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## FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING THE GENRE “PORTRAIT SKETCH” IN THE WORLD AND RUSSIAN TELEVISION JOURNALISM

### **FORMACIÓN Y DESARROLLO DE LA ENSEÑANZA DEL GÉNERO “BOCETO DE RETRATO” EN EL MUNDO Y PERIODISMO DE TELEVISIÓN RUSO**

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper teaches thesis that the rapid development of information and communication technologies, the processes of globalization and glocalization are common factors in the development of documentary films both in Russia and in foreign countries and tries to educate these factors. Although Russian and foreign documentaries have a different historical trajectory which is determined by specific historical and cultural, political, economic conditions, national traditions and ideological affinities, they largely enrich each other, actively interacting in the field of creative experience. The classic genre of journalism “portrait sketch”, which accounts for many famous documentaries, is currently undergoing a major transformation. This process is influenced by such factors as the commercialization of television, the prevalence of entertainment and gaming content, the formatting and unification of TV channels’ products, as well as the intensive virtualization of society, where the bright line between the real world and the virtual world seems to be fading. The article presents the results from the study conducted on the basis of the Kazan Federal University, analyzes the scientific works of media researchers and documentaries of different years, mainly of the new century. The analysis incorporates the opinions of Russian and foreign researchers and famous directors.

**Keywords:** Educating the genre, television, portrait sketch, genre transformation.

#### RESUMEN

Este trabajo enseña la tesis de que el rápido desarrollo de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación, los procesos de globalización y glocalización son factores comunes en el desarrollo de documentales tanto en Rusia como en países extranjeros y trata de educar estos factores. Aunque los documentales rusos y extranjeros tienen una trayectoria histórica diferente que está determinada por condiciones históricas y culturales, políticas, económicas, tradiciones nacionales y afinidades ideológicas específicas, se enriquecen en gran medida entre sí, interactuando activamente en el campo de la experiencia creativa. El género clásico del periodismo “retrato de bocetos”, que da cuenta de muchos documentales famosos, está experimentando actualmente una gran transformación. Este proceso está influenciado por factores como la comercialización de la televisión, la prevalencia del contenido de entretenimiento y juegos, el formateo y unificación de los productos de los canales de televisión, así como la virtualización intensiva de la sociedad, donde la línea clara entre el mundo real y el El mundo virtual parece desvanecerse. El artículo presenta los resultados del estudio realizado sobre la base de la Universidad Federal de Kazán, analiza los trabajos científicos de investigadores de medios y documentales de diferentes años, principalmente del nuevo siglo. El análisis incorpora las opiniones de investigadores y directores famosos rusos y extranjeros.

**Palabras clave:** Educar el género, la televisión, el bosquejo de retratos, la transformación de género.

## INTRODUCTION

Documentary cinema occupies an important place in modern television practice, combining cinematic expressiveness and documentary factfulness. The development of this segment of television broadcasting has always been the focus of media researchers. E. M. Efimov, V. E. Vishnevsky, V. M. Polevoy, I. Belyaev, S. A. Muratov, S. S. Ginsburg, L. Y. Malkova and others have written about the main stages of formation, as well as the prospects for the development of documentary television film as one of the genres of television journalism. Corrigan Timothy, Renov Michael, Arthur Paul and others have devoted their scientific works to the history of foreign documentary cinema.

The technologies for the formation of a documentary television image, as well as the basic laws of constructing a screen language, are described in detail in the works by V. Drobashenko, G. S. Melnik, A. A. Novikova, S. V. Sycheva. However, the theoretical comprehension of the changes in the portrait sketch, as the basis of the documentary television film, has not so far been completed over the matter of the advanced development of practice. The question of the influence of new media platforms on the development of documentary television formats is also little-studied

The nature of the television portrait sketch is characterized by a synthesis of fiction and documentary films. The subject of research in this sketch is personality. The most important components in revealing the hero's individuality are the moral (for example, their system of values), psychological (character, temperament), intellectual (thoughts, ideas) and creative aspects of their life. The portrait can be both individual and collective.

Although the first documentaries began to be screened at the end of the 19th century, the formation of the genre of portrait sketches in context of documentary films began only by the middle of the 20th century. The current state of portrait sketch television documentary filmmaking is vastly different than it was before the 1980s. According to Russian media researcher Shergova (2010), in documentary television journalism there is a general tendency of genre decadence, which leads to stagnation of the genre under discussion.

There is also an opinion that television documentary in portrait genre has died out due to the monotony and unification of documentary television films: *“The portrait television painting has disappeared. Noisy parties do not provide an opportunity to establish emotional contact. This requires an in-depth, fiction studies of personality <...> it is impossible to obtain material about the life of an individual by inviting this person into a non-native environment”*, thinks Bakhtin (2000).

In Prozhiko (2020), 's judgement, modern television documentaries have two mainstreams:

1. the tradition of interpretive style of art, which is supported by the whole history of Russian documentary cinema;
2. pressure on TV documentaries of the “virtualized” information picture of the reality.

If in the first case on the screen we can trace the author's conception of the vision of the hero or socio-political events, then in the second case there is a clear predominance of a dimensional portrayal of the real world – the objects carrying any information become salient, and the real reality remains behind the verbal linearity of narrative. This trend has developed under the influence of the culture of the Internet and social networks.

## METHODOLOGY

In our research, we used empirical and theoretical methods: methods of analysis and synthesis of information, as well as historical analysis to study the formation and transformation of the genre of “portrait sketch” in television publicism.

We have analyzed scientific works and documentary films of different years, mainly of the new century, testifying to the transformation of the genre of “portrait sketch” and the impact of this transformation on the development of Russian documentary television journalism. Our analysis also comprises the opinions of Russian and foreign researchers.

## DEVELOPMENT

Many foreign researchers consider the ethnographic film *Nanook of the North* by Robert J. Flaherty to be the first documentary film in the genre of portrait sketch (Kritzman, 2009). However, some methods that are unacceptable for ethnographic documentary films, for example, the reconstruction of everyday life, are used in the film. An important contribution of the American filmmaker was the fact that filming was based on the method of observation. This is especially evident when Flaherty is shooting Nanook's house so that the light – the sun behind the clouds – is opposite the house. He deliberately chose this foreshortening to convey the suspenseful and inclement atmosphere of the North.

Although Robert Flaherty is considered to be the first documentary filmmaker who used the genre of portrait sketch, more nearly the era of this genre begins with John Grierson in the 1930s (Kahana, 2008). Paul Rotha, who produced and directed several works for one of Grierson's divisions, promoted it as an oppositional form

of cinematography that “*materialized mainly for sociological, political and educational reasons*” (Galloway, 2006). One of the most important principles established by John Grierson is the distinction between analytical journalism and television publicism, which embraces the portrait essay genre and documentary: “*documentaries, like journalism, have an increased requirement to tell the truth if they want to maintain their integrity; but much more than journalism, they are also the author’s means of expression*”. (Grierson & Hardy, 1971)

It is important to note the rapid development of foreign documentary filmmaking since the 1940s. One points to *David Holtzman’s Diary* (1967) by Jim McBride, *Lightning Over Water* (1980) by Wim Wenders, Michelle Citron’s autobiographical reflection on the relationship between mother and daughter in *Daughter Rite* (1980) and Errol Morris’ stylized portrait of US involvement in the Vietnam War *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* as the examples of documentaries in the genre of portrait sketch (Jameson & Foster, 1983).

One of the most famous foreign documentaries of the late 20th century in the genre of portrait sketch is *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Let’s dwell on it in more detail. The TV movie is a cultural portrait of Vietnam, which is shown through the thoughts of women, different in social status and profession, but united by a tragic fate – they were subjected to exile and had to constantly move around the country. The atmosphere of a country which turned out to be divided and fragmented by decades of wars and colonization is conveyed through female images (De Obaldia, 1995).

The expressive means used in the film require special attention. The main method of filming here is in-depth interview, which “holds” the structure of the film. To visualize Trin’s speech in different parts of the frame, and sometimes the method of subtitling is used on the faces of the characters – these are poems, proverbs, quotes. In some parts of the interview, voice of American actresses is used, since the interviewees did not speak English. Thus, the documentary reveals the public experience of the war and its aftermath through reconstructions via interviews.

Another striking example of foreign documentary filmmaking is Errol Morris’ portrait sketch *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter* (Chion, 1999). The main character of the film, Fred Leuchter, is an inventor, engineer, researcher who pursues his career by updating and modernizing the equipment of the electric chair for the Massachusetts penitentiary system. According to Morris, “*It’s ultimately a film about denial. Denying the obvious, denying death, denying oneself, denying the Holocaust.*

*But the most important thing is the inability to see the world, to see reality. To live in a cocoon of one’s own creation”.*

In this film, the author uses symbolism to show the ambiguous character of the hero. For example, the biography and details of Leuchter’s life are full of unusual circumstances: many interviewees pronounce his name incorrectly, and during filming, he appears in society as Zelig from Woody Allen’s film having the same name (1983) in various incarnations – as a scientist, spy and anti-Semite, an American patriot, an engineer and clown. During the interview, Leuchter constantly proceeds from one story to another, but none of them are associated to his personal life. Even though he admits the lack of logic and consistency in his strange career and life, even though he, as an expert on the electric chair, retrained for a high demand expert on lethal injections, hanging and gas chambers, Leuchter admits that all of these professions have different goals. According to one of the commentators portraying him at the end of the film, this is a biographical portrait in which Leuchter “came out of nowhere and returned to nowhere”.

Later, numerous documentaries of a similar new format appeared on modern Western television – *Los Angeles Plays Itself* by Tom Andersen, *Dead Reds* by Victor Erice, and others.

As for Russian cinema, it is important to note that the genre of portrait sketch in documentaries began to be used much later, which is associated with the political system of the country. In the Soviet Union, personality was hardly distinguishable, ideological priority was given to collectivism, so the genre of portrait sketch was little used. However, there were propaganda films-portraits that had a particular task – representing an image of the heroic and strong Land of the Soviets. These are the films such as *Ocherk o stakhanovtse Ivane Gudove* by Roman Karmen, *Heroes of the Motherland* by Fyodor Kiselev and others.

It is important to note the time when the sketch appeared on television and the associated formation of specific features. The first documentary television film in the USSR appeared in 1954. It was a cycle of stories by famous literary scholar and researcher Irakly Andronikov: *Pages of Great Art, Portraits of the Unknowns, Andronikov’s Word*. In 1959, I. Andronikov visited the Caucasus and filmed the necessary shots with a narrow-width camera. In Leningrad, Andronikov’s readings were accompanied by an illustration of the material he had shot. The effect of the impromptu “one-sided dialogue” used by Andronikov turned out to be characteristic of television (Belyaev, 1998).

The documentary television film *The Shortest Distance (Kratchaishee Rastoyaniye)* (1958) is a collective portrait,

it tells about graduates who will have to choose a specialization and an educational institution. The director of the film, the founder of Russian television documentaries, Belyaev, used the method of reconstruction to recreate the effect of schoolchildren's excitement about their future fate, because at the time of filming they were already graduates. In those years, as Belyaev writes, such creative works were often considered as plot sketches or documentary sketches. Their important feature was the introduction of actors into the storyline, as well as the dubbing of the characters by professional artists (Drobashenko, 1986).

The 1960s and 1970s were breakthroughs for the genre of television story. As an example, let us cite the film *The City Tells About Itself* (Gorod rasskazyvaet o sebe) by Belyaev, which was based on a television interview. Later, Belyaev shot a whole series of interviews with people of different professions. Through such documentaries, television told people about their contemporaries. For the first time, non-standard images of people appeared on the screens.

The films-portraits such as *All My Sons* (*Vse moi synoviya*) and Kurilovskiye Calaches have appeared. In the first film, directors A. Stefanovich and O. Gvasilia showed the youth of that time, using the minimum arts media: in the frame there is only a chair, the characters of the film and a movie camera, which simultaneously takes them. The characters of the film are young people of the 1960s – open, educated, simple and talented. This television film has been done at the “Horizon” youth television station and won the 3rd All-Union TV Festival (Martynenko, 1973). The second film tells about the tractor drivers who stayed at the rear during the Great Patriotic War. Director of the TV film Dmitry Lunkov used the method of hidden camera to show the utmost sincerity of his female leads, as well as the technique of a synchronously recorded monologue. During the film cutting, the method of parallel joining of the frames was used, which helped the director achieve the effect of one space, although all the women were caught separately from each other (Does doc have the right to art, 2010).

Television films by Vladislav Vinogradov are considered classics of the portrait sketch genre. He shot films that were not similar to each other in subjects and style. For example, in the film *Turner* (*Tokar*) the director unexpectedly for the protagonist of the film switches on a song from his childhood performed by Leonid Utesov, thereby achieving disclosure of the character's individuality. If, before turning on the song he appears to us quite formally – as an exemplary communist and activist, then after having heard the composition he seems to recall something from

his childhood, and the viewer sees an ordinary, even shy person.

TV documentary films in the genre of portrait sketch were shot not only by Moscow and Leningrad studios, but also by representatives of other schools of Soviet documentary filmmaking. For example, one of the successful works of the Riga studio was the film *235 Million* directed by W. Browns about the unification of people of different nationalities in the Soviet Union. Together with screenwriter Hertz Frank, Uldis Browns found a very interesting plot device – two lines are intertwined throughout the film: national events and facts of the personal life of ordinary citizens of different nationalities.

In connection with the dynamic development of technology and the acquisition of the necessary skills by people in the 1980s, documentary television films was estimated at hundreds. In 1987, about three hundred had been shown on the screen. In the viewing grid, television documentary filmmaking took twelve to sixteen hours.

When it comes to modern television documentary films, discussions around its fate have been revolving on among Russian scientists and directors over the past twenty years. The rebirth of television films began with the collaboration of documentary filmmakers and experienced television journalists. A demonstrative example is the documentary project by V. Mansky and K. Ernst *Realnoe Kino*, in the editions of which journalists tell how the world of documentary filmmaking works in Russia.

Indicative from this point of view is the discussion organized by the magazine *Iskusstvo Kino* (*The Art of the Film*) (Libergal, 2016). Let us cite some of the opinions of its participants. According to authoritative media explorer S. A. Muratov, documentary films on television have turned into “pseudo-cinemas”, since they are shot according to a single formula, where the image, or composition and montage, do not have the main meaning, instead the principle of text prevails. In the opinion of director S. Dvortsevov, television documentaries are “not films as such, but special formats”. This is also confirmed by director Mansky, who says that television films are formatted in documentary filmmaking.

There is also another opinion about the situation in Russian television documentaries. G. Lebede, the compiler of the documentary program of the Moscow International Film Festival in 2016, connects the changes in documentary filmmaking on television with the process of blurring the boundaries between television and auteur cinematography. This leads to the fact that documentary films are shown at festivals or in cinemas, and indie films are shown on television screens (Ilchenko, 2012).

From our point of view, the decline in the quality level of documentary television films based on the genre of “portrait sketch” is associated with the strengthening of the market model in the Russian television industry on the whole. This is related to the desire of producers and owners of TV channels to create as much TV content as possible in a single format for general audience.

The very concept of “format” can be defined as a list comprised of requirements, often formal, created by producers or owners of TV channels for producers of TV products (Ilchenko, 2012). These are data on the frequency of TV airtime, run time and timeline, on the content of the TV program. These formats are required to comply with the general concept of a TV channel, for example, a cultural and entertainment direction – such as “СТС” (STS) or “ТНТ” (TNT), or day-and-night news channels – such as “Россия 24” (Russia 24).

Such a crisp classification of TV channels reduces the creative process of producing TV programs to a set of information and their standardization to a specific channel format. The format, as a rule, is adjusted to the mass viewer, the calibration of TV programs takes on marginal forms grounded upon the base needs of people for information about scandals, interstate or interethnic conflicts. Documentary films based on portrait sketches acquire the format of dubious entertainment shows. The embrace of achieving a high rating turns portrait sketches into mythologizing personalities, especially historical ones.

One of such examples of documentary television films based on the genre of “portrait sketch” was the cycle *Geniuses and Villains of the Past Era* about outstanding scientists, musicians, politicians and artists of the 20th century. This cycle was shown on the channels “ОРТ” (ORT) and “Первый” (First) from 1999 to 2011, and later on the channel “Культура” (Culture). The idea of this cycle was to show a historical figure, and the era in which the hero of the portrait sketch lived, considered from the perspective of the character of a particular person. The authors, touching upon conflicts and themes of the period, use the sketch method of art typification.

Positive trends in the development of portrait television documentaries are the genre enrichment with new techniques such as:

- Artistic reconstruction of the events of the era in which the hero of the portrait sketch lived.
- The use of 2D and 3D graphics or animation to supplement the video sequence or display any additional information.

In television journalism, the tendency to merge genres has become clearly visible, so the genre of “portrait sketch” can enter into symbiosis with other genres, for example, with a travel sketch or cinematographic genres in the form of reconstructions. For example, we can cite the film *Pirates of Silicon Valley* – the interviews with the characters of the portrait sketch are included in the structure of a feature film that reconstructs the events of the history of the creation of such information giants as Apple and Microsoft.

Currently, documentary in the genre of portrait sketch holds a high position on video hosting, dozens of documentary television films appear on the Youtube platform. However, only a few films become trendy, and their authors become famous – for example, A. Pivovarov, L. Parfenov, Y. Dud. These journalists embarked upon their creative careers on television, now they use their television skills on their independent Youtube channels. The migration of experienced television journalists from TV channels to video hosting sites is stimulated by their desire for free creativity. It cannot be argued that the documentary television film has remained unchanged on the Internet. Virtual culture has undoubtedly influence on television genres and formats, transforming them.

Modern documentaries differ from 20th century documentaries not only in general style and form, but also in the style of the journalist’s dialogue with the audience and with the characters. Producers increasingly use reconstruction of events in their projects to recreate a particular historic period, turn to portrait films and raise contemporary issues.

## CONCLUSIONS

Russian television documentary undoubtedly has its own unique traditions and specific features. However, today we can talk about some common points that bring it closer to foreign documentary filmmaking. This is the transformation of the genre of documentary portrait television sketch associated with the commercialization of television, the prevalence of entertainment and game content, and the formatting of TV channels’ products. In the era of “hybrid” reality and the virtualization of society, the boundaries between television documentaries and auteur films are dissolved, which provides journalists and directors with vast opportunities to produce an original creative product.

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