referring to both socialist and nationalist patterns, and finally leading to the radical sacralization of the leader, presented as a sacred being. The ways of legitimizing it have also changed. Themes and narratives characteristic of socialist realist cinema and films based on colonial patterns, with strong influences of Japanese imperial culture, have ceased to suffice, they no longer fit in with the hagiographical narratives produced in cinema under Kim Jong Il (the author pays special attention to his importance). This has even led to the creation, as Husarski writes, of a new film genre: Works for the Representation of a Great Leader, a characteristic example of which is *Mt. Paektu* (1980).

Of course, this image does not apply only to movies, but the film examples confirm it. Husarski presents the evolution of Kim Il Sung's film images, noticing the dynamics of totalitarian culture, its changeability over time, the meaning of changing contexts and circumstances, and above all its myth-making dimension. The choice of a film, which is a text of culture that has an exceptionally strong impact on emotions and thus effectively builds a mythical worldview, is obvious for a film expert and does not require justification.

Husarski focuses on feature films. This is, of course, justified, although the inclusion of documentaries into analyses would make it possible to show the importance of the doctrinal intertext to an even greater extent. Husarski analyzes in detail only six of the dozens of films he has included in his work: *My Home Village* (1949) by Kang Hong-sik, *Boy Partisan* (1951) by Yun Yong-gyu, *Newlyweds* (1955) by Yun Yong-gyu, 1955), *A Forest is Swaying* (1982) by Chang Yōng-bok, *Mt. Paektu* (1980) by Ŏm Kil-sōn and *Love that Blossomed the Future* (1982) by Pak Hak. I consider this decision fully justified in relation to North Korean cinema. What matters is not creating a specific lexicon of films or examining the artistic distinctiveness of each of them, but making a functional and representative review of the most important and most characteristic works and phenomena, allowing to see the dynamics of changes in the image of Kim Il Sung and taking into account the accompanying circumstances. This intention has been carried out in a fully successful way.

I have no objections to the analysis of particular films. Husarski sees in them the most important elements from his point of view, he is also able to make generalizations about them. The work does not lack accurate observations, interesting, well-argued interpretations, and their precise ordering and consistent and thoughtful narration, subordinated to the main theme, create a superior value. Most importantly, these interpretations and analyzes in a in

detailed and convincing way justify the ways of constructing screen images of the Kim Il Sung, and describe and explain their transformation. They prove how it fits into the political and mythical reality of North Korea and at the same time creates it.

For a film historian, North Korean cinema is a particular challenge. The most important reasons for this being for example problems with access to sources, both film and film-related ones. Another one is the specificity of this cinema, so different from Western cinema. As a result, historical and film studies often contain simplifications and stereotypes, largely due to adopting a Western perspective in research on a completely different culture. Husarski's competences allow him to avoid this mistake. This is very well demonstrated by the interpretation of *Comrade Kim Goes Flying*, which proves that, contrary to the interpretation of it by some Western critics, it is very firmly embedded in the coherent system of North Korean culture.

Husarski has managed to combine the analysis of the mythical message, its structures and meanings with the study of strictly political contexts, showing at the same time how important role is played by film in them. It is not without reason that he puts forward a hypothesis that for stability of the regime, cinema is much more important than any church's text. At the same time, it proves that the impact of Korean cinema consisted not only in imposing oppressive images, but also contributed to building a community, which is a phenomenon characteristic of myth. Of course, this also happens because the creators and viewers remaining in the world of myth and totalitarian regime have no other choice. However, this does not change the above fact.

It is also here worth noting that Husarski offers the reader much more than just an analysis of the title issue. The reader receives a kind of compendium of knowledge about films, artists, poetics, the most important topics, inspirations, structures of North Korean cinema, and everything is embedded in historical, political and cultural contexts, thanks to which one can see both the dynamics of this cinema and its constitutive features. Thanks to this, the analysis of Kim Il Sung's film images is significantly deepened and completed.

When proving that filmmaking is subordinated to ideology and politics, Husarski also shows its artistic diversity, noticeable even in a unified system. The life stories, also artistic ones, of directors and actors are very interesting, thanks to which it is even more clearly seen how important were films made in the 1930s and the first half of the next decade for North Korean cinema. A great example are the roles of Mun Ye-bong. The characters she plays in movies from the colonial period are basically no different from the heroine of *My Home Village*. But thanks to the histories told about the creators, we also learn about building film

cadres (also by purges) and supervising filmmakers. Husarski also provides the reader with the institutional history of North Korean cinema and the development of infrastructure (when, for example, the increasing importance of cinema during the "cultural revolution" campaign during the mid-1950s influenced the establishment of cinemas). The author does not forget about the title issue. These sometimes minor matters, seemingly of secondary importance in the context of shaping the myth of the leader, perfectly complement the picture of total and totalitarian cinema, in which everything is often subordinated to superior goals.

A very interesting phenomenon in totalitarian culture is the rewriting of various texts, including films. They were reworked, scenes or shots that could evoke undesirable associations or emotions were cut out from them, others were added. That is why it has been so important to pay attention to the revised versions of particular films, e.g. *My Home Village*, because thanks to this, it is possible to reconstruct the process of negotiating meanings and adapting the text to current circumstances, especially political ones.

Attempts at formulated poetics, for example in "Seed theory", do not go beyond newspeak. Therefore, the arguments of the author, who focuses primarily on the immanent poetics of North Korean cinema, should be acknowledged. In a very interesting way, he shows inspirations, sometimes very detailed ones, with patterns and aesthetics of Soviet, Japanese and Korean cinema from the colonial period. He points to both their poetics and the myths that influence them: socialist, nationalist or state, also related to creating the image of Iosif Stalin or Emperor Hirohito. From the point of view of a historian of totalitarian cinema, these considerations are very interesting, especially when the author writes how and under what circumstances these influences gained or lost importance, as well as how they were to fit into the needs, expectations and capabilities of the Korean system.

I will also make some note about my doubts related to terminology. The author notes that "Socialist realism was the official doctrine of art until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991". Most researchers, however, limit the timespan of socialist realism as an artistic and cultural phenomenon to the mid-1950s, recognizing the fundamental difference of the Stalinist period, and it is not just a dispute over terminology but subject matter. What is fascinating, however, is that much of the experience of Stalinist culture survived in North Korea, including the cinema. Speaking of Soviet cinema, let me note that *The Young Guard* by Sergei Gerasimov was made in 1948, not in 1941.

Of course, Roman Husarski focuses on the representations of Kim Il Sung, but he also analyzes the filmic imaginations of other characters (the leader's family members or enemies), time, space, style and genres, plot, the role of editing, acting (the author's remarks on the

actor's interpretations of the figure of Kim Il Sung or the lack of them are very interesting, as well as the information that the actor playing Kim Il Sung was not allowed to play any other role), film symbols and metaphors, the use of sets and costumes, etc. The construction of characters or dramatic solutions do not necessarily distinguish cinema from other forms of expression. However, Husarski often points to ways of using visualization. Sometimes these clues are seemingly small, but well-chosen. An example is the ending of *A Forest is Swaying*, when we see the enormous inscription "chuch'e" carved in the rock and painted red.

The author also draws attention to the use of film editing. However, let me make a polemical remark here. Husarski writes about how Korean artists in the late 1940s used the achievements of Vsevolod Pudovkin, Lev Kuleshov, and Sergei Eisenstein from the Soviet montage theory period. Perhaps Johannes Schönherr was quite right, however, when he noticed that *My Home Village* "was not a Soviet style production at all", because the cinema of the Stalinist era largely departed from the formalistic – as it was then described – methods of the Soviet avant-garde, reaching for more classic patterns. What could be called "Soviet style" was not homogeneous either, it changed with various historical circumstances.

As a film historian, I would be extremely interested in more in-depth research on production culture or more detailed data on distribution, but I realize that in the realities of North Korea this is simply impossible, because it would require access to data usually hidden in archives. The author, however, writes about distribution, pointing out which films were distributed in Korea and at what time, also paying attention to the rituality of participation in screenings. The latter issue allows us to realize that not only the sender of the message, but also the recipient is important for the myth-making character of cinema. Although the issue of the aforementioned screenings is only hinted at, the author refers several times to the problem of film reception.

Roman Husarski is very knowledgeable about film literature. Of course, one could refer to more books and articles in relation to one or more films or issues, but the bibliography is very functional, and most importantly – skilfully, often critically – in the good sense of the word – made. However, I must make one terminological remark. The author uses the term "cinematography" several times, understanding it as "kinematografia" in Polish. In English, the term is used primarily in relation to the art and technology of motion-picture photography, and in the contexts Husarski has used it, "cinema" should appear. Interestingly, as a point of reference for the concept of "kimjongilomatography" that he created (which, by the way, well reflects the status of Korean cinema at that time), the author gives "reaganomatography", but this term is used primarily by Polish authors ("reaganomatografia").

In conclusion, Mr. Roman Husarski precisely presented the methodological assumptions and formulated research tasks, and then successfully implemented them. The dissertation is relatively small, but very rich in content. The author has very well controlled the whole work. His knowledge of North Korean cinema is admirable, and his analyses of particular films are also appreciated. His theses are convincing and well-argued. So I estimate that the dissertation titled *The Evolution of the Myth of Kim Il Sung as Reflected in North Korean Film 1949-1994* has met the formal and substantial requirements for doctoral theses and I admit Mr. Roman Husarski to further stages of the doctoral procedure.