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Ethnocultural Communities in Archival Films: Vladimir Erofeev's "Beyond the Arctic Circle"

Abstract

At the turn of the 1930s, the Soviet film industry produced for the wide screen many educational films about the life of remote regions of the country, allowing the audience to make a virtual journey through the multi-structured multinational Union of the SSR. The article is to introduce Vladimir Erofeev's archival ethnographic film "Beyond the Arctic Circle" (1927), an assembled film about the "exotic" frontier region of the Far North. The socio-political and cultural-ideological context of the film creation is being analyzed. The author concludes that Vladimir Erofeev's concept of documental film was radically different from that of Dziga Vertov (poetical

Constructionism) or of Mikhail Kalatozov (revolutionary romanticism) or of Nikolai Lebedev (ideology journalism). The method consistently used by Vladimir Erofeev when creating his documentary films involved systematic study of source material and its retranslation in cinema; it thus may be called "anthropological newsreel." Due to the specifics of silent cinema, the film "Beyond the Arctic Circle" is a kind of visual text consisting of approximately the same number of film images and captions alternating in a narration. The film is built as a sequence of episodes describing the geography and ethnography of distinctive North-Eastern outskirts of the country. In the course of the study it becomes obvious that this film is to the utmost a documental film / chronicle, which distinguishes it from many propaganda films of the Soviet period. The source base of the research is little-known archival film and photo sources, as well as data from the Soviet periodicals and excerpts from the theoretical heritage of the film director Vladimir Erofeev. The method discovered by Vladimir Erofeev, while working on the "Beyond the Arctic Circle" film, amount to combining research and creative approach, and thus his film conveys not just information about the events, but also provides their visual and emotional context, the vital "feeling" of the North. This is a case-study providing historical and anthropological analysis of the Far North image in the Soviet documentary. No wonder that the film "Beyond the Arctic Circle" has broken the framework of purely enlightening narrative and become an outstanding phenomenon in the cinema art and a significant experience of visual anthropology in the Soviet period, as well as a multi-layered historical source that has not lost its relevance for contemporary scientific research.

Keywords

Historical source, archival ethnographic films, visual anthropology, Vladimir Erofeev, Far North of the USSR.

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