II. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR APPLICATION IN THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY

NETWORK CULTURE AS AN ARTISTIC SPACE OF MODERN OF CINEMA

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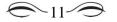*Kirov, Russia*

Summary. The aim of this article is to present a brief overview of the subgenre of contemporary cinema named "desktop film". It outlines the principle features of this cinematic form and discusses its philosophical and sociocultural foundations. Desktop films are viewed as a product of network society and network culture. Using examples from theory and several desktop films, the paper argues that the main artistic feature of desktop films is the act of omnipresent surveillance (termed "omniopticism"). In conclusion, the paper claims that the genre of desktop films reflect the transparency of public and private life of people living in the contemporary network society and network culture.

Keywords: desktop films; network culture; network society; cinema; surveillance.

Desktop film is a type of motion picture whose action mostly takes place on a computer screen [1], and the story is told via images and text messages that appear on a computer or a mobile device screen [5]. The word "desktop" emphasizes the characters' lack of mobility during the film. In many desktop films, the characters do not move away from the screen for most of the time, while in others the action is taken outside, where the characters actively move around in physical space without looking up from their screens. In modern desktop films, the computer is often replaced or supplemented by smart phones.

At the moment, the term "desktop film" is used by critics locally: both Russian and international reviewers employ it mainly to characterize the series of films by Russian director and producer Timur Bekmambetov that focus on the same theme of technology's impact on people's lives in modern networked society. This string of films consists of such movies as "Убрать из друзей" ("Unfriended"), "Волшебник ОС" ("Wizard of OS"), "Взломать блогеров" ("Hack Bloggers"), "Поиск" ("Searching") and "Профайл" ("Profile") (2015–2018). Some of them were shot in cooperation with Western filmmakers and actors and helped to popularize the subgenre both in this country and abroad.

However, desktop films were produced even before the appearance of this term. One of the earliest examples is the film by American director Jed Weintrob "On-Line" (2002). It should be noted that currently the elements of

desktop storytelling are found in many, if not most, films on the topic of computer technology. Consequently, to classify a movie as a desktop one, screen devices should play an integral part in driving the plot forward and influence the characters' actions.

Desktop films can be tentatively classified into two groups. The first group is characterized by the action taking place inside a house or a room ("Chatroom", 2010; "Cyberbully", 2015). They focus is on the screens, and the dominant aesthetics is that of horror ("The Den", 2013; "Cam2Cam", 2014; "App", 2013). Usually there is no happy ending. Such films are typically low-budget, so they use expressive techniques sparsely and tend to focus on verbal images. This, in its turn, creates the pseudo-documentary effect typical of independent cinema.

Films of the second group transfer action to the street ("Nerve", 2016) or even to a dystopian universe of the future ("Anon", 2018). The cinematic quality of their images is higher and brings them closer to the mainstream cinema. Films of this type attempt to go beyond the boundaries of the genre and feature more inventive and ambitious artistic solutions.

Characteristic of all desktop films is their focus on the private lives and the relationship between the characters ("Open Windows", 2014; "Login", 2013). While this is a common theme in many motion pictures of any genre, desktop films take this focus to a new level, subjecting its characters to surveillance that intrudes upon their private lives.

Surveillance is a form of social control and power. It ensures, in words of the American sociologist William Staples, the "state of constant visibility" [4, p. 55] prevalent in modern society. Interpreted broadly, the concept of surveillance, especially its high-tech variety, is closely linked to the philosophical concepts of panopticism (J. Bentham, M. Foucault), synopticism (Mathiesen) and omniopticism (N. Jurgenson).

The concept of panopticism is centered around the image of "Panopticon", originally suggested by the English philosopher Jeremiah Bentham (1791) and later expanded by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980). Panopticon is a type of prison that looks like a round-shaped building with individual cells for inmates. In the centre of the circle formed by its walls there is a watchtower for the wardens [3, p. 292]. At any given time the wardens can potentially watch the people incarcerated in their cells, and the prisoners know about this surveillance. Panopticon was intended to exercise power over the prisoners. The inmates' were aware that they could be observed at any time [3, p. 294–295] and that awareness influenced their behaviour. Applying the concept of Panopticon to society, Michel Foucault saw it as a disciplinary mechanism used by organizations of power to improve production, economy, education and public morality [3, p. 304].

Later on, scholars have expanded on this original idea of panopticon. Thomas Matiesen's "synopticon" implied that masses may watch individual people using the mass media [6]. N. Jurgenson's "omniopticon" combined both

approaches and described the situation of one person watching the many and many people watching one person at the same time [2, p. 90–91]. Mark Poster suggested the term "participatory superomniopticon". Despite the variety of terms, it is clear that the theoretical models of the panopticon, synopticon and omniopticon all aim to describe the state of modern network society, namely its lack of privacy and ubiquitous transparency of private and public life, made possible through the use of digital devices and the growth of mass media, the Internet and social networking sites. Omnioptcism lies at the foundations of desktop films as well.

In desktop films the agent/device of surveillance is the screen – either a computer, a smart phone screen or a neuroscreen implanted into human body. Screen devices turn into full-fledged characters in desktop films. The screen in desktop films turns into the equivalent of reality and an analog of the human psyche. In a way, it becomes an extension of the characters' bodies. Screen devices in desktop films are both public spaces (they can be used to communicate with people, to show the characters' lives to the audience) and private spaces (they store personal information and used to send personal messages). Interacting with them, each character becomes visible to other characters in the film, who can monitor their actions. Screen devices connected to the network are potentially vulnerable to external control, which means that their owners are also vulnerable. The screen does not guarantee privacy. Because of this, the screen and screen devices become a space of uncertainty and fear. Many of these fears are associated with the problem of human-technology relations. These fears include the fear of security breach, invasion of the intimate space, aggression from antagonists. Desktop films, originating in the genre of horror films that traditionally explored subconscious fears, allow deeper insight into the psychology of people living in the network society.

Nearly every desktop film features a situation of surveillance and privacy violation, often expressed as cyberbullying and resulting in the death or damage to the protagonists. In "Cyberbully" a schoolgirl becomes the victim of an anonymous hacker who gets hold of her photos and drives her to a suicide attempt. In "Unfriended" a group of friends is lured into a game of truth or dare to reveal secrets about themselves that lead to their deaths. Both "The Den" and "Open Windows" offer private lives of their characters, a university student and a popular actress, up for public observation and later hold the young women hostages for viewers' pleasure. "Nerve" is an antiutopia in which the characters sign up to take part in an online game and end up forced to perform dangerous challenges dictated by the audience who watch them on their smartphone screens in real time. Another dystopian film, "Anon", is interesting in that it offers a way of escaping this state of surveillance through the destruction of one's "digital double" (the sum of data about a person recorded in official documents) and willing loss of a name.

In desktop films, a laptop camera or a smartphone screen turns into an all-seeing eye-warden, at the same time immersing the viewer in the act of surveil-

lance. Hence, desktop films use a variety of stylistic techniques simulating the process of surveillance techniques (first-person POVs and rapidly shifting POVs, hand-held camera shots), and various metanarrative techniques ("fourth wall" breaking, "film within a film", the effect of spontaneous "found footage" and mockumentary) as well as techniques borrowed from computer games (split screen, gamified plots).

Desktop films raise ethical problems of anonymity, privacy and publicity, performativity and fluidity of digital identities, the relations between people and machines, individuals and audiences in the network space. Desktop films represent a dystopian and sometimes exaggerated view of modern society with its culture of constant visibility and transparency and erasure of the boundaries between the private and the public made possible through the development of information and communication technologies.

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