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**REPRESENTATION OF CONTEMPORANEITY IN RUSSIAN CINEMATOGRAPHY
OF 2000s:
POST-SOVIET AS A CULTURAL TRAUMA**

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Philosophy in Culturology

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GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PAPER

The relevance of the research topic and focus is substantiated by the fact that the Soviet past has been the centerpiece of the official public discourse for the past two decades. The past, the ways of its representation and remembrance frameworks appear to be key elements of both contemporary Russian ideology, intellectual debates, and everyday life. To quote the researcher J. Levchenko, in contemporary Russia “the past is everywhere, its totality is akin to the illusion of unity transmitted in the discourse of power”¹.

Indeed, the term “post-Soviet” is still widely used to denote Russian contemporaneity² in academic circles, in journalistic texts, as well as in projects supported by relevant historical politics³. It seems that the “post” period that started in 1991 is not over yet. It means that Russian contemporaneity, in fact, directly depends on the past, or rather on its ideal nostalgic image. This sort of dependence often indicates the presence of historical or cultural traumas, which, consciously or unconsciously, have not been discussed or worked through by the society over a long period of time. This dependence serves as a basis for constructing historical politics that shapes contemporary context, as well as relationships with the past, and outlines a public dialogue. The post-Soviet being part of this politics is a complex hybrid construct directly linked not only to the traumatic past of the country that was not worked through but also to the new ways of its representation and remembrance⁴.

¹ *Levchenko J.* (2013) *Vechnaya molodost. Eshche raz o sovetskom proshlom v rossiyskom kino* // *Neprikosnovenny Zapas*, No. 3. P. 305.

² For more details see: *Suverina K.* (2018) *The Scar I Don't Remember* // *History Lessons* (<https://urokiistorii.ru/article/54762>). Accessed on: 15.09.2020.

³ For example, Russian International Affairs Council's project “Post-Soviet Space 2020” (2020) (<https://russiancouncil.ru/postsoviet2020>). Accessed on: 17.09.2020.

⁴ *Liderman Yu.* (2011) *V storonu travmy: kak vremya priobretaet kachestvo «post»* // *Puti Rossii. Budushchee kak kul'tura: Prognozy, reprezentatsii, stsennarii*. Tom XVII. Seriya «Liberal'noe nasledie». – Moscow: *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*. Pp. 522–534; *Kalinin I.* (2010) *Nostal'gicheskaya modernizatsiya: sovetskoe proshloe kak istoricheskij gorizont* // *Neprikosnovenny Zapas* No. 6 (<https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2010/6/nostal'gicheskaya-modernizatsiya-sovetskoe-proshloe-kak-istoricheskij-gorizont.html>). Accessed on: 15.04.2020; *Koposov N.* (2011) *Pamyat' strogogo rezhima: Istoriya i politika v Rossii*. – Moscow: NLO; *Kobrin K.* (2017) *Postsovetskiy mavzoley proshlogo*. – Moscow: NLO.; *Malinova O.* (2017) *Neudobnyi yubiley: Itogi pereosmysleniya «mifa osnovaniya» SSSR v ofitsial'nom istoricheskom narrative RF* // *Political Science* No. 3; *Timofeeva M.* (2013) *Travma proshlogo (stalinskogo rezhima) v klinicheskom materiale*

Questions related to articulation of the post-Soviet reality and ways of this articulation had been discussed in academic circles long before the concepts of “historical trauma” or “dependence” emerged. Many attempts have been made by scholars and public intellectuals to describe a new representative symbolic system in order to outline the historical boundaries of contemporary Russia⁵. However, laws and constitutional amendments⁶ adopted over the past few years are a clear indication of the fact that the Russian society still being in the temporality of the “post”. Thus, “post” has remained and consolidated itself as a foundation for the existing identity, “lifeworld” and self-evident reality including both routine everyday life and what is usually referred to as “culture”⁷. That is why the question how to analyze the existing dependence, or rather the forms that it takes, remains open.

The researcher M. Timofeeva rightly pointed out that “processing of a trauma is one of the functions of culture.”⁸ Analysis of different cultural forms can provide an answer to the question above. Traces of the traumatic settled in everyday practices, cultural symbols and linguistic forms become customary and are therefore always at the margin of the visible where visual arts, such as filmmaking, operate. According to the researcher T. Dashkova, “research potential of a film as a source is directly linked to its characteristics such as the “cinematographic” (“functional”, “constructed”) way of (re)thinking the reality,

rossiyskikh patsientov // Gefter (<http://gefter.ru/archive/7514>). Accessed on: 15.09.2021; Travma: Punkty. Oushakine S. Trubina E. (Eds.) (2009) – Moscow: NLO; Yampolsky M. (2015) Kollektivnaya pamyat' na trope pobedy. Pochemu Georgievskaya lentochka stala simbolom kollektivnogo psikhoha // Colta.ru (<https://www.colta.ru/articles/specials/7253-kollektivnaya-pamyat-na-trope-pobedy>). Accessed on: 09.03.2020; Etkind A. (2016) Krivoe Gore. Pamyat o nepogrebennykh. Electronic edition. – Moscow: NLO, etc.

⁵ See footnote No. 4 and the new papers: Boym S. (2001) The Future of Nostalgia. – New York: Basic Books.; Vse v proshlom. Teoriya i praktika publichnoy istorii. Zavadski A. Dubina V. (Eds.) 2021 – Moscow. Novoe Izdatelstvo; Kurilla. I. (2022) Bitva za proshloe. Kak politika menyaet istoriyu. – Moscow. Alpina; Safronova Yu. (2020) Istoricheskaya pamyat'. Vvedenie. – St. Petersburg: European University; Stepanova M. (2017) Pamyati pamyati. – Moscow: Novoe Izdatelstvo; Eppe N. (2021) Neudobnoe proshloe. Pamyat' o gosudarstvennykh prestupleniyakh v Rossii i drugikh stranakh. – Moscow: NLO etc.

⁶ One of the most vivid examples of commitment to the temporality of “post” is the constitutional amendment to Art. 67.1 on legal succession of the USSR. For more details see: A comparative table of the current Constitution of the Russian Federation as amended by the approved Russian Law “On amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation”. “On Improvement of Regulation of Certain Issues of Organization and Functioning of Public Authority” // Duma.gov (<http://duma.gov.ru/media/files/WRg3wDzAk8hRCRoZ3QUGbZ84pI0ppmjF.pdf>). Accessed on: 23.11.2020.

⁷ Gudkov L. (2005) Sindrom negativnoy identichnosti v posttotalitarnoy Rossii.. P. 140

⁸ Timofeeva M. (2013) Travma proshlogo (stalinskogo rezhima) v klinicheskom materiale rossiyskikh patsientov // Gefter (<http://gefter.ru/archive/7514>). Accessed on: 15.09.2021.

which does not diminish but rather increases its value for studying cultural processes.”⁹ Dashkova adds that film texts are worth being studied as “cultural objects”, as they bear (or contain) traces of social processes, historical events, ideological conjuncture, mental attitudes, latest trends etc.”¹⁰ The film critic A. Dolin shares this view. At the launch of his book *Mirazhi Sovetskogo: Ocherki Sovremennogo Kino* (*Mirages of the Soviet: Essays On Contemporary Cinema*) Dolin pointed out that instead of criticizing Russian cinema “one should place it in the right context, as this will resolve any questions.”¹¹ It is important to note that the films, analyzed in this work¹², appeared almost at the same time as the ideologemes of the post-Soviet were formed. Despite this fact, the so-called unconventional films¹³ is still criticized for its acute social character and grim tone, as well as constant representation of unsightly Russian realities. We designate these films as *unconventional* following by the filmmaker Nikolay Khomeriki’s idea, who described his work as “unconventional cinematography” and thus defined a major new movement which made no pretence to the elitism of art-house cinematography, but rather experimented with formats and themes.

The question why Russian unconventional cinema has such a distinctly sombre character and is appreciated by so few¹⁴ was raised a decade ago by the Russian film critic and editor of the *Iskusstvo Kino* (*Film Art*) magazine Daniil Dondurei in a discussion held at the *Kinotavr* Film Festival in 2011. The

⁹ Dashkova T. (2013) *Telesnost' - Ideologiya - Kinematograf. Vizual'nyi kanon i sovetskaya povsednevnost'* – Moscow: NLO. P. 11

¹⁰ Ibid. P. 11

¹¹ Anton Dolin: ne lyublyu, kogda rugayut rossiyskoe kino (2021) // iReactor (<https://infoactor.ru/374620-anton-dolin-ne-lyublyu-kogda-rugayut-rossiiskoe-kino>). Accessed on: 11.11.2021.

¹² Following the logic of the film expert N. Condee, we can say that the economic crisis of 1998 completely destroyed the Soviet system of film production, where the key role was played by the state. This crisis gave birth to the first private film studios and production centers (e.g. A. Rodnyansky’s STV). Moreover, television became actively involved in the film production process. This change in the conditions of production undoubtedly influenced the content of the films themselves. In 2003, A. Zvyagintsev’s debut film *Vozvrashenie* (*The Return*) was an absolute success at the Venice Film Festival. Many young filmmakers started to see cinema as a way of expressing a critical stance on contemporary social, political and cultural realities. From that moment on, cinema ceased to be mainstream and aimed exclusively at mass audience. For more details see: Condee N. (2009) *The Imperial Trace Recent Russian Cinema*. Oxford University Press; Strukov V. (2016) *Contemporary Russian Cinema& Symbols of A New Era*. Edinburgh University Press.

¹³ For more details see: Baker M. “Tale in the Darkness” in Cannes (2009) // Ruskino.ru (<https://ruskino.ru/item/2009/5/22/skazka-pro-temnotu-v-kanne>). Accessed on: 15.09.2020.

¹⁴ “Novye tikhie”. Rezhisserskaya smena – smena kartin mira (2011) // *Iskusstvo Kino* No. 8. (<https://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2011/08/n8-article4>). Accessed on: 10.09.2021.

discussion brought to the following idea: contemporary Russian cinema has taken the place of a critic of the existing social reality, showing us the portrait of a Russian, the portrait that horrifies him (that Russian). That is the reason why films are rapidly losing viewers reluctant to watch these “dark” stories.

However, in spite of such feedback and sustained criticism from audiences and critics, contemporary filmmakers persist in making films, most of which continue to reflect on the “unattractive” Russian contemporaneity^{15,16}. Numerous filmmakers’ attempts to comprehend and capture the ongoing contemporaneity of the post-Soviet give us the opportunity to consider unconventional cinematography as a multi-faceted cultural phenomenon that starting from the early 2000s has been shaping its own view of the cultural, social and political reality forming in Russia. We can therefore assume that it works with the aforementioned dependence on the ideal past that has become part of our experience, which all of us are aware of but not all of us are prepared to acknowledge.

This study focuses on two interrelated phenomena: 1) historical politics of the post-Soviet based on constructing a traumatic experience of the past; 2) Russian contemporary unconventional cinematography, which addresses both the complicated collective past itself and the existing forms of its representation.

Level of scientific development of research topic. Research on historical and cultural traumas in Western humanitarian discourse has been going on for quite a while. Trauma studies as a separate area of research emerged in the late 1980s in the United States at Yale University. This research area is a combination of various disciplines (psychoanalysis, philosophy, history, cultural and postcolonial studies, racial studies) exploring the impact of traumatic events on historical and cultural processes. The theorists in this field such as F. Ankersmit, C. Caruth, D. LaCapra, D. Laub, S. Felman, R. Leys, drawing on the research of S.

¹⁵ For example: *Vernost’ (Fidelity)* directed by Negina Saifulaeva, 2019; *Chelovek, Kotori Ydivil Vsex (The Man Who Surprised Everyone)* directed by Natalia Merkulova, Alexei Chupov, 2018; *Serdce Mira (The Heart of the World)* directed by Natalia Meshchaninova, 2018, etc.

¹⁶ M. Razbezhkina, P. Kostomarov, A. Rastorguev, L. Arkus, S. Loznitsa, and many others can also be mentioned among film directors who raised the question of the need to observe reality as it happens without distinguishing between documentary and artistic approaches. For example, P. Kostomarov and A. Rastorguev have been working for several years on the project *Srok (Term)* aimed at capturing the protest events of 2011-2013.

Freud, W. Benjamin, J. Lacan, J. Derrida, M. Halbwachs¹⁷, etc., have developed a number of methodological guidelines for the study of historical collective traumas.

In order to distinguish between historical and cultural traumas and give an overview of the analytical tools to deal with them, this study draws upon the works by J. Alexander, N. Smelser, R. Eyerman and P. Sztompka¹⁸. What was important in their research was defining the nature of a cultural trauma, which is rooted not in the historical event *per se* (it may not even exist), but in the ways of interacting with the past constructed by the society.

Several representatives of Trauma Studies have also been engaged in analyzing the representation of traumatic experiences through various visual media. These include A. Meek, E.A. Kaplan and B. Wang, who suggest that visual media can be interpreted as a cultural institution providing an opportunity to understand, overcome and transform the traumatic experience of contemporaneity, catastrophes and social cataclysms of the 20th century.

To analyze the phenomenon of the “post-Soviet” we will refer to two key notions: “memory” and “history”. The notion of “memory” as a social construct was developed by M. Halbwachs¹⁹. In our study we also draw on the concept of memory proposed by the German researcher A. Assmann²⁰, and the notion of

¹⁷ Ankersmit F. (2005) *Sublime Historical experience*. Stanford/Cambridge; Caruth C. (1991) *Unclaimed experience: Trauma and The Possibility of History*// Yale French studies № 79. Literature and the Ethical Question. PP. 181–192; Caruth C. (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Caruth C. (2013) *Literature in The Ashes of History*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Derrida J. (1995) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* // *Diacritics*. Vol. 25, № 2. PP. 9–63; Freud Z. (1999) *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*. Fischer; Halbwachs M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. The University of Chicago Press, p. 1-23; Lacan J. (2004) *Seminari. Kniga 11. Chetire osnovnich ponatia Psichoanaliza*. M.: Gnozis/Logos [Lacan J (1964) *Le seminaire. Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*. Livre 11. Editions du Seuil]; LaCapra D. (1997) *Lanzmann's «Shoah»: Here There Is No Why* // *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 23. № 2. PP. 231–269; LaCapra D. (1999) *Trauma, Absence, Loss* *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 25. № 4 (Summer). PP. 696–727; Lays R. (2000) *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Felman Sh. (1991) *In an Era of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah* // *Yale French Studies*. 1991. №. 79. Literature and the Ethical Question. PP. 39–81. Felman Sh., Laub D. (1992) *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

¹⁸ Alexander J. C., Eyerman R., Giesen B., Smelser. N. J., Sztompka P. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. University of California Press.

¹⁹ Halbwachs M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. The University of Chicago Press, p. 1-23.

²⁰ Assmann A. (2006) *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*. München: C.H. Beck; Assmann A. (2013) *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention*. München: C.H. Beck. Assmann. A. (2019) *Zabvenie Istoriei – Oderzimoto Istoriei*. – M.: NLO.

“history” is interpreted through the research framework of historical politics. Thus, we understand history as an ongoing dialogue between the present and the past²¹.

It should be mentioned that various researchers have studied the phenomenon of the “post-Soviet” from the perspectives of historical politics, memory theory and historical trauma. Russian sociologists, primarily B. Dubin and L. Gudkov²² were the first two to conduct a detailed analysis into how attitudes towards historical memory developed and into the sociocultural state of society in the post-Soviet period. The genesis and analysis of the post-Soviet historical politics were studied in papers by A. Aseev, S. Belov, A. Zavadsky, A. Linchenko, M. Lipman, O. Malinova, A. Miller, E. Meleshkina, M. Stepanova, E. Suverina, V. Shishkov, M. Shub, M. Yampolsky, and others.

In respect of the analysis of post-Soviet historical and cultural traumas, it is worth mentioning the studies by E. Trubina and S. Ushakin who initiated the publication of a large collection of essays *Travma: Punkti (Trauma: Points)*²³. The topic of a historical trauma of the post-Soviet and the possibility/impossibility of working with its traces within the contemporary context are also studied by the historian and literary scholar A. Etkind and the historian N. Eppele.

Among works on the phenomenon of contemporary Russian cinematography, of particular note is a monograph²⁴ by the cinema and media researcher V. Strukov who suggests that films made after 2003 should be seen as a holistic phenomenon, producing a new form of symbolism. Another important work is a collection of reviews and critical essays by the film critic E. Stishova entitled *Russian Cinema in Search of Reality. Testimonies* containing texts written between 1995 and 2011. They explore the genesis of contemporary Russian cinema, its path from the collapse of the state film production system to the

²¹ Kurilla I. (2022) *Bitva za proshloe. Kak politika menyaet istoriu.* – M.: Alpina Publisher. P. 15.

²² Dubin B. (2011) *Rossiia Nulevii. Politicheskaya kultura, istoricheskaya pamayt', povsednevnyaya zhizn'.* M.: ROSSPEN; Dubin B. (2009) *Zhit' v Rossii na rubezhe stoletii. Sociologicheskie ocherki i razrabotki.* M.: Progress-Tradiciya; Gudkov L., Dubin B. (2009) *Intelligenziya: zametki o literaturno-politicheskikh illuziyah.* M.: ID Ivana Limbakha; Gudkov L. (2005) *Sindrom negativnoi identichnosti v posttotalitarnoi Rossii // Vtoraya Navigaziya.* Almanah. Zaporozh'e: Dikoe Pole. Vip. 5. Pp. 123–144; Gudkov L. (2011) *Abortivnaya Mpdernizatsiya.* M.: ROSSPEN.

²³ *Travma: Punkty.* Oushakine S. Trubina E. (Eds.) (2009) – Moscow: NLO.

²⁴ Strukov V. (2016) *Contemporary Russian Cinema. Symbols of the New Era.* Edinburgh University Press.

emergence of independent production agencies and the connection between the cinema of the noughties and television.

The turn towards the representation of neo-nationalism and post-imperial identity, which is of importance for this study, is examined by S. M. Norris in his book *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memories, and Patriotism*²⁵.

In addition, some studies analyze unconventional cinematography not only from the perspective of representing the past but also as an independent cultural phenomenon reflecting the state of the post-Soviet society²⁶. We should mention the research conducted by Y. Liderman²⁷, attempting to work out a theoretic instrumentality for studying various types of social traumas manifesting themselves in some or other representative forms.

In order to understand the essence of representation of the post-Soviet in unconventional cinematography it is important to analyze the cinematographic and theatrical phenomenon of New Drama. Such an attempt was made by M. Lipovetsky and B. Beumers²⁸ who studied the basic characteristics of the post-Soviet times — violence and communication incapacity prevailing in the contemporary Russian society, specifically, their manifestation in cinematography.

Films displayed in the *Zakritii Pokaz (Closed Screening)* TV show on Channel One Russia were used as the **source base** of this paper.²⁹ The choice is

²⁵ Norris M. S. (2012) *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memories, and Patriotis*. Indiana University Press

²⁶ Abdullaeva Z. (2011) Postdok. Igrovoe / neigrovoe. – Moscow: NLO; Bychkova O., Konstantinova I., Petrova E. (2017). Intertekstual'nye svyazi v p'ese brat'ev Presnyakovykh «Izobrazhaya zhertvu» // Vestnik CHGPU im. I.YA. Yakovleva No. 3(95). Pp. 24–29; Gaidin B. (2017). Shekspirosfera // Gorizonty gumanitarnogo znaniya No. 5. Pp. 102–117; Gasheva N. (2016). Integrativnost' kinovykazyvaniya: avtorskoe kino Rossii 2000 gg. // Vyatka State Humanities University Bulletin, No. 8 (19). Pp. 5–12; Condee N. (2012) Sovremennoe rossiyskoe kino i problemy vnutrenney kolonizatsii // Tam vnutri. Praktiki vnutrenney kolonizatsii v kulturnoy istorii Rossii. – Moscow: NLO. Pp. 760–788; Kurennoy V. (2009). Filosofiya fil'ma: uprazhneniya v analize. – Moscow: NLO; Liderman Yu. (2007) Balabanov snyal tot fil'm // Iskustvo Kino No. 7. (<http://old.kinoart.ru/archive/2007/07/n7-article5>). Accessed on: 15.09.2020; Levchenko J. (2013). Vechnaya molodost'. Eshche raz o sovetskom proshlom v rossiyskom kino // Neprikosnovenny Zapas No. 3. Pp. 302–316; Khrenov N. (2011). «Novaya volna» v rossiyskom kinematografe: fil'my A. Zvyagintseva // Teoriya iskusstva i hudozhestvennoe voobrazhenie XXI veka. No. 2(3). Pp. 67–74

²⁷ Liderman Yu. (2011) V storonu travmy: kak vremya priobretaet kachestvo “post” // Puti Rossii. Budushchee kak kul'tura: Prognozy, reprezentatsii, stsennarii. Tom XVII. Seriya «Liberal'noe nasledie». – Moscow: NLO, pp. 522–534.

²⁸ Beumers B., Lipovetsky M. (2012) Performanci nacilia. Literaturnie i teatralnie eksperimenti “novoi dramy”. – Moscow: NLO.

²⁹ For a complete list of films displayed in the talk show, see: Closed Screening / Wikipedia (https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Закрытый_показ). Accessed on: 08.09.2020.

dictated by the logic of the film production industry itself, which in the 2000s was closely linked to television being both a platform and a source of funding for filmmakers.³⁰ 77 new Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakh films and 11 foreign auteur films were screened in the *Zakritii Pokaz* TV show during the period from 2007 to 2013 (4 films and discussions about them were screened in the prototype of the *Zakritii Pokaz* called *Prem'era so Zritelaymi* (Premiere with audience) during the period from 2005 to 2006). Unconventional cinematography is often referred to as films designed and produced to be shown at film festivals, i.e. intended for a closed circle, rather than being mainstream. The creator of the TV show Alexander Gordon made these festival films, which were designed “not for everyone”, available to a wide audience, basically obliterating this cliché.

Discussions of contemporary films held in the *Zakritii Pokaz* talk show (2007–2013) constitute the second source for the study³¹. These discussions were presented to the viewers as an expert evaluation of what they had seen. Thus, not only did the television discourse allow to broaden the audience of new films but it also provided the audience with a unique way of understanding them.

Legal acts, newspaper articles and public statements by politicians on the country's shared past complement the sources of this research. They reveal the sociocultural context, in which unconventional cinematography is born and which it focuses on.

This selection of sources will enable us to explore how the cultural trauma is formed and how it works, as well as to address the current situation of a lack of understanding between viewers and filmmakers expressed in a refusal to apprehend and recognize unconventional films.

The **object** of the study is the multi-component constructed cultural trauma of the post-Soviet and its inherent sociocultural framework of memory.

³⁰ Strukov V. (2016). Contemporary Russian Cinema & Symbols of A New Era. Edinburgh University Press.

³¹ Channel One resumed *Zakritii Pokaz* (the *Closed Screening*) talk show in October 2021 after a seven-year break. The films shown in October and November 2021 will not be reviewed in this dissertation. The talk show retained its format but the sociocultural context and, therefore, the choice of films has changed.

Ways of critical representation of the post-Soviet cultural trauma in Russian unconventional cinematography constitute the **subject** of the study.

The **aim** of this dissertation is to justify the ways in which unconventional cinematography represents the post-Soviet period as a critical position that makes visible the cultural trauma intrinsic to the said period and the ways of perceiving the past and present constructed on its basis.

For that purpose, the following research tasks were set:

- To trace the origins and genesis of the phenomenon of historical traumatic experience, as well as to draw a conceptual distinction between the terms of “historical trauma” and “cultural trauma”
- To analyze the context in which unconventional cinematography was born and to prove, through examples of the emerged social memory frameworks, that a constructed cultural trauma underpins ideology and strategy of the post-Soviet cultural development. To propose a new periodization of Russia’s recent history based on the analysis
- To analyze the ways in which unconventional cinematography represents post-Soviet contemporaneity and its inherent cultural trauma using specific examples
- To analyze some of the film discussions from the *Zakritii Pokaz (The Closed Screening)* TV show to demonstrate how the selected ways of representation are perceived by expert viewers.

The above research purpose and objectives determined the **research methods** hereof. Dominick LaCapra’s analysis of representation of collective trauma traces and their mechanics will form the methodological framework of analysis of the post-Soviet. Specifically, the relationship of the concepts (*loss and absences*), which form the community memory economy. These two ways also

enable us to describe different forms of dealing with the past and, in particular, to show how a cultural trauma is formed³².

The selected unconventional films will be analyzed through the lens of post-structuralist analysis, in particular through the deconstruction method developed by J. Derrida³³. Deconstruction makes it possible to abandon the logic of classical film analysis and analyze complex cultural and iconic constructions, where speech and visual forms also become protagonists and forms.

Academic novelty of this study lies in the fact that for the first time:

- The concept of the “post-Soviet” is reinterpreted providing the foundation for a new historical and cultural periodization of contemporary Russian history.
- It is shown, through analysis of the conventional sociocultural frameworks of memory and their cinematic representation, that the post-Soviet rests and functions on a series of constructed cultural traumas.
- For the first time in Russian academic discourse, Russian unconventional cinematography is described as a complex, holistic and multi-faceted cultural phenomenon.
- Various ways of symbolic representation used by unconventional cinematography are examined as a special critical perspective inviting viewers to observe the familiar everyday life with symbolic structures of the post-Soviet cultural trauma discreetly woven into it.

Proceeding from the purposes and objectives of the research, **the following arguments of a dissertation to be defended:**

1. The post-Soviet refers to a particular era in the history of contemporary Russia (2005–2014) characterized by a specific memory economy and historical politics, as well as certain strategies for representing history, such as defactualization (recollection), mythologization and sacralization (oblivion), which are basic elements of a cultural trauma

³² LaCapra D. (1999) Trauma, Absence, Loss Critical Inquiry. Vol. 25. No. 4 (Summer), pp. 696–727.

³³ Derrida J. (1998) Of Grammatology. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

2. Starting from 2014, namely with the introduction of Article 6.21 in the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses, the post-Soviet becomes part of the “traditional values” concept representing an ideological construct and a new positive symbol providing a foundation for a conservative turn built on the strategies and cultural traumas mentioned in the first paragraph
3. Filmmakers in unconventional cinematography were among the first to present a public analysis of the post-Soviet and its cultural traumas. The first manifesto film, which used basic narrative and visual techniques, was the work by the director Kirill Serebrennikov *Izobrazaya Zertvy (Playing the Victim)*, broadcast on central television.
4. Filmmakers in unconventional cinematography, despite skepticism from critics and audiences, have been methodically observing the routine of the post-Soviet everyday life over the past 20 years. Through the observation of the familiar and the mundane, they have turned their unconventional cinematic vision into a form of critique, a research position enabling them to find new ways to critically represent the post-Soviet cultural trauma and its inherent strategies of social development, namely the repression and the formation of the phenomenon of “absence”.

The **theoretical value** of the study lies in revealing cinematography as one of the cultural institutions offering, along with others, its own ways for representation of contemporaneity and its relationship with the past. It also consists in defining Russian unconventional cinematography as a special genre where filmmakers have developed forms of reflection on the actual mode of historicity and its inherent cultural traumas.

Practical significance. The research material was used in the lectures and special courses developed by the author, in particular: a series of lectures and seminars on researching traumas and dealing with the Soviet past within the course Interdisciplinary Approaches to History Studies (MSSES); a series of lectures and seminars on a new perspective on the history of art (in particular through a postcolonial framework) in a joint course developed in cooperation with the

curator O. Shirokostup, *Current Practices and Concepts in Contemporary Art* (HSE); a series of lectures and seminars on the history of the oppressed and analysis of sociocultural phenomena such as violence in the author's course *Gender Studies and the History of Sexuality* (HSE). In professional development, in particular: teaching a series of classes in a Reading Group for teenagers *Forget Cannot Be Remembered* together with the historian A. Kravchenko at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center; organizing a public lecture by researcher M. Hirsch; preparing a translation of texts by M. Hirsch and E. van Alphen and an interview with the Trauma Studies theorist C. Caruth. The author is a compiling editor of a number of projects within the Garage Museum's publishing program: Postcolonial and Queer series, and an editor of *The Garage Journal: Studies in Art, Museum & Culture*, as well as an initiator of a study of the history of sexuality in contemporary Russia and the HIV epidemic phenomenon *Plus History of Contemporary Russia*. The author is also a co-founder of the Public History Lab, which for several years has been engaged in "projects and research on Public History, a problem field that includes the theory and practice of the past existing in the public space"³⁴.

Research results approbation. The research material was approbated in 17 publications, 3 of them published in journals indexed with *Scopus* and *Web of Science*, in presentations at 11 international and academic conferences. The author also moderated and organized a number of conferences and panels dedicated to this and related research topics.

The dissertation structure is in line with the purposes and objectives set by the dissertation author and allows for a consistent review of the relevant research issues. The paper consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusion, and a list of references.

SUMMARY

The introduction explains the relevance of the dissertation topic, describes the extent of the chosen research topic development, defines the purposes and

³⁴ Public History Lab (<http://publichistorylab.ru/>). Accessed on: 17.09.2020.

objectives, methodological basis, as well as academic novelty, formulates the main theses to be defended, reflects the theoretical and practical significance of the work, provides information on the approbation of research results, and outlines the structure of the work.

The **first chapter**, *Trauma as Experience of Cultural and Historical Self-Determination. Key Concepts and Approaches*, examines the main approaches to the historical and cultural trauma study and explains the key categories of research, such as “history” and “memory”, and how they function within the discourse of cultural trauma and fit into the cultural development strategies that underpin collective identity and representations of a country’s shared past.

The **first paragraph of the first chapter** describes the origins of Trauma Studies, namely W. Benjamin’s introduction of the “history of the oppressed”³⁵ concept, which made it possible for the first time to look at the narrative of the past as a series of *ruptures*, generating situations that require a revision of value-based and social structures. This chapter also examines S. Freud’s research, where he first makes an analogy between personal and collective traumatic experience and describes its essence, which relates to the process of forgetting, i.e. the period of latency. Thus, historical experience, in order to reveal the fact of latency, refers not to the event itself, but to *its relevance in another time and space, i.e. to memory*. It is with this understanding of traumatic experience that Trauma Studies researchers will work in the future.

The **second paragraph** of the first chapter describes and analyzes the main theories of Trauma Studies. Among these, special attention is given to two strategies of cultural development and the inner workings of the memory economy, namely **forgetting and recalling**, as well as the related methods of representing the past traumatic experience – **working through** and **acting out** – described by D. LaCapra. These two representation methods show and explain how a community deals with collective traumas.

³⁵ Benjamin W. (2010) Über den Begriff der Geschichte. Suhrkamp.

This paragraph also identifies the differences between a historical trauma and a cultural trauma. The dissertation author shows that traumatization and its impact on a community depends on the sociocultural context in which the representation of a past event occurs³⁶. In other words, a cultural trauma is the socially mediated attribution of certain events as traumatic³⁷. It is essentially an empirical social concept, bringing together a set of tools (such as loss and absence) that enable us to classify, repress and generally build relationships with the past in the *here and now*. It is important to understand that not only real events but also *fictitious* ones can be classified as traumatic³⁸.

Importantly, the cultural trauma is directly involved in the creation of the official discourse order³⁹, i.e. serves as a basic element of the cultural development strategy. It can therefore be used to produce different forms of absence by reinterpreting past events. This constitutes its essential distinction from a historical trauma, which indicates rather than hides traces of latency.

In **Chapter Two, *The “Post-Soviet” Memory Economy: Cultural and Historical Politics and the Process of Homogenization of the Past***, the dissertation author reviews how different discourses of the cultural trauma have been taking shape within the Russian historical narrative and public memory culture over the past fifteen years, and on this basis presents an alternative way of periodizing Russian history of the past thirty years.

In the first paragraph, describing the genesis of historical politics and modes of remembrance, the dissertation author shows how oblivion and recollection work in the post-Soviet memory economy, how normalization of the Soviet past has enabled the erasure of historical boundaries, the construction of a

³⁶ Smelser N. J. (2004) Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma // Alexander J.F. Eyerman R. Giesen B. Smelser N. J. Sztompka P. Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity. First edition. University of California Press. P. 36.

³⁷ Alexander J.C. (2004) Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma. // Alexander J.F. Eyerman R. Giesen B. Smelser N. J. Sztompka P. Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity. University of California Press. P. 8.

³⁸ Eyerman R. (2016) Kulturnaya travma i kollektivnaya pamyat [Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory] // NLO No. 141 (5). (https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/141_nlo_5_2016/article/12171/). Accessed on: 15.05.2020.

³⁹ Alexander J.C. (2004) Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma // Alexander J.F. Eyerman R. Giesen B. Smelser N. J. Sztompka P. Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity. University of California Press. Pp. 9–10.

representational grid of the cultural trauma and making contemporaneity dependent on the past.

Describing the process of normalization, the dissertation author explains how three strategies of post-Soviet historical politics were formed: defactualization (recollection), mythologization and sacralization (oblivion), which eventually became the fundamental elements of the cultural trauma. The researcher concludes that the Russian historical politics of the 2000s was based on repression, which was hidden behind the constructed cultural trauma, or, to be more exact, the moral and protective attitudes, normalization and sacralization of events of the Soviet past. Thus, the cultural trauma of the post-Soviet became the basis of the protracted past, and the inseparable link with the past was enshrined in law, e.g., in the new constitutional amendment to Article 67.1, which refers to Russia being the successor of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.⁴⁰

The second paragraph describes the emergence of the concept “tradition” as a new form of oblivion and replacement of the lingering post-Soviet with an ideology of traditionalism, which, as the dissertation author believes, is based on the principles of historical politics, as described above. These principles made it possible to integrate and literally dissolve the post-Soviet into a new conservative discourse. The post-Soviet got “nullified” when Article 6.21 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses⁴¹ came into effect, becoming part of the tradition, which took the place of a new positive symbol within the rhetoric of return to the origins and the strategy of detachment. The cultural trauma of Russian traditionalism was based on understanding of the loss of historically established ideals such as traditional family values. It can therefore be concluded that the established conservative ideology was built on the same model of structural absence. The place of the unattainable ideal element of the past was merely taken by tradition.

⁴⁰ Comparative table of the current Constitution of the Russian Federation taking into account the approved Law of the Russian Federation “On Amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation” “On Improvement of Regulation of Certain Issues of Organization and Functioning of Public Authority” // Duma.gov <http://duma.gov.ru/media/files/WRg3wDzAk8hRCRoZ3QUGbZ84pI0ppmjF.pdf>. Access date: 23.11.2020.

⁴¹For the full text of the article see: Russian Code of Administrative Offenses, Article 6.21. Propaganda of Non-Traditional Sexual Relationships Among Minors (http://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_34661/f385ab5d34de901b2e5f3d08ac0b454481377d6a/). Accessed on: 23.11.2020.

Proceeding from the above analysis, the dissertation author proposes considering 1991–2005 as the experimental period, 2005–2014 as the post-Soviet period, and the time starting from 2014 as the period of new traditionalism. In summary, Russian contemporaneity can be described as a complex cultural trauma of a cyclic past where history is substituted by a repression/neutralization mechanism, customs and traditions “passed down through generations...”⁴². The origins of this cyclicity lie in the post-Soviet period.

In the third chapter, *The Post-Soviet as a Cultural Trauma: Representation of Contemporaneity in Unconventional Cinematography*, the dissertation author describes how unconventional cinematography of the noughties, following the tradition of New Drama (ND) and the verbatim method, began to focus on ordinary and taboo language, on unattractive images and realities of everyday life, where the traumas of the post-Soviet were settling in.

In **the first paragraph** of the first chapter, the author proposes to address unconventional cinematography as an integral, complex and multi-faceted cultural phenomenon that uses a number of recurrent elements, which: 1) are central aesthetic techniques for most unconventional films and 2) represent post-Soviet ideologemes acting as channels for comprehension and symbolization of contemporaneity, and for building a connection with the events of the past.

The dissertation author emphasizes that the Russian films shown in the *Zakritii Pokaz* talk show have individual characteristics and their own cinematic techniques. However, the proposed analysis of common elements enables us to see these films as a holistic attempt of a critical view, allowing to identify and analyze the social strategy of the post-Soviet society with its orientation “towards a lost culture”.⁴³

⁴² Comparative table of the current Constitution of the Russian Federation taking into account the approved Law of the Russian Federation “On Amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation” “On Improvement of Regulation of Certain Issues of Organization and Functioning of Public Authority” // Duma.gov <http://duma.gov.ru/media/files/WRg3wDzAk8hRCRoZ3QUGb84pI0ppmjF.pdf>. Access date: 23.11.2020.

⁴³ For more details see: Liderman Yu. (2011) V storonu travmy: kak vremya priobretaet kachestvo “post” // Puti Rossii. Budushchee kak kul'tura: Prognozy, reprezentatsii, stsennarii. Tom XVII. Seriya «Liberal'noe nasledie». – Moscow: NLO. Pp. 522–534

The following fundamental elements were identified and described in detail during the analysis of the films: 1) the category of time, 2) the category of space, 3) the typical non-hero/non-heroine, 4) the poetics of non-fiction, 5) violence as a communicative and social norm, 6) other forms: films-facts and films-parables. In her analysis of the manifesto film *Izobrazaya Zertvy* (*Playing a Victim*), which opened the *Zakriti Pokaz* talk show, the dissertation author then shows how unconventional cinematography deals with the six identified elements.

This is the story of Valya, a post-Soviet Hamlet, acting out murder victims during reconstructions of crimes. He is a typical non-hero: very apathetic and cynical, preferring an escapist lifestyle. The director and scriptwriters of *Playing the Victim* go even further: they create a non-hero who imitates the victim, thus turning the entire narrative into a simulation. The time setting is *here and now*, blending the dramaturgy of ND with the poetics of non-fiction.

At the talk show, invited experts pointed out that the film was devoid of life and reality. It is difficult to understand whether they deny the film's depiction of reality or clearly note one of the main characteristics of the post-Soviet – its outsideness (structural absence), as outsideness is also a symptom of cultural trauma actualization.

Speech is an important element of the poetics of non-fiction; in this film it constitutes a marker of everyday life and belonging to the present. Therefore, *Izobrazaya Zertvy* is more of a film-fact, which, remarkably, is based on a simulation story. The speech and visuals seem to create some dissonance in the process of watching the film: everything is clear and recognizable and at the same time completely simulative, as the post-Soviet itself is based on secondary, previously used symbols⁴⁴. Speech in the film is a marker of *violence*, representing one of the main forms of post-Soviet communication. Unconventional cinematography literally forces the viewers to witness violence that they are used to and may have repressed and stopped noticing.

⁴⁴ Ushakin S. (2009). Byvshee v upotreblenii: postsovetskoe sostoyanie kak forma afazii // Zhurnal'nyi zal (<https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2009/6/byvshee-v-upotreblenii-postsovetskoe-sostoyanie-kak-forma-afazii.html>). Accessed on: 10.03.2020.

The reactions of experts analyzed in detail in the dissertation demonstrate that the described techniques are effective and that viewers are either unprepared to recognize the film's connection with contemporaneity, or deny the cinematographic status of the films analyzing this contemporaneity with its own methods.

In the **second paragraph** of the third chapter, the dissertation author analyzes and distinguishes between films-facts and films-parables broadcast in *Zakriti Pokaz* talk show, using the six elements identified above.

Contemporary filmmakers, working with the “ethics of looking”⁴⁵, draw the audience's attention precisely to the “average” society, to the “metaphysics of the commonplace”, where the traces of a historical trauma are deposited. This way, the viewers are made aware of the symptoms (*Ersatz*)⁴⁶ of a repressed painful memory, which turns them into a community of on-lookers⁴⁷. To paraphrase the film critic Zara Abdullaeva, experience becomes the “protagonist” of unconventional cinematography. “Not just a sensual experience, but an experience of living together. Or even the production of such experiences.”⁴⁸ Contemporaneity itself becomes a memory and it seems that filmic observation of it turns viewers into eyewitnesses. Thus, unconventional films directors restore the viewers' perspective on the repressed, settled in everyday routine. By doing so they give audience an understanding of how cultural trauma works, and it is no longer history that is presented here as a moment of alienation, but rather contemporaneity that is unable define temporal boundaries. Unconventional cinematography therefore offers us a different kind of knowledge, one that actualizes history through its traces in contemporaneity. The vision offered by the filmmakers allows the audience to

⁴⁵ Abdullaeva Z. (2011) Postdok. Igrovoe/neigrovoe. Moscow: NLO. P. 29.

⁴⁶ Symptom formation is a substitution (*Ersatz*) of something else that could not manifest itself. Certain mental processes should normally have developed enough to make them known to consciousness. This did not happen, but a symptom emerged from the interrupted, somehow disrupted processes that should have remained unconscious. // For more details see: Freud S. (1990) Introduction to Psychoanalysis. Series of lectures. – Moscow: Nauka.

⁴⁷ Remarkably, the slogan of the 2011-2013 protest campaign in Moscow was the phrase “We will be watching”.

⁴⁸ Abdullaeva Z. (2011) Postdok. Igrovoe/neigrovoe.. Moscow: NLO. P. 9.

understand *how* they view “self-evident reality”, or rather its absence, the inability of the existing historical politics to articulate it.

In the **conclusion**, the findings of the study are presented and the prospects for the continuation of the research are outlined.

The dissertation offers a detailed description of the cultural trauma mechanisms and on this basis provides a new perspective on the post-Soviet period and its inherent historical politics, which is based on the reproduction of cultural traumas. The post-Soviet becomes part of the concept of tradition based on the cultural trauma of traditionalism and the rhetoric of a return to the origins. Based on the analysis of unconventional films, the research shows how an advanced way to critically and methodologically deal with the complex cultural trauma of the post-Soviet, as well as its inherent ways of actualizing the past, has been shaped along with the post-Soviet itself. Consequently, unconventional cinematography can be characterized as a distinct cultural movement where very different filmmakers have paid attention to the same phenomenon — that of the post-Soviet cultural trauma — and have used similar elements and ways of dealing with it critically.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS REFLECTING THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THE DISSERTATION RESEARCH

Publications in journals included in the list of recommended journals by the Higher School of Economics:

1. Suverina E. (2015) The Repressive Tolerance of the Post-Soviet: How to Watch Contemporary Russian Cinema // NLO. No. 131. (https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/131_nlo_1_2015/article/11256/). Accessed on: 15.09.2020.
2. Moroz O., Suverina E. (2015) Trauma Studies: History, Representation, Witness // NLO No. 2015. (http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/4502#_ednref23). Accessed on: 4.09.2020.

3. Suverina K. (2023) Queer Parable and Unveiling the Normative Body:
The Man Who Surprised Everyone // Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema
№ 1 (upcoming).

Other publications:

1. Zavadsky A.I., Isaev E.M., Kravchenko A.V., Sklez V.M., Suverina E.V. (2017) Public History: Between Academic Research and Practice // *Neprikosnovennyy Zapas* No. 2. Pp. 22–34.
2. Suverina K. (2015) Archive, Event and Historical Trauma. Interview with Cornell University Professor Cathy Caruth // *History Lessons*. (<https://urokiistorii.ru/article/52378>). Accessed on: 4.01.2021.
3. Adibekov K., Korchagin K., Larionov D., Suverina E. (2015) Zhiznennost' / dokumentalnost': mezhdru poeziei i kino [Verisimilitude / Non-Fiction: Between Poetry and Cinema // *Sigma*. (<https://syg.ma/@dennis-4/zhizniennost-sliesh-dokumentalnost-miezhdu-poezii-i-kino>). Accessed on: 4.01.2021.
4. Suverina K. (2016) Shame, Not Sorrow. Translation of Ernst van Alphen's report. Part 1 // *History Lessons*. (<https://urokiistorii.ru/article/53119>). Accessed on: 4.01.2021.
5. Suverina K. (2016) "Justification" vs "Return". Translation of Ernst van Alphen's report. Part 2. // *History Lessons* (<https://urokiistorii.ru/article/53124>). Accessed on: 4.01.2021.
6. Suverina K. (2017) // *History Lessons*. (<https://urokiistorii.ru/article/53875>). Accessed on: 4.01.2021.
7. Suverina K. (2018) The Post-Soviet: The Scar I Don't Remember / *History Lessons*. (<https://urokiistorii.ru/article/54762>). Accessed on: 4.01.2021.
8. Suverina K. (2018a) The Soviet Past as a Territory of Freedom. Interview with Ilya Bernstein // *History Lessons*. 2018. (<https://urokiistorii.ru/article/54547>). Accessed on: 4.01.2021.

9. Politics of Affect: The Museum as a Public History Space (2019) Zavadsky A., Sklez V., Suverina K. (Eds.) – Moscow: NLO.
10. Suverina E. (2020) “Archive Fever”: Cultural Trauma and Phantoms of Memory in Contemporary Russia // Culture and Arts Bulletin. No. 2 (62). Pp. 114–123.
11. Suverina K., Strukov V. (2021) Gender, Sexuality and Queer Studies // All's in the Past. Theory and Practice of Public History, edited by Dubina V., Zavadsky A. – Moscow: Novoe Izdatelstvo. Pp. 377–394.