

# The presentation of totalitarian themes in the children's movies of director A. Karsakbayev

## La presentación de temas totalitarios en las películas infantiles del director A. Karsakbayev

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Received: 30/09/2017 • Approved: 05/10/2017

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#### ABSTRACT:

In the modern world, where the generally accepted values are freedom, free speech, and equality, the development of art, including cinema, can be diverse. However, during the Soviet period, cultural activity was censored viciously. Nevertheless, the intellectuals never stopped opposing the official ideology. This struggle took place in the cultural space, in literature, music, and cinema. However, the protests had to be concealed, especially in movies, to pass the censorship and to ensure the artists' personal safety. The purpose of this study is to explore the anti-ideological aspects in cinema by the example of children's movies. To that end, the study used general scientific research methods, including the systems approach, analysis, and synthesis. In children's movies, the anti-ideological aspect is presented allegorically and figuratively. They ridicule the absurdity and facetiousness of the existing system. Nevertheless, the movies have profound dramatic meaning, which hooks the viewers and shows them the injustice of the totalitarian regime. Such movies had a significant effect on the development of Soviet cinematography and further establishment of

#### RESUMEN:

En el mundo moderno, donde los valores generalmente aceptados son la libertad, la libertad de expresión y la igualdad, el desarrollo del arte, incluido el cine, puede ser diverso. Sin embargo, durante el período soviético, la actividad cultural fue censurada viciousamente. Sin embargo, los intelectuales nunca dejaron de oponerse a la ideología oficial. Esta lucha tuvo lugar en el espacio cultural, en la literatura, la música y el cine. Sin embargo, las protestas tuvieron que ser ocultadas, especialmente en el cine, para pasar la censura y asegurar la seguridad personal de los artistas. El propósito de este estudio es explorar los aspectos anti-ideológicos en el cine a través del ejemplo de las películas infantiles. Para ello, el estudio utilizó métodos de investigación científica general, incluyendo el enfoque sistémico, el análisis y la síntesis. En las películas para niños, el aspecto anti-ideológico se presenta alegóricamente y figurativamente. Ellos ridiculizan la absurdidad y factibilidad del sistema existente. Sin embargo, las películas tienen un profundo significado dramático, que engancha a los espectadores y les muestra la injusticia del régimen totalitario. Estas

Kazakh cinematography.

**Keywords:** ideological opposition; children's movies; directing art; Soviet cinematography; the image in the art of cinema.

películas tuvieron un efecto significativo en el desarrollo de la cinematografía soviética y en el establecimiento de la cinematografía kazaja.

**Palabras clave:** Oposición ideológica; películas infantiles; Dirigir arte; Cinematografía soviética; La imagen en el arte del cine.

## 1. Introduction

Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet state for seventy years. During this time, Kazakhstan underwent substantial social and political changes. Civil wars, the rule of the Bolsheviks, the Red Terror (Resnick & Wolff, 2013; Reese & Whitewood, 2016; Cooper, Perrie & Rees, 2016), and the hardships of World War II – all this left an indelible mark on the history of the Kazakh nation. Despite the dissolution of the USSR and the establishment of independent Kazakhstan, the country has yet to recover from the hard times of the Soviet age (Kuşçu, 2014, 178-197). All these sociocultural changes made considerable adjustments to the national art, including the art of cinema (Mursalimova, Aidarova & Yedilbayev, 2015, 95; Romina, 2015, 209-223). Cinematic art formed and developed in step with history – it evaluated the demands and opinions of the modern times. K. Siranov, one of the first Kazakh movie critics, wrote: “The birth and development of the Kazakh Soviet cinematic art is closely related to the historic victories of the Soviet people, who have successfully built socialism and are triumphantly marching to the peak of human happiness – communism” (Siranov, 1966).

After the dissolution of the USSR, over the last twenty-five years, Kazakhstan has found a way to promote the market art and adapt to the development of independent art (Nomads, 2015, 399-416; Shayekina & Mamrayeva, 2014, 38). The new generation that was born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union perceives the history of the last seventy years differently and does not mask its negative opinion of the past age. Nowadays, the ideology of the state that follows the path of democracy enables innovation and freethinking. The state carries out an open policy and does not restrict the exchange of information between all spheres. A person who lives in a place where there is no censorship cannot understand the power of the censorship pressure. However, during the Soviet period, dissent was persecuted, especially in cinematography, due to its ability to convey information to the wider population (Guillory, 2014, 271-281; Dumančić, 2014; Gorsuch & Koenker, 2013).

During the Soviet period, the main power that resisted the regime were the Sixtiers and dissidents (Wojnowski, 2015). However, open demonstration of ideas that contradicted the official ideology ended up with many intellectuals from across the USSR being sent to labor camps or compulsory treatment or exiled from the country (Koslov, 2006, 448). Nevertheless, the resistance against the existing ideology continued, including in children's movies.

The purpose of this study is to explore the anti-ideological aspects in cinema by the example of children's movies.

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## 2. Methods

The methodological and theoretical framework of this study included systems analysis, synthesis, systems approach, theory of activity, and theory of staged formation of mental efforts.

In addition, the study generalized the materials of Kazakh and foreign researchers on the subject at hand.

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## 3. Data, Analysis, and Results

The defining events in the life of generations were the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's report at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress. For most Sixtiers, this was a resolution of a long-lasting worldview crisis, a catharsis that made peace between them and the life of the country.

Called the "Thaw" by the public, this time period was the context of the activity of the Sixtiers. They actively supported the "return to the standards of Lenin", which explains the praise of "Lenin" in their works.

Movie critic Bauyrzhan Nogerbek wrote: "Being part of Soviet cinematography, Kazakh cinema was born and developed while shyly looking back and obeying the commands from upstairs" (Nogerbek, 2008). The Communist Party of the USSR and its representatives in each republic kept a tight rein over all the developing forms of art. All manners of works of art were aimed at praising the communist ideology, while personal thoughts and innovations in the works of authors were often treated with suspicion, modified, and corrected. Even national folklore, which was censored strictly, was processed in accordance with the Soviet system: "...Especially considering the fact that many of them truly believed in the Soviet ideology, the ideals of the communist society, and filmed "special-order" totalitarian movies at the bidding of their hearts" (Nogerbek, 2008). Under the pressure of this period, the works of many authors were forgotten and lost their value at the dawn of the new age. Meanwhile, talented painters, in spite of the rough system, fought for each work and attempted to leave a truthful image of art for the future generations.

"A certain movement established in the Kazakh cinema art, which aimed to search for ways out of the crisis of the 1970s. The crisis was overcome by onscreen results, balanced creative mastery of all the components of movie production, thematic components in particular, which was typical for Soviet cinema in general" (Aynagulova & Alimbayeva, 1990).

Abdulla Karsakbayev was one such director. "A founder of national cinematography (...), A. Karsakbayev during his short path in his creative work managed to reach an artistic and esthetic level that is comparable to the modern professional independent and action movies" (Nogerbek, 2008). Many people know him by his revolutionary movies as a straightforward person. Movie critic B. Nogerbek studied the creative path of the director and considered his movie *Restless Morning* (1977) the birth of non-totalitarian cinema that cut a path through the Soviet Kazakh totalitarian cinema.

Abdulla Karsakbayev holds a special place in the history of Soviet cinematography. He approached the child theme with innovativeness and professional individuality. Similar to other artists, the director shared his opinions, thoughts, and searches in his art. A. Karsakbayev looked at the world through the eyes of children and strived to achieve artistic beauty through this. The life and the beginning of A. Karsakbayev's artistic path coincided with the historical period of the Soviet Union, which saw the totalitarian political system reach its peak. Karsakbayev was a member of the so-called Sixtiers and, just like his contemporaries, he also suffered from the totalitarian regime. Many Sixtiers experienced a worldview crisis already in their childhood. This did not generally lead to a radical reconsideration of their opinions, but forced them to engage in reflection and caused them to form a hidden opposition to the regime.

Abdulla Karsakbayev was the first among his contemporaries to realize that the newest and most secret, easiest and hardest thing in the art of cinema was to reveal the internal contradiction – the formation of children's movies. Children's movies, which Karsakbayev created by internalizing each new turn of the age, were, at the time, some of the viewers' most favorite movies, although they were understudied. In 1966, his movie *My Name Is Kozha* (1963) received an award at the Cannes Festival; at the Riga All-Soviet Film Festival, his movie *Alpamys Goes to School* (1977) won the main prize. Meanwhile, the movies *A Trip into Childhood* (1968), *Outrun Me if You're Fast* (1974), and *The Bitter Taste of Childhood* (1983) were among the viewer's favorites.

"The creation of works for children, which corresponded with the ideological and artistic requirements of the times and took into account the peculiarities of children's perception and psychology was such a big deal in our country that children's movies became a special branch of Soviet cinematography" (Siranov, 1966).

Despite having a distinct mark of their time, Karsakbayev's movies did not lose their tonality,

they aged well and are not perceived as “part” of the Soviet period. These children’s movies were created as an escape from the totalitarian system, they are part of their period of non-totalitarian school of Kazakh cinema. After analyzing the elements of these movies, which attempted to undermine the foundation of the Soviet ideology, one can classify them as anti-Soviet movies.

While filming children’s movies, Karsakbayev criticized and ridiculed the system. He showed the flaws in the system through children’s actions: jokes, pranks, tricks, and sarcasm. These means are clearly seen in the movie *My Name Is Kozha*. Kozha is a true “rebel”. Kozha opposes himself to everybody else. The stubbornness of Kozha, who was infamous in his neighborhood for hooliganism, seemed to come out of nowhere. Kozha was a menacing image that transformed into a “villain” in an “ideal” society. Other people were outraged and annoyed by his free will, sensuality, empathy, and opposition. Therefore, they were all ready to unite their efforts to reeducate him, expel him from school or even exile him altogether. However, Kozha was his own master, a personality, and nobody else could be his master. Having been conceived with such beliefs and filled with allegoric mockery, the conflicts escalated the opposition between Kozha and the society.

“Kozha is not exactly an exemplary guy; in this respect, he is unlike the exemplary boys from many children’s books. He is a mischievous child and a dreamer. His mischief sometimes borders on rudeness, while his dreamery – on unpleasant stories” (Siranov, 1966).

Kozha has an open wound – the consequences of his orphanhood. The society is unable to replace his father, who died in the war. His mother cannot stay at home, she cannot give her son her motherly love and care, because she has to work in the field. The conflict between Kozha and Maykanova, the woman who set the rules, which took place when Kozha tried to cut the line to get books and with the “bourgeois” Zhantas further escalated the internal contradiction. After failing to find common ground with his environment, Kozha together with Sultan took the path of freedom. “...He plays all the time. Sometimes the games he plays are bad...” (Siranov, 1966). He tried smoking cigars, stealing, and other machinations. He was punished, but that did not make him a coward or force him to cease his opposition. He invented new ways of hooliganism. All actions and words of Kozha expressed his internal anger and resistance to the society and the environment in which he found himself.

In the movie, one can see in the actions of the young restless character an example of courageous heroism in the fight against the totalitarian system. There was another person in the movie, who tried to maintain the balance between society and personality – uncle Rakhmanov. Rakhmanov was a wise man, who held a special place in the society, discussed changes of the age, and set children on “the right path”. He supported the system, but did not reject Kozha. If the times, i.e. the society, prevails, he will be discarded, but if Kozha wins, he is ready to support him; Rakhmanov is a regulating medium between them. “...gradually and delicately he weans children from unadvisable and sometimes dangerous games” (Siranov, 1966).

The movie *My Name Is Kozha* was filmed at a time when the communist authorities were powerful; however, it was an anti-Soviet work that came out of the censorship sphere. The movie features certain scenes that usually would not have been permitted by the censorship body, such as child smoking, a woman’s desire to remarry, etc. The movie does not aim to praise the Soviet ideology, on the contrary, it mocks the society through the actions of the main character – Kozha.

Kozha personifies not only the “rebellious” image of that age, but also that of the present time. He has an image that does not obey the social system and does not know defeat.

In addition, *My Name Is Kozha* is regarded as a movie that used bold methods not only from the perspective of ideology, but also in terms of art and directing. “... this method consists in the fact that the entire work (rehearsal, filming, etc.) with young actors was conducted in the form of a children’s game, a game about what was required of them in the movie” (Siranov,

1966). This was the first Kazakh movie to use the language of cinema, since it was filmed in a direction that differed from Sh. Aymanov's school of the time, i.e. it did not use theater actors. This movie initially presented the main character's dream. According to film experts, *My Name Is Kozha* was a turning point in the history of Kazakh cinema, it influenced the "new wave" of cinema and enabled it to develop in a new fashion. While agreeing with this opinion, one could say that this movie featured an anti-ideological point that criticized the political system of the country.

Another Karsakbayev movie with a prevailing anti-ideological perspective is *Six-Year-Old Alpamys*. People kindheartedly accepted Alpamys, who hugged his alphabet book and dreamed of going to school. Alpamys is not like Kozha, he is a dreamer and a sensitive character, who looks at the world with innocent eyes. He is ready to live in harmony with his surrounding environment and accept all laws of the society in advance. Meanwhile, his friend Kayirkhan is a real anti-ideological character – not only does he refuse to go to school, he even refuses to wash.

In the Kazakh epos, Alpamys is the name of a batyr, a warrior; little Alpamys is a hero, who is only starting his battle against the contradictions in his surrounding world. He proves his sensitivity and constantly fights against the representatives of the ideological group, whom he encounters. While trying to protect himself, Alpamys took certain steps, but did not make the same mistakes that Kozha made, which consequently led to the punishment of the latter. Alpamys is smarter and more grownup and clever than Kozha is. The young adolescent strives for freedom not as Kozha does – through arrogance, but by composedly controlling his willpower. The calm boy proved himself from the positive side and achieved his goal by peaceful means. The movie depicts the spiritual path of Alpamys through school and native land in the company of Mynar Ata – a wise old man – and loyal friend Kalikhan. "The establishment of the young individual is traced by the authors in an accurate orientation of the growing audience towards the moral principles, mastery, and constant aspiration, which can provide society with the prospect of future growth through harmonious development of each personality" (Aynagulova & Alimbayeva, 1990).

Karsakbayev's movie *Outrun Me if You're Fast* was filmed in the spirit of struggle. Movie critics did not pay special attention to this movie and it did not undergo segmentation, although the audience gave it a warm welcome. However, when compared to other movies of the director, its value is more special and complex. Therefore, when analyzing this film, it is necessary to consider it not only from the perspective of the sports theme for children, but also its dramatic and directional essence. The story of the movie is formed by noticeable and unnoticeable anti-ideological lines; despite having a sports theme, it is based on the rules of Soviet ideology. The movie uses allegory to mock the morality of the communist system through small details, by presenting to its characters the fight between good and evil, strength and weakness, cleverness and deviousness. The protagonist – a teenage girl named Gulya – is a new image that incorporates the features of both Kozha and Alpamys. She had the hooliganism, stubbornness, inventiveness, and free will of Kozha, but also such virtues of Alpamys as shyness, timidity, pureness, and curiosity. She experienced the pressure of external forces and walked the hard path to victory to achieve her goal – to participate in a sports competition. Her enemies were not simple people, furthermore, they were united as representatives of a sophisticated system. However, brave Gulya was not alone in her fight. Her close ones, relatives, and friends supported and helped her, although she did receive the first blow alone.

"When teaching children patriotism, duty to their comrades and the society, and educating them in the high moral standards – honesty, sincerity, and diligence – it is important to pay attention to films, in which the main characters are children. Positive images of children are always perceived warmly by the young audience. They enrich their inner world and make their actions humane" (Siranov, 1966).

*My Name Is Kozha*, *Six-Year-Old Alpamys*, and *Outrun Me if You're Fast* remain as top-priority children's movies in the history of Kazakh cinema and hold a special place of importance in the

Kazakh classical movie library. The group of protagonists comprises of different characters that are unlike one another. Their content conveyed not only the simple ideas of the children's world, but also an in-depth conflict with the problems of the society.

Abdulla Karsakbayev's movies *A Trip into Childhood* and *The Bitter Taste of Childhood* had distinct genres that were filled with the realism of the historical and dramatic period. "...The director tried to fill the traditional onscreen model with entirely new philosophical content and profound psychological characteristics of the characters – both positive and negative" (Nogerbek, 2008).

Childhood is usually associated with good memories, but *A Trip into Childhood* depicts the life of a boy named Bektas, who lived during a harsh transition period. He witnessed the contradictions of those times, when the communist system came to power, when the political reform commenced among peoples and he ended up being the main character of these historic events. The story of Bektas started as a children's game and proceeded to branch into various storylines that altered the mental state of the protagonist. During his happy days at his parents' side, Bektas had to think only about learning. His aspirations were not supposed to be affected by historical changes that took place around him or by the mockery and bullying of his peers. However, fate had something else in store for him – he lost his mother and a teacher, to whom he was close. The teacher was his spiritual foothold and paragon. In this movie, Sagatbay, similar to Rakhmanov from *My Name Is Kozha*, is an image of a person, who put the problems of his people before his own problems. Through his enlightening activity, he was a guarantor between the people and the authorities. His brother was wounded, his harmless father became associated with a shady group. All this changed Bektas' outlook and made him stronger; he grew up fast and made decisions as adults would have. What does Bektas dream of when he recalls this important period in his life. In the end, various sensations, such as tempered heroism, overcome fear, and boundless care turned into sweet nostalgia.

The movie *A Trip into Childhood* repeats the story of *Restless Morning*, which opposes the concepts of pureness and dirtiness, good nature and villainy, goodness and evilness. All those who did not support the Soviet collective policy or resisted it were treated as enemies; even not working for the system was considered a crime. Misunderstandings, contradicting opinions, and the endless argument between teacher Sagatbay and the supervisor, a member of the authorities, who "preferred to cut the head off instead of trimming the hair", brings the viewer to ambiguous thoughts. The teacher does not value politics as much as the supervisor does, but his aspirations for innovation annoys the people who surround him. By comparing these two characters, the directors ridicules the Soviet ideology. There is another group that consists of rich officials and their pawns. They oppose the governmental enthusiasts and do not support politics at all; on the contrary, they want to govern the simple people, who have not yet grasped the essence of politics. "...Sometimes it was difficult for the viewers to keep track of who was historically right, who was "friend" and who was "foe" (Nogerbek, 2008). In addition to the problems of that time, Bektas had another problem – the mockery and bullying of his peers. The poor boy was accused of everything, he always suffered from injustice. Nevertheless, he did not fall for their trap and proved he was right with perseverance to match that of his peers. Bektas' image is the result of all children of the revolution, who lived through the hardships of their people's nations and lost their childhood. Nowadays, when we are reconsidering and reevaluating the history of the Kazakh people, information that would accurately depict those times is scarce. However, this movie with its sincere historical story gave the opportunity to enjoy its ideas, despite having been filmed several years after the period it depicts and having failed to pass strict censorship.

A. Karsakbayev's movie *The Bitter Taste of Childhood* is another realistic movie that showed the state of the Kazakh people after World War II in parallel to the children's adventures. The war had a significant impact even on the auls that were far from the frontline. Old man Zeynoll was responsible for delivering necessary commodities and letters from the frontline to the dwellers of auls that were located along a riverbank. He took his granddaughter Dariga and visitants

Omir and Mukhtar as his assistants; they would travel in a boat, visiting the auls along the way. The children felt calm and happy at the old man's side. They listened to the old man's stories, made fun of each other, and would have continued their happy childhood days, but Zeynoll got electrocuted and carried away by the river. The children found themselves without care and protection. They had to rely on their own efforts and cooperation, make decisions, and see the business they started through to the end. During the first difficult trip of their lives, they witnessed a nation suffering from war, they consoled grieving mothers, and tried to bring good news. The poor condition of the people, the griefs of those in mourning, and the defenselessness of old women encouraged them to perform heroic deeds. They made decisions like adults, paying no attention to the fact that they were only children and grew up fast.

Over the course of the war, the Soviet Union altered its totalitarian ideology and directed political morals towards the fight against fascism. All republics that were part of the USSR sent masses of their people liable for military service to the war and worked day and night behind the lines. The Kazakhs considered it their duty to defeat the common enemy and went down in history as an active participant of the struggle. However, the war was a bloody trial for the people. *The Bitter Taste of Childhood* was released when the themes of war changed. The movie was full of fancy and patriotic psychological characteristics of simple people, including children. "The specific peculiarities of child cinematography dictate their own special demands. Reality should be depicted from the perspective of children's consciousness and perception, then the psychological effect of the movie on children will be strong and convincing" (Siranov, 1966).

*The Bitter Taste of Childhood* showcases a strong individual style of the director, while featuring images that are similar to other A. Karsakbayev's movies. The children's familiarization with historical towns and their relationship with Zeynoll bridge the gap between history and the future. The allegoric depiction of children on a boat, the transformations of the scam of the passengers from other nations, and the fact that the Kazakh boy was forgiven, while the rest were thrown overboard – all this went unnoticed by the government censors of the time, who monitored each shot carefully. The black snake that appeared in the boat was not poisonous, although it did scare the children. The black snake personifies the actions of the harsh but mindless government of that time. Meanwhile, having overcome their fear, the children used the snake to protect themselves from the enemy. The nature of this movie, which is filled with metaphoric symbols, uses children to show an optimistic view of the future by depicting the fight of the people, who supported the victory of the Soviet Union over fascism. Although the people were in a sad, sorry, and hopeless state, they were also full of heroism, tranquility, and trustiness.

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## 4. Discussion

Movies for children or with children require complex psychological, philosophical, and artistic taste and experience. While leaving its first and classical marks of the children's theme in Kazakh cinematography, the works of Abdulla Karsakbayev have retained their value. On the contrary, they enable studying other spheres in the field of new ideas and opinions. "...While living in a totalitarian state, he did not palter and attempted to tell the truth about the society he lived in where and when he could. This is why his movies stood the test of time. Abdulla Karsakbayev was a pioneer. This is the significance and interest he holds for the future generations of cinematographers" (Nogerbek, 2007).

Any viewer from any time can give a high evaluation of Karsakbayev's artistic work. He specified the erroneous or altered thoughts and concepts and formulated the problems of modern studies. After Karsakbayev's children's movies, which were aimed at research, the Soviet propaganda was no longer as frightening as it used to be. The anticommunist life of director Karsakbayev showed the "death" of the ideology of that time on the one hand and accelerated this process on the other hand.

Karsakbayev masterfully showed the protest against the communist system through children's movies. Therefore, it seems that the most effective way of rejecting the communist ideology is

to laugh, i.e. to show it through comedy and satire. At the same time, it is a difficult way of criticizing the system through children and their innocent eyes.

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## 5. Conclusion

The opposition to the Soviet ideology in children's movies was conducted through allegoric subtexts and symbols. These movies gave the director the opportunity to showcase the absurdity of the totalitarian system.

Anti-ideological movies were of different genres and combined elements of comedy and drama, which enabled revealing the entire depth of the picture.

Most films were censored, which is why the general audience could not see them. They were censored not only because they contradicted the Soviet system and ideology, but also because they depicted the problems of the society and moral degradation.

Nevertheless, these works had a significant impact on the society of that time, which ultimately led to the reconsideration of values. In addition, these movies determined the course of development of Kazakh cinematography.

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Revista ESPACIOS. ISSN 0798 1015  
Vol. 38 (Nº 48) Year 2017  
Indexed in Google Schollar

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