



VANISHING LANDSCAPE: SOVIET ALMA- ATA FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS

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Abstract

How did the soviet documentary filmmakers perceive Alma-Ata? Which characteristics of social identity have been preserved in the films? Soviet cinematographers made the first shots of the city at the end of the 1920s. But the documentary films about Alma-Ata from the 1960s-1980s interest us the most. At this time, the most popular image of the city was the garden-city that was created and grown by many generations. Tall luxurious green trees along both sides of wide streets, parks, blossoming flowers and fertile apple fruit trees are the visual motives that influenced documentary filmmakers to devote their resources for making documentaries in Almaty.

Almaty is identified as a green city in the documentary films about the sights of the young city. It is obvious that the filmmakers played a role of mediators between the Soviet power and the people of Almaty. Thus, the social identity of the city in various movies is associated with the man-made environment and with steadily growing construction. During the last decades the previous look of the city and its green attire have changed dramatically and are now turning into the vanishing landscape.

Keywords: identity, documentary films, Alma-Ata, garden-city, mountains, apples, green spaces.

How did first cinematographers in the second half of the 1920s see Alma-Ata?

Let's refer to filming of the 1929 feature film "Turksib", filmed by Russian cinematographers under the direction of Victor Turin. A detail, dedicated to the city, opens the credits "Alma-Ata – city

of apples". Apple branches with fruits appeared on the coat of arms of the city before the revolution in 1908. A symbol of the new capital of Kazakhstan – a branch with large spherical fruits was shown in the film close-up. Stills with blooming apple trees, apples will be constant, recurring



Figure 1. Still from the movie "Turksib", Director V. Turin

motif in stories about Soviet Alma-Ata (Fig. 1). Preceding the show of the city, cameraman captures the landscape of the city from the aircraft, stretched on the foothills of the northern slope of the Trans-Ili Alatau at an altitude of 600-900 meters above sea level, in the valleys of the rivers Big and Small Almatinka. Mountain river (also in stills) nourishes everything alive. Features of the terrain, availability of water resources, a beautiful mountain landscape, the abundance of wild apple and apricot trees were also appreciated in the middle of the nineteenth century by an outstanding geographer and botanist P.P. Semenov Tian-Shansky [14].

Now here are oaks, elm trees, candles of poplars and socially important objects are viewed through them: Holy Ascension Cathedral, the building of the former male gymnasium, house on Commerce Street. A small town (population of about 50,000) is surrounded by greenery. Just like that Vernyi was inherited to new generations. The concept with a clear geometry of streets and rectangular blocks that housed the apartment houses, public buildings was based in its plan since the beginning of the foundation [10, p.253]. People have created a garden city in difficult climatic circumstances [10 p.222-224, p.283].

In Stalin's time, in 1930-1940s, the government was absorbed by the

implementation of the priority tasks of economic and nature is seen as a useful resource for the construction of socialism. Habitual for citizens greenwood of Alma-Ata looks more like a backdrop in films devoted to revolutionary holidays, in reporting on the growth of ribbons and achievements of the republic's economy. In the report "Triumphant May" (1938) of cameramen I. Kolsanov, H. Nazaryants, G. Novozhilov and others Alma-Ata is hidden behind high clumps of trees. Open space, not yet developed by "Zelenstroï" remains where recently new office buildings were built. The first architectural ensemble that was built in 1935-1937 on the west side of avenue named after Stalin – three buildings of National Commissariats are well seen in the frame [2, p. 125]. Later in the film a frame with blooming apple trees and the following plans were edited in: on the wide not cobbled square in front of the tribune of the Comintern the troops and the workers of the city pass with banners. The trees hide the small residential houses near the area of the Comintern in the documentaries dedicated to the holiday of the revolution "Twenty-second anniversary of October" (1939) and "Twenty-ninth anniversary of October" (1946). In several episodes of the feature film "Soviet Kazakhstan" (1950), the capital looks like a greeting card needed to be admired: central streets, sheltered from the hot sun by tall poplars, elms, alleys of squares, parks, refreshing sprays of fountains, parterre flower beds, smiling citizens. The phenomenon of social identity of the young Soviet city that was not to be questioned is revealed in the movies and broadcasted by government through cinematic images. Apart from that propagandized identity, surely there was a private individual perception of the citizens. Alma-Ata mostly

represented a territory of small private houses with a lot of fruit trees growing around; sweet-scented tobacco, petunias, and exotic peonies were blooming in the dooryard by the short picket fence [8, p.5; 9, p.5]. It is difficult to identify the face of the city, to make out his features, as if it disappeared behind the green dress, shading trees, protected by the very nature, taking it as an ally against the politicians and managers.

At the new stage of development and intensive growth of the capital the Soviet government (city party committee and executive committee of the City Council) affirms loyalty to the traditions of green construction in Alma-Ata. Since the beginning of 1960s in the official documents the following is said more and more often: "Green outfit is the pride of Alma-Ata, legally called garden city. Greenery and flowers decorate the city, creating the conditions for cultural recreation, developing aesthetic tastes and love for green friend of mankind" [13, p. 172]. In Brezhnev period films about Alma-Ata are shot regularly. It should be noted that the scope of the prevailing standards of documentary films made in the Stalin era: a report, a film-report are resistant. At the same time, new forms appear, such as landscape film without narration. On the one hand, they refer to the discoveries of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s – the silent documentary film by Dziga Vertov and his cinematographer colleagues, and on the other, it is an amazing phenomenon, avant-garde for the 1960s in the cinematography where the image organically interact with music. The relative weakening of the censorship controls contributes to the creation of landscape films without comments.

The most spectacular examples are tapes of native Alma-Ata citizen Yuri

Piskunov (1937-1988). A graduate of VGIK, workshop of Stalin Prize winner, creator of films about animals A.M. Zguridi, the young director was particularly fond of shooting nature [5, c.166-167; 15, p. 45-48]. Starting with the film "Mountain Stream" (1964) * on the nature in the vicinity of Alma-Ata, Y. Piskunov refers to urban themes. Titles of the films convey the atmosphere of the seasons: "Autumn Rhythms" (1965, jointly with G. Ovcharenko), "Winter impromptu" (1967), "When the Spring leaves" (1968).



Figure 2-3. Stills from the movie "Winter impromptu", Director Y. Piskunov

They ingeniously declared the author's individuality and his relationship to the city belonging only to the peculiar perception of the world of Piskunov. The films were created in collaboration with composer Edward Bogushevsky. He has brought in them his own impressionistic sense of city life [5, c.72-73]. The improvisational nature of the music expressed the freedom of "statements" that came with the "thaw".

Stylistic features of the documentary filmmaker Piskunov manifested in shooting unpretentious fragments, moments from

life of nature and society, which, at first glance, has nothing significant. People are walking, talking, the sun shines brightly, snow sprinkles, fluffy lumps settle on the bare tree branches, the rain, people are hiding under umbrellas. The selection of these wonderful moments of “imprinted time” (A. Tarkovsky) is driven by the author’s vision. Alongside with the cameraman Victor Osennikov [1, p.222-223]. Director and cameraman watch pictures of wildlife with sense of lyricism. Charmed by graceful whirling snowflakes, glowing sun, piercing the green mass, they imprint these lively pieces.

Nature appears as a friendly environment for man, encouraging the birth of poetic images. Urban people in these films naturally exist within this environment. Y. Piskunov shoots friendly and mysterious world of natural elements in and around the city. It seems that man and nature can be in harmony.

In the poetic texts of popular songs the image of the socialist city presented to be light, called the “blue city”, where people live with dignity and happiness. There is an opposition to the capitalist city in the hits, parodying an alien way of life: “The black cities will disappear in the white mists”. Nostalgic feelings still give rise to a string of songs: “My white town, you are a flower of stone”, “City above the Neva light, the city of our labor glory”, “My dear capital, my golden Moscow”...

Alma-Ata was also presented in the same vein: “Alma-Ata – not a city, but a dream itself”.** “All who are young, come to our favorite city”. The city was associated with youth. In the image of the capital romantically raised, sparkling in the bright sun, in its features, nature played a remarkable role. It was one of the positive motivations of social identity, attachment to the native roots, upbringing factor of

patriotism and love for the city as home. “My hometown – Alma-Ata” was stated through television screens, from radio sets.

The construction of new and the expansion of old cities, urban plans were set as a priority in the construction of socialism. Landscape film of the director Osman Zecci “Alma-Ata tomorrow” (1966) compositionally edited as architectural report on urban development plans. Visual story on the expected new constructions in Alma-Ata: what a cinema “Arman”, the cableway on Kok-Tobe, the building of Library named after Pushkin will look like in the near future. A model in construction bureau of design institute on what Russian Drama Theater named after M.Lermontov will be like. The footprints are made with scale: at the foothills of the Trans-Ili Alatau magnificent pavilions of “Kazakhfilm” studio will take place. The cameramen, like its predecessors, takes a shot of an enormous parterre flower bed with Kazakh ornament in the Park of Culture and Recreation named after M. Gorky, a delightful panoramic view of the Trans-Ili Alatau mountains, unique landscape that determines the geographic location of Alma-Ata [4, p.3-4] .

“City – one street” (1970) a film by Y.Piskunov, very close on the subject matter to the above-noted film looks further and deeper: the director gives the right to speak to specialist: “City and nature: how to achieve harmony? How to subordinate the architectural design and implementation of the tasks of interaction with nature?”. The actual novelty is in how an architect reflects on the importance of “natural” expediency in city planning. Aesthetically and technically noble task: to form a unified image of Alma-Ata, where strictly straight lines of streets head towards the mountains and as if “flow down” of them. The camera captures

how the urban landscape changes as the construction of new streets, new neighborhoods continue. Thereby these chronicles of construction, we can see how modern architecture, new design of buildings were fitted into the landscape, as a generation of Soviet architects of the sixties acts mainly responsible, retains and generally does not change the slender figure of wide streets laid down by the founders of the Vernyi in the nineteenth century. However, the documentary filmmakers have almost removed the buildings of pre-revolutionary era, due to the ideological assumptions where the new countdown of time began with the October Revolution. However, one of the most significant objects, symbols of a bygone era is the Holy Ascension Cathedral, whose domes can be seen everywhere. It is significant that in the period from 1930 to the early 1980s the Central Museum of History of Kazakhstan was housed in this very cathedral [11, p.48-51].

Alma-Ata residents as the heirs of the inherited traditions from previous generations of the city continue to work to increase the artificial green environment. In 1983, in the encyclopedic publication noted: "Through the efforts of generations of citizen-enthusiasts one of the greenest cities in the country was created" [2, p.18].

Nearly half a dozen films was dedicated to this green capital in the period from 1965 to 1992 in accordance with the plans of the studio and the orders coming from the relevant departments of the USSR center – Moscow. They were filmed by documentary filmmakers: Osman Zecci (Alma-Ata resident since 1953), Mark Berkovich (lived in Alma-Ata since 1956), Asylbek Nugmanov (resident of the capital since the mid-1950s), Vladimir Tatenko (Alma-Ata resident since 1973) [6, p.54-55, p.149-150, p.159, p.185-

186]. This list is complemented by film-reports, marked by the communistic pathos on the success of the socialist construction of the republic as a whole, on its natural resources and achievements in the economy. The fame of the capital of Kazakhstan as one of the greenest cities in the Soviet Union is widely distributed through the media and cinema. [13, p.180, p. 261]. It is remarked that films about Alma-Ata between 1970-1980s were the tapes demonstrating the attractiveness of the capital for tourists (Fig. 3-4). ***



Figure 4-5. Stills from the movie "Alma-Ata", Director N. Berkovich

In the works of experienced filmmakers "Alma-Ata" (1971) of M.Berkovich and "Welcome to the Alma-Ata!" (1974) of A.Nugmanov it is shown how new architectural ensembles fitted into the old urban landscape, how the empty territory is developed. Green construction is all around built houses, planting of thousands

of trees, shrubs, flowers is on-going: environmental well-being of the city is evident. The leading architects of the city often appear in the frame. Their credo – to follow the main principle of building: composite systems of axis of community centers – central esplanade are designed to ventilate the city with mountain breezes. As an illustration of these theses and their realization M.Berkovich's stills serve a look where final thought about Alma-Ata states visually and comments behind the scenes: "Streets are straight as the Sun's rays".

A.Nugmanov's film "Welcome to the Alma-Ata!" (1974) has its own stylistic merits: the rhythmic pattern of the narrative set by motion of reportage camera, shooting from a car, panoramas (cameraman A.Mischenko). Subjective camera shoots from the bottom of the building at an angle, as a man throws off his head in the surprised glance and looks at the new high-rise buildings in the city. As if these high-rise objects are allowed to compete with the great sacred mountains. In 1960-1970s altitude of architectural ensembles have not covered up the mountains, beauty and solemnity of shining peaks still have the man in awe. Eternal mountains, snow-capped peaks sparkling in the sun frame are the magnificent suites of the capital, giving the city recognizable and unique features.

Operation of directors accordingly to the conventional method in Soviet art of socialist realism is the reason why the portrait of Alma-Ata looked mostly ceremonial and smoothed. It has always been like that in the center of the city. Being socially responsible for the execution of the instructions of the Party and the government documentary filmmakers had the right to criticize the actions of the authorities, only in definite framework. The documentaries never focused on the fact

that the gardens and parks of the city have existed since the pre-revolutionary times. The formation of the social identity of the young socialist city was also influenced by the fact that cameramen had not filmed disadvantage "places" of Alma-Ata like landfills, barracks, and industrial zones. Environmental problems were not discussed.

Meanwhile, in late 1970s in the party and government documents important new installations appear. The city guide takes into account that "taking steps to accelerate scientific and technological progress, it is necessary to do everything so it will be combined with thrifty attitude to natural resources, not be a source of dangerous air and water pollution, soil depletion, so that subsequent generations are able to enjoy all the benefits that nature provides"[2, p.21].

It is obvious that due to the growth of the city serious problems with its ecological health occurred. In 1984 in the film "City and smog" V.Tatenko made the first attempt to examine the problem of the seasonal air pollution of Alma-Ata that had already been brewing then. The population of the capital at that time exceeded one million inhabitants (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Stills from the movie "City and smog", Director V.Tatenko

To summarize. Documentary filmmakers shot customized films under the socialist

planning and were especially productive in the 1960-1980s. Capturing the urban environment cameramen remained committed to the same visual images, motifs. They could not be not repeated, because the studio production plans were constructed in such a way that the screening of one of the film was separated from the other by two or three year gap.

From film to film emblems were transiting like stamps: blooming apple trees, apples on the branches, the ridge of the mountains, parterre flower beds, tall poplar tree, shady alleys. The city in those works was bright, sunny and green. Trees covered five-seven stored buildings. The urban environment was familiar to thousands of citizens, natural place of habitat: parks, squares, alleys, green plants along the roads, highways, sidewalks. Lush vegetation occupied all the free territory. Canals leaking through the city and their murmur created a special sound background. Apple orchards occupied large areas near the city. In the growing districts in the west of the capital residents smashed front gardens, planted local area with flowers, shrubs, trees. In reality, serious environmental problems already matured associated with the intensive construction, the expansion of the city boundaries. Citizens have seen the inside of these problems: air pollution by fuming CHP, transport and emergence of high-rise buildings, hindering the airing of the city by mountain breezes.

In the films ambiguity and inconsistency, predefined by socio-political situation in which the filmmakers worked is clearly visible. On the one hand, they are objectively reflected the dominance of the natural environment. On the other – as the responsible executors of state orders they created an idealized portrait of the “blue city”. As subjects and residents of Alma-

Ata, they were bringing their own individual features of the relationship to the city. Bound by the method of socialist realism, whose prerogative was the desire for an aesthetic sublime, beauty, they fastened on the film the image of the city that reflected the time of high hopes and faith in a brighter future.

The image of the garden city was reasonable for Soviet reality. Its formation was influenced by objective factors, namely the characteristics of the natural habitat where the city was built. “Survivability” of the garden city image and the social identity born on its basis were not imposing forcibly driven ideological stamp into the head of Alma-Ata residents by Soviet propaganda.

Now that social identity is almost lost, since the USSR disappeared from the map. Kazakh SSR became independent Kazakhstan. There is an intense destruction of the environment that formed the image of the unique garden city. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s – 2000s documentary films on Alma-Ata – Almaty were no longer planned and almost not shot. ****

Whether current documentary filmmakers, formally freed of former ideological shackles, are wondering of what is now the defining image of Almaty? Is the green hat is still part of its identity? It is obvious that the modern documentary cinematography hardly puts the task to reflect the new look of Almaty, objectively reflect the complex reality of our city, including problems with its green attire. While being not focused on the value of nature, most filmmakers ignore this topic.

How its residents perceive the city today? Reviewing the responses of the most active users of social networks, forums, discussions of urban issues, it can be concluded that the response to the

appearance of the southern capital, its image is more negative than positive.

However, city officials, non-governmental organizations are trying to revive the glory of the garden city, the former capital of Kazakhstan, to recover the precious necklace of mountains – apple orchards, which were proudly gloried by generations of Almaty residents, to revive the unique sort of Aport apples. But in documentary film this activity is being almost not reflected. ***** Meanwhile, according to the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) in the last 30 years apple orchards decreased by more

than 70%. *****

Today, ecological problems of interactions between nature and society clearly faced two million inhabitants of the city. The black smog covers “Blue City”; it is one of the main factors threatening the life of the metropolis today.

What is left for us to do? Work for the future, facilitate the return of bright, comfortable, high titled garden city of Almaty and capture the city, its inhabitants and the nature in the new films. One consolation – the eternal nature is always there: the mountains, the trees, the clouds...

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*The film "Mountain Stream" in the Central State Archive of cinema and photo documents and sound recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK CSACPDS) is absent. Abstract in the catalog says: "Landscape film is about the beauty of the world around us".

** It should be noted that the city's name and a common noun "Alma-Ata" in Russian is feminine. The current name of the city of Almaty reflected in the cacophony of the word "almatyntsy". So began writing in the Encyclopedia "Almaty", released in 1996 [2].

*** In the advertising brochure "Alma-Ata" (1961?) published in seven languages (Rus., Kaz., Ital., Eng., Arab., Fr., Spanish.) photos are divided into two blocks. The first is dedicated to the sights of the central part of the city, parks and squares of the capital, the second - natural features of the rock mass of Trans Ili Alatau. On the inside cover the brand of the capital of Kazakhstan - Aport apples. The appearance of the booklet for foreign tourists with plenty of pictures with a green dress (D.Smirnov photos) said that the city authorities have seen the appeal of the city, identifying it with the garden city.

**** Walking through the Alma-Ata with ... 2004-2007., IR-B Studio-ICS-B.

6 episodes of 30 minutes. http://icsb-studio.kz/filmografia_icsb.html.

- 1) The history of the city
- 2) Architecture of the city
- 3) Bazaars and markets
- 4) Square
- 5) Horse in Alma-Ata
- 6) Galleries and Art Museums

Script: E.Golovinskaya. The author and director: A.Golovinsky

Cameras: V. Zakharov.

In the first story, dedicated to the history of the city, a leading, well-known scientist-archaeologist offering to overlook the historical center of the Vernyi on the flying balloon. The device rises over the park named after the 28 Panfilov heroes. From the dizzying heights greenery of the old park with the sun shining on the mosaic domes of the Holy Ascension Cathedral makes a special impression. Next, the operator shoots the panorama of the city to the south and north. In the haze majestic ridge of Trans-Ili Alatau frames Almaty from the south. But the chaotic high-rise buildings has changed the city beyond recognition. Past green decoration is suppressed, repressed by barely aesthetic architectural structures. It is difficult to name a city garden. It's a different city, a metropolis of another social identity.

***** "Precious necklace of mountains". Documentary. Kazakhstan. 2008. 35 min.

At the request of the GEF / UNDP. Written and directed by Irina Timchenko.

Operators Vadim Malakhov, Abishev Duman, Alexander Garifullin.

Film report on the execution of conservation programs in situ mountain agro-biodiversity in Kazakhstan. Russian and Kazakhstani scientists V.Kascheev, T.Salova, V.Dragavtsev, R.Turehanova, and others speak on the protection of genetic resources.

*****Justification: Faces a number of threats including loss and degradation of habitat due to agricultural expansion and development, genetic erosion (grafting of commercial varieties and hybridization) and overgrazing. In Kazakhstan its habitat has declined by over 70% in the last 30 years. Overall, it is suspected that population declines throughout its range have exceeded 30% over the last three generations. Classed as Vulnerable. <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/32363/0>

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САҒЫМ БЕЙНЕ: АЛМАТЫ КЕҢЕСТІК КИНОДОКУМЕНТАЛИСТЕР КӨЗІМЕН

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Аңдатпа

Кеңестік кезеңнің документалисттері Алматыны қалай қабылдады, әлеуметтік біртектіліктің қандай мәнерлі қырлары кинолбірлерге жазылып қалды? Қаланы алғашқы үлбірге түсіру жұмыстары 1920 жылдары кеңестік кинооператорлармен жүзеге асты. Бірақ, біз үшін көбірек қызығушылық тудыратын, жас астананың көптеген ұрпақтың қолымен жасалған бау-бақшалы қала келбеті сипатына ие болған кезіндегі, 1960-1980 жылдардағы Алматы туралы деректі фильмдер. Кең көшелердің бойына жағалай отырғызылған биік ағаштар, гүлденген және жеміс беріп жатқан алма ағаштары, саябақтағы аллеялар Қазақ КСР-ң астанасына арналған сюжеттерінің басты мотиві болып табылды. Алматының біртектілігі, жас қаланың көрікті жерлері туралы деректі фильмде көғарай шалғынның молшылығымен сипатталады. Кеңестік билік идеологиясының ықпалымен кинематографисттер әлеуметтік біртектілік дәнекерлері ретінде, астананың салтанатты, шырайлы бейнесін ғана жасағаны айқын. Соңғы он жылда, Алматының экологиялық мәселелеріне байланысты фильмдердің түсірілмегендігін айта кеткен жөн. Осылайша, қаланың біртектілігі кеңес кезінің бірқатар фильмдерінде үздіксіз құрылыспен байланыстырылады. Бірақ соңғы жылдары қаланың бұрынғы келбеті, жасыл желегі жоғалып бара жатыр.

Тірек сөздер: біртектілік, деректі кино, Алматы, бау-бақшалы қала, таулар, алмалар, жасыл желектер.

УХОДЯЩАЯ НАТУРА: АЛМА-АТА СОВЕТСКАЯ ГЛАЗАМИ КИНОДОКУМЕНТАЛИСТОВ

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Аннотация

Как воспринимали Алма-Ату документалисты советского времени, какие выразительные черты социальной идентичности сохранила киноплёнка? Первые съёмки города были произведены советскими кинооператорами в конце 1920-х годов. Но наибольший интерес для нас представляют неигровые/документальные фильмы об Алма-Ате 1960–1980-х годов, когда одной из ведущих имиджевых характеристик в восприятии молодой столицы стал образ города-сада, создававшегося руками многих поколений. Высокие, пышные кроны деревьев по обеим сторонам широких улиц, парковые аллеи, партерные клумбы, цветущие и плодоносящие яблони – эти визуальные мотивы стали определяющими в сюжетах, посвящённых столице Казахской ССР. Отождествление, идентификация Алма-Аты с обликом растительности закрепляется в документальном кино о достопримечательностях молодого города. Очевидно, что кинематографисты выступали как медиаторы социальной идентичности, исходившей от идеологов Советской власти, и потому работали на создание парадного, приглашённого образа столицы. Отметим, в эти десятилетия почти не снимают фильмы, в которых поставлены насущные экологические вопросы, связанные с проблемами роста Алма-Аты. Таким образом, социальная идентичность города в ряде лент советского времени соотносится с рукотворной окружающей и дружественной средой и с неуклонно расширяющимся строительством. За последние десятилетия прежний облик города, его зелёный убор сильно видоизменились и превращаются в уходящую натуру.

Ключевые слова: идентичность, документальное кино, Алма-Ата, город-сад, горы, яблоки, зелёные массивы.