

REVIEW
by the foreign scientific advisor to the dissertation of
Azat S. Khakimov
«DOCUMENTARY AS A MEANS OF FILM LANGUAGE IN
KAZAKHSTANI FEATURE MOVIES (1945 – 2019)» for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in program 6D040600 – Directing

Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after T.K.Zhurgenov

In the introduction of his thesis, Azat Khakimov addresses the fact that in the history of Kazakh fiction film, documentary elements have frequently been used by directors, as part of their cinematic language. This has also been recognized by commentators, but so far it has not been theorized. While documentary and fiction are usually studied separately, since they are understood to have different relations to reality, this thesis analyzes the correspondences between documentary and fiction film instead. This novel approach enables a better understanding of the relation between fiction film and reality, while rethinking reality at the same time. It also provides fiction film directors with a toolkit to articulate their working method and to develop the expression of their world view. In an exemplary manner, the thesis thus serves both film-philosophical and practical purposes, which ultimately have social relevance too, for the way the thesis enables film directors to envision and develop new world views.

Khakimov's first aim is to understand the position of documentary means in the creative practice of fiction film production in Kazakhstan. To that end he builds on a solid body of Kazakh film scholarship, as outlined in the introduction, and analyzes a large amount of Kazakh fiction films throughout the dissertation. In order to conduct his analysis, Khakimov has distinguished three historical eras, according to a well-motivated periodization. In a systematic way he maps the different documentary elements that directors have used as means to tell their stories, to develop and communicate their visions, and to engage their viewers. Khakimov's rigorous analytical approach subsequently invites for future projection, how documentary elements may help to propel (Kazakh) cinema, while developing new visions.

The thesis presents thorough descriptions of the films studied, which is evidence of Khakimov's profound understanding of cinema, particularly in the context of Kazakh culture and society. His research method has four components: historical and cultural analysis; historical comparison; narrative

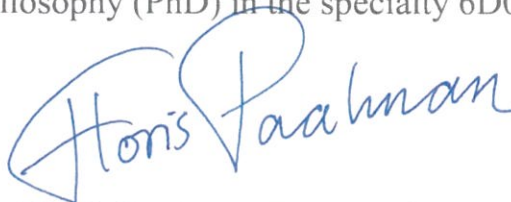
analysis; semiotic and structuralist analysis. Methodologically, the thesis makes use of a corpus of historical films, and draws on historical trends. However, since the focus is the problem of documentary means within fiction film, rather than a problem of historiography, historical evidence serves above all current understandings of cinema. As such, this thesis is an exemplary case of learning from historical achievements. Rather than presenting merely a chronological account, each of the three periods serves an argumentative purpose, depending on the characteristics of each period. Informed by historical and social scientific knowledge, the chapters are based on the differentiation between (positivist and objectivist) 'documentary techniques' and (individualist and subjectivist) 'documentary style' in fiction film, further elaborated through revisionist (cultural and relativist) documentary approaches within 'creative cinema' engaging with today's reality.

Besides its relevance for practice, the thesis is theoretically relevant for problematizing cinema's continuously changing relationship with reality, due to changing image technology and social conditions. Khakimov succeeds to fulfill his research objectives, most importantly to identify the forms, properties and functions of documentary elements in fiction films, which he has presented as a unified, layered model. This model significantly contributes to the academic debate of film language, how directors can use it, and how viewers can understand it. Khakimov's elaborate analytical structure, sophisticated in its divisions, is exhaustive in regard to his findings, and open to embrace possible findings in the future. Moreover, future developments could eventually enter into a dialectic with this model to fuel further theoretical and practical developments. In this light, Khakimov speaks of interaction with virtual objects, as representations that create a 'reality effect'. Khakimov aptly conceptualizes this prospect with the term "kinemakhoros", as a movement space that combines the reality of objects and images. It also incorporates Khakimov's distinctive concepts of 'audiochronotope' and 'integrated space,' which allow to accurately define directing techniques.

Beyond its relevance in the context of Kazakh cinema and culture, this thesis may serve as an international reference. Khakimov's approach offers a systematized model for similar research abroad. Moreover, it allows for international comparative research, so that the historical comparison can be extended to geographical comparison within the context of world cinema. The limits of the allegedly universalist premise of film language addressed by early filmmakers can then be established, next to the need to be culturally

specific in the application and decoding of signs, as shown here for Kazakhstan.

The research carried out by Khakimov, the decisions made and directions taken, correspond to the conversations I have had with him. He has also constructively built upon the material found and discussed during his research visits to the Netherlands, and he has fully independently elaborated on the information and suggestions provided by me, which has resulted in a coherent, multilayered thesis. I therefore believe that the dissertation work of Azat Serikovich Khakimov, "Documentary as a means of film language in Kazakhstani feature movies (1945 - 2019)", submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy PhD in the program 6D040600 – Directing, performed at a high level, is relevant, independently prepared scientific research, and contains new scientifically developed findings that contribute to the development of the theory and practice of cinema. Azat Serikovich Khakimov deserves to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the specialty 6D040600 – Directing.



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