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Conflict between social expectation and personal fulfillment in Italian film

Cinematography in XX century aroused as a new way to express art. In the period of realism it became possible to show the reality using visual and audio content. Besides, it was very significant century for all humanity because of many events, especially wars, protests and their consequences. Most of people were facing external and internal conflicts that they did not experience before. Totalitarian regimes were set up and their members became like puppets in the hands of dictators. Sometimes there was a choice between staying safe and losing your personality at the same time or suffering and poverty.

These topics were a commonplace for the European literature and cinema of XX century. Especially, Italy was a country where such famous and talented directors as Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, Vittorio De Sica were creating. Their films are icons for the history of cinematography. These directors were familiar with historical processes, but they were mostly paying attention not to actions and epics, but to the deepest parts of human soul and all contradictions and difficulty of choice that it contains. This approach was typical for European art, inspired by existential philosophy, psychological achievements, modern and avant-garde trends.

«The Conformist» («Il conformista, 1970») was one of the first films that made Bernardo Bertolucci a worldwide famous artist. Like the previous director’s films, «The Conformist» concerns many political and social issues. This film is based on the novel written by Alberto Moravia in 1951. It is known to be a political drama in the Fascist era in Italy.

The main character, Marcello Clerici, is a representer of wealthy class and because of that was abused in his childhood. Besides, he has an experience of sexual harassment by man and was forced to kill his persecutor. All these negative feelings reflected in his personality. Marcello Clerici started to feel that he is not similar to others and even excessive person. He wanted to fit in the society and to reach success. Marcello’s situation was also influenced by the fact that his mother was addicted to morphine and his father was insane. The main character decided to become a state employee of the Fascist government and after that he received an offer to participate in mission in Paris. Marcello disguises his task in the capital of France by having a honeymoon there with Giulia, a woman that he had married. This can be considered to be a turning point of the film, because from that moment work mission and personal feelings of Marcello are in contradiction.

Firstly, he got involved in romantic relationships with Lina, the wife of a former professor and anti-fascist agitator Quadri that he was asked to kill. Lina allowed him to seduce her, even when she knew that Marcello was a spy and presented some hazards to them. At the same time, she stayed friendly to his wife, Giulia, who did not have any suspicions about betray of her husband. This situation became quite tense for Marcello, but eventually he felt that he can control fates of other people. He offered Lina to stay with him and let her husband go alone on his journey, but she refused. At that point Marcello had a choice between his mission, happy life with his wife and feelings that he had to Lina. He realized that if he was obligated to kill not only Quadri, but also the woman he had fallen in love with. Main character made his choice – he did not want to sacrifice his stable life and despite feeling inner sorrow for Lina, who were crying and asking him for help before her death, he stayed imperturbable and cruel.

The second contradiction appeared in the end of the film. The final took place in 1943 during the fall of Benito Mussolini and the fascist dictatorship. Marcello became an excessive person again because of his political career and beliefs. However, he had many things to lose, because he was quite wealthy, he had wife and child. So he accused his companion Italo of being a fascist in public and found a man who was similar to Lino. Finally, he lost his friend, but still was not accepted by people of the new partisan political movement.

The main problem of the film is that the character mixes the states of having normal, appreciated life and being a conformist. In one of the episodes, he says: «I'm going to build *a life that's normal*. I'm marrying a petty bourgeoise» («*The Conformist*»). In fact, Marcello escaped from his independence, the ability of making his own choices. Being a conformist in the world where political regimes are rapidly changing one another means being dependable on people in power and fate. Only a person who realizes his or her own right to decide and who has strong lifelong principles will have the opportunity to build a free life in society. Those beliefs can be acceptable for some people and other people can be against them, but still the most important thing is to be true to yourself and «The Conformist» proves it.

Another significant film for European cinematography appeared on the screen more than two decades earlier than «The Conformist». It was directed by Vittorio De Sica in 1948 and called «The Bicycle Thief» («Ladri di biciclette»).

The action took place in post-war Italy in 1940s. Antonio Ricci, who is unemployed father of two children, had finally found a job of billsticker after a long search. To begin his duties he required a bike. Antonio had had the bicycle, but he passed it to a pawn shop to get at least some money and buy food. To buy a bike from the pawnshop, the wife of Antonio latter provided six sheets which were her dowry. While Antonio put a poster of Rita Hayworth on the wall, the bicycle was stolen. Antonio and his young son Bruno had searched for it without any hope. We can see Rome through the eyes of a father and son – it is full of contradictions of the rich and poor «eternal» city. Sometimes it seems that Antonio is about to find stolen, but each time the hope is changing to despair. After realizing that the family is going to be hungry, Antonio had tried to steal another bike, but he was caught. All this happened in front of a small Bruno. Owner of the bike forgave Antonio, deciding that the humiliation of capture is enough for him.

Therefore, the film reveals the problem of human conscience. Antonio realizes that he can not steal the bike and only in the final he dared to take this step. «You live and you suffer» - says Antonio about his situation (*«The Bicycle Thief»*). In a world where there is a great need to provide a family with money, often there is no place for honesty and conscience. Antonio was faithful to his principles, but in the end he lost it and remains with no additional means for living. The film gives quite pessimistic scenario for people who are similar to Antonio.

Comparing these two films and their characters, we see that Marcello and Antonio are different people. Marcello is more egoistic, he tends to care only for his fate and he does not show positive and altruistic intentions in his behavior. He got used to cheat, to disrespect and ignore other’s people feelings. Antonio is completely opposite – he is not striving to be accepted by society. He just wanted to provide his wife and children with all important things for living, he was caring for family. Despite the great difference, both characters did not reach their aims, because both of them lost their principles at some point and did not want to be true to themselves anymore.

Works cited

1. The Conformist. Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. Perf. Jean-Louis Trintignant, Stefania Sandrelli, Gastone Moschin . Paramount Pictures, 1970. DVD.
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