

## “Coming Soon?": Cinematic Sociology and the Cultural Turn

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Throughout the 20th century, cinema has played, and, to some extent, continues to play a key role in shaping the social imagination and anthropology of modern human. Nevertheless, as a review of English scholarly literature shows, cinema, unlike art and music, remains a marginal subject of analysis for sociologists. The article attempts to consider the state of sociological reflection on cinema in the context of the cultural turn in sociology in both the international and national contexts. By reconstructing the history of the interaction between sociology, film studies, and cultural studies, the author not only proves the scarcity of interest among sociologists in the analysis of cinema, but also discusses the ways by which sociological perspectives were involved in film research at the turn of the 20th–21st centuries, and the potential of the latter for the study of social imagination. A survey of communities of Soviet sci-fi cinema fans demonstrates one possible way of developing of the sociologically oriented program of cinema studies.

*Keywords:* sociology of cinema, cultural sociology, film studies, cultural studies, social imagination, film practices, cinematic experience, cinema fandom

Dmitry Kurakin's article "The Sociology of Culture in the Soviet Union and Russia: The Missed Turn" marked a milestone for the discussion of Russian sociology of culture against the backdrop of general tendencies in sociology around the world. On the whole, Kurakin's assessment of the state of affairs seems quite plausible. It is, however, worth discussing the criteria for this kind of assessment not only as it applied to Russia, but also in a broader context. The cultural turn, missed by both Soviet and Russian sociologists, is embodied in the program of American cultural sociology as articulated by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al. Based on the distinction suggested by Alexander and Smith, Kurakin proceeds to differentiate between cultural sociology as a general sociological theory and sociologies of culture as sectoral sub-disciplines, that is, a sociology of literature, of art, or cinema (2017: 12, 17). This definition is a bit of an oxymoron, considering that American sociologists themselves admit that the construct of culture as an autonomous object necessitates borrowing interpretative techniques from the humanities ("from Aristotle to such contemporary figures as Frye (1971/1957) and Brooks (1984)" (Alexander, Smith, 2003; 14)). In this sense, culture's image as an object of sociological research is determined not only by those general declarations regarding culture's significance for the interpreta-

tion of social action, but also by a researcher's ability to interpret texts<sup>1</sup> produced by the respective humanities. Accordingly, a systematic characterization of the cultural turn is only possible upon analyzing the development in respective sectoral sub-disciplines where sociology intersects with research into literature, art, music, cinema, etc.<sup>2</sup>

This idea is implicit in Kurakin's inquiry into the Soviet sociology of culture. Whereas most research into the sociology of art and cinema does not stray far from the positivist approach and manifests a weakness of theoretical reflection (and a detachment from the international scholarly context), works by the Levada circle, including those by Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin, and Abram Reitblat study literature as a social institute, and build upon literary studies, the sociology of knowledge, social psychology, and a number of other disciplines. Starting from the sociology of literature, Gudkov and Dubin mapped out a project of a social and anthropological analysis of culture. This project not only "to a certain extent foreshadowed the culturally sensitive perception of Durkheim's later work in sociology and the foundation of the 'strong program' in cultural sociology by Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues in the mid-1980s" (Kurakin, 2017; 11), but also seems more interesting than the works by Gudkov's and Dubin's American counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, other fields of the Russian sociology of culture have nothing comparably significant to boast about.

In the present article, I would like to address the state of another sectoral sub-discipline, the sociology of cinema (or cinematic sociology). According to Kurakin, works in this field are generally representative of the state of Russian sociology of culture: he writes that "the majority of those studies were conducted using a narrow positivist approach and made little attempt to engage seriously with any sociological theories" (13). In this case, labeling this a "missed turn" makes a lot of sense. However, in the international (primarily English-speaking) scholarly context as well, research into cinema in light of the "cultural turn in sociology" is rather problematic. As I am going to try and show later on, the sociology of cinema is not exactly viewed as a separate sub-discipline. Unlike sociological reflection on music (DeNora, 2000) and art (Heinich, 2001), a sociological reflection on cinema has but a tenuous connection to the project of cultural sociology. The question of how the sociology of cinema, both Russian and international, correlates to the cultural turn will be in the focus of my attention.<sup>4</sup> For this, I am going to characterize the interaction between cultural sociology and film studies/cinema studies, which subsequently should let me define the historical perspectives and contemporary conditions for the es-

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1. As Alexander successfully demonstrates in his perusal of Parsons' sociological theory (1990).

2. This idea is derived from the multifaceted nature of the concept of culture that includes such meanings as an individual self-improvement and lifestyle, as well as various forms of aesthetic activity as succinctly articulated already by Raymond Williams (1985: 87–92). For an endeavor to apply a similar concept to the sociology of art, see Farkhatdinov (2010). For a balanced characterization of the relationship between the sociology of culture and cultural sociology, see Inglis (2016a).

3. For more on the gist and fate of this project, see Kaspe (2015), Stepanov (2015).

4. It is worth noting that my study will be limited predominantly to the English-speaking branches of the sociology of culture / cultural sociology in general, and the sociology of cinema in particular.

establishment of a sociological reflection on cinema. Then, I am going to try and show how this reflection helps shape the premises of contemporary cinematic research.

### **“The Lost Horizon”: Cinema in Contemporary Cultural Sociology**

I will begin my discussion of sociology’s interaction with film studies/cinema studies by perusing the works that form the canon of the cultural sociological project. By systematically defining the place of cultural problematics in the structure of sociological knowledge, works by Jeffrey Alexander and Philipp Smith have played a key role in the critical re-conceptualization of the discipline of sociology, and created a new system of theoretical references. Nevertheless, a present-day student of cinema as a phenomenon of contemporary culture, one who is familiar with the evolution of cultural studies in the humanities, is bound to feel awkward when perusing these texts as they present outdated knowledge about culture. Such a researcher would find it strange for the task of developing and mastering various textual interpretation techniques that were largely fulfilled over the course of the twentieth century to be presented in the early twenty-first century as not just relevant, but also as innovative. One of the most systematic attempts at reflection of this kind was made by British cultural studies, which Alexander and his colleagues are rather ambivalent about. While acknowledging the contribution of British cultural studies to the progress of theory of culture and, at a certain point, even using the term cultural studies in reference to their own project, Alexander and Smith repeatedly disqualified them as reductionist (2003: 17–18). It seems indicative that this criticism is based primarily on their assessment of the collective works published by Birmingham-based researchers in the 1970s. This means that American sociologists have largely ignored the best practices developed in Birmingham in the 1980s–2000s in the sphere of media text analysis and daily culture, along with the theoretical development of subjectivity issues, as well as the discussion of the studies of popular culture that was key to the establishment of cultural studies as a discipline (Johnson, 1986; Stepanov, 2015).<sup>5</sup>

In some cases, it is the cultural sociologists’ unwavering focus on the tradition of sociological theory, which they accuse cultural researchers of neglecting, that hinders their exchange with the tradition of the humanities (Sherwood, Smith, Alexander, 1993). What is notable in this sense is the explanation of why turning towards the visual is indispensable, as given in the introduction to the collective volume entitled *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life* (Bartmański, Alexander, Giesen, 2012). Stating that sociologists have neglected studying visual texts for a long time, the authors write that “The founders of critical social theory, from Karl Marx to Max Weber and Walter Benjamin, have insisted too much on disenchantment. We need to look much more to Emile Durkheim’s notion of totemism if we are to capture the enduring parameters of material symbolism and the role materiality plays in social classification and boundary making. The French founder of cultural sociology insisted that “collective feelings become fully

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5. For a critical survey of interpretation of the tradition of cultural studies in the works of J. Alexander see, e.g., McLennan (2005: 2–3), Oswell (2010: xxviii–xxix).

conscious of themselves *only* by settling upon external tangible objects” (1995: 421). With this volume, we build upon this classical insight, connect it with contemporary currents in cultural sociology and aesthetic philosophy (see Boehm, Belting, and Giesen, this volume), and demonstrate how a theory of iconic power can be put to work in an explanatory way. We suggest that iconicity allows us to see enchantment as a continuing presence despite tremendous historical change” (4). As we can see, the fact of visual imagery’s impact, axiomatic for any student of today’s visual media, requires invoking not only the thesis of disenchantment for its legitimization, but also the Durkheimian notion of archaic totemism.<sup>6</sup> This way of thinking leaves all studies of visual imagery’s captivating power outside of our scope (as exemplified in works by the previously mentioned Walter Benjamin, as well as Siegfried Kracauer, Roland Barthes, and other classics of media studies) and studies of social imagination (from Cornelius Castoriadis, Benedict Anderson, and from Arjun Appadurai to Henry Jenkins and Michael Saler), which substantiate the possibility of studying imaginary universes and the various forms of “enchantment” as something of fundamental importance for the functioning of contemporary society. This certainly does not necessarily mean that the above-mentioned scholars have no works devoted to these issues,<sup>7</sup> but the use of this argument in itself seems symptomatic.

The very status of cinema as a field of references in the works of cultural sociologists turns out to be quite marginal. While proponents of critical theory like Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson<sup>8</sup> keep making recourse to cinema in order to conceptualize the processes taking place in contemporary society, for cultural sociologists, cinema as one of mass media is, unlike theatre, music, and literature, neither a theoretically significant object, nor a source of metaphors and examples. Even leaving aside the question of how this depends on a specific individual cultural sociologist’s intellectual, theoretical, and aesthetic values, one can see that the status of cinema as an object of sociological analysis is marginal. Cinema-related publications in leading cultural-sociological periodicals (such as *Cultural Sociology* and the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*) can be counted on the fingers of one hand, which is especially striking against the backdrop of dozens of publications in the field of the sociology of music. There are just as few monographs that aspire to consider cinema as a phenomenon of significance for today’s society. Compendia on the visual sociology and the sociology of media (e.g., Emmison, Smith, 2000)<sup>9</sup> also offer scarcely any texts on the sociology of cinema.

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6. Tia DeNora also begins her work by criticizing an invocation of the Durkheimian tradition (2000: 3).

7. Notably, when turning towards media analysis, Alexander immediately finds himself compelled to refer to Stuart Hall’s works.

8. John Urry may serve as an example of a classical sociologist who actively introduced cinema into the space of reflection (2016).

9. It merits saying that this situation is, to an extent, typical of other social sciences as well. For example, Wolf Kansteiner describes the failed attempt in the 1990–2000s to incorporate a reflection on cinema into the practical work of a leading American historical publication, *American Historical Review* (2018: 131–132).

### **“Pride & Prejudice”: The Sociology of Cinema—Cultural Studies—Film Studies**

Researchers have many a time written about the paradoxical situation of the sociology of cinema. The sociologists Tatiana Signorelli Heise and Andrew Tudor noted that, having emerged alongside sociology and grown to be the most influential communication channel in contemporary society, cinema has never been an object of sociological investigation in its own right (2016: 481). Although social studies of cinema, occasionally involving classics of sociology (Herbert Blumer in particular), began as early as the 1910s, respective projects never became part of mainstream social sciences or the humanities. This was because they were mostly quantitative studies (related especially to marketing), designed to figure out the parameters of the audience and the films' success factors and document the effects of cinema's impact on the audience (Signorelli Heise, Tudor, 2016: 485).<sup>10</sup> As cinema gained academic recognition in the 1960s-80s, a number of works were published with an expressed purpose of establishing the sociology of cinema (Huaco, 1965; Jarvie, 1970; Tudor, 1974; Prokop, 1982). However, this is where the development of the sociology of cinema as a sub-discipline actually halted.<sup>11</sup>

The coming-together of film studies, as well as cultural studies on the whole, had to do with the distancing from the above-mentioned models of sociological inquiry. In their exploration of culture, generally-speaking, and cinema in particular, the new disciplines were guided by structuralist and semiotic approaches aimed at establishing the peculiarities of film as a text. These approaches are not exactly foreign to sociological problematics. Nevertheless, by following the critical tradition, they opposed mainstream sociology with its structural and functionalist perspective and the respective methods of empirical analysis. Worth noting is the position of a leading theorist in film studies, Dudley Andrew, who, in his 1984 publication, remarked on the specifically humanitarian nature of film studies' conceptual apparatus, and doubted that the sociology of cinema would ever be able to incorporate it (8–9).

An important contribution to the success of sociological reflection in the framework of film studies was made by cultural studies claiming to be an alternative to the sociology project for the study of modern society (Inglis, 2016: 313; Stepanov, 2015). This contribution is at least twofold. Firstly, films could now be seen as a form of a representation of social reality. This not only relativized the aesthetic evaluation and allowed including the broadest possible body of films, but also consistently turned cinema into the source material for probing into society's notions about itself, representation of various groups and communities, and social confrontations and conflicts (Turner, 1993; Turner, 2008). Thanks to cultural studies, issues of identity have become one of the key lines of research in various human sciences, including film studies. Secondly, re-thinking cinema's impact and its reception by the viewer played an important role. One of the turning points for cultural studies was their debate with the structuralist-minded theorists of the

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10. Today, this research is described in the context of history of the film industry (Ohmer, 1999; Sklar, 1999).

11. For an overview of these works, see do Nascimento (2019).

journal *Screen* about how the cinematographic apparatus should operate.<sup>12</sup> While theorists upheld the notion of a passive beholder whose position is derived straight from the cinematic impact, cultural studies insisted on spectator autonomy and active potential, and the possibility of a different reception of cinematic texts by different audiences. This would then shift the issue of impact and reception into the plane of social and cultural diversity. Notably, cinema was not a priority research object for the Birmingham school and their followers: studies into TV-viewers' receptive activity played a much greater role in the development of problems of studying popular culture (Pribram, 2005: 160).<sup>13</sup> It nevertheless seems indicative that it was mostly proponents of cultural studies (Turner, 1993; Tudor, 1998; Denzin, 2002; Miller, Stam, 2004) and like-minded scholars who, in the 1990–2000s, published summary works on cinema as a social phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

However, the expansion of identity issues, seen as an expression of the postmodernist crisis in academe (Readings, 1996), was also perceived as a symptom of the crisis in film studies as a discipline in the 1990–2000s. One of the features of crisis, in experts' eyes, was the scattering of film scholars across the departments of literature and language studies, media, etc. (Chow, 2001). An even-more momentous process to instill the sense of crisis in the discipline was the transformation of media space in the late 1990s—early 2000s. New media technologies not only changed cinema's cultural status, but also undermined the future of film studies. It seemed that, having lost the radicalism of their original impulse, film studies found themselves marginalized along with the object of their research, which increasingly lost not only its classical form, but also its relevance as a form of media consumption. Tom Gunning poignantly described this situation in his review of this field of knowledge when he wrote "Has the era of film studies come to an end? Should the study of film simply be absorbed, if not replaced, by the larger discipline of media studies or even visual studies? Has a scholarly preoccupation with film or cinema studies become a limited paradigm, appearing a bit out-moded, even a bit embarrassing, like an outfit once considered trendy? The future, to coin a phrase, is not what it used to be. A medium that spent most of the twentieth century trying to establish cultural credentials and often apologizing for its cultural youthfulness (or even immaturity) now has to defend itself from charges of incipient Alzheimer's syndrome. Could it be the fate of cultural studies that embrace modernity and its products that they pass too quickly from youthfulness to senility, displaced by the latest academic fashion?" (2008, 185).<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, efforts to re-conceptualize cinema as an object of study in the works of the leading representatives of film studies bear witness to the fact that the situation

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12. To be fair, this journal, too, published articles on the sociology of cinema. For instance, Terry Lovell's piece adapting the classical sociological toolkit for the analysis of cinema (1971).

13. Nevertheless, Dana Polan recently proclaimed a renewed interest in the writings of Raymond Williams on film (2013).

14. Norman Denzin's works (1995) stand out from the rest in that they attempt to use (Hollywood) cinema as the lens for an investigation of life in American society, as well as devise a quality methodology for an analysis of "cinematic society".

15. See also Samutina (2011). On a similar temporal situation in the evolution of cultural studies, see Stepanov (2015).

of crisis has become time to develop new perspectives in this field of knowledge that are driven by the evolution of sociological reflection. Of utmost interest here are not so much the endeavors to rehabilitate the sociology of cinema in light of a certain theory (for instance, that of Pierre Bourdieu)<sup>16</sup> or an approach (e.g., a study of how identities are constructed on-screen),<sup>17</sup> as the reflection by leading representatives of film studies that turns the situation of crisis into a source of theoretical, and sociological, reflection. For theorists, issues of cinema's specifics as a medium, on the one hand, and the diversity of its social contexts, on the other, come together in the task of conceptualizing cinema as an experience (not only purely semantic, but also physical (Gunning, 2008, 201), and, accordingly, boost their interest in the figure of a viewer and its historic transformations in the culture of the twentieth century. Among priority topics for debate is that of cinephilia as the quintessence of a positively meaningful cinematic experience (Andrew, 2009).<sup>18</sup> According to Natalia Samutina, it is indicative that, in describing the present state of film studies, theorists "find it appropriate to make a sort of "personal confession" and reminisce about how different their own experience of watching and studying films used to be earlier" (2011).

It is precisely cinema's specifics as a medium and problems of the cinematic experience that serve as the criteria to assess the significance of one or another theory. Here, let us recall Michael Turvey's oft quoted statement, "we have to use our expertise—gained from watching large numbers of films, observing them and the response of viewers to them carefully, and learning about the contexts in which they were made and exhibited—to evaluate the theories we take from other disciplines in terms of whether they successfully explain (or not) film" (2007: 120; cit.: Andrew, 2009: 904). Dudley Andrew also stresses how important it is for scholars to match their work up with cinephiles' activities by recognizing the relevance of intellectual exchanges between the academe and broader public, and the endeavors to conceptualize cinema originally undertaken outside of the academe, but commonly accepted as classical today (2009: 879–888). This also includes attempts made over the course of the twentieth century to introduce cinema into the educational context that have given a significant impetus to the establishment of film studies (see, e.g., Bolas, 2009; Grieveson, 2009).

One more aspect of the problems of the cinematic experience has to do with new conditions of film reception and the production of knowledge about it in contemporary culture. These problematics have been marked out systematically in the concept of pos-

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16. This may be illustrated by works by Tatiana Signorelli Heise and Andrew Tudor (2016) that have articulated the strong program project in the sociology of cinema based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept. Remarkably, in formulating this program, its authors do not make references to Jeffrey Alexander et al. Additionally, S. Baumann's works from the 2000s have marked a notable milestone in the development of cinema analysis within the traditional sociological framework. Starting from Bourdieu's concept, as well as works by Howard Becker and Paul DiMaggio, Baumann describes the process of cinematic production acquiring the status of art (2009).

17. For instance, the collective volume *Cinematic Sociology* (Sutherland, Feltey, 2013) presenting samples of research into identity representations in cinema.

18. That's said, as Jeff Sconce (2007) and Tomas Elsaesser (2005) demonstrate in their works, this experience may be based on a cinephile's specific disenchantment.

sessive spectator as formulated by Laura Malvey, who described the possibilities of taking possession of cinematic imagery thanks to the new ways, in which cinema exists “on DVD or a computer screen, thus allowing for any degree of distraction from the action and making it possible to pause it, differently organize space before the screen, endlessly rewatch any film fragment, make one’s own rearrangement, watch while checking emails or instant messaging” (Samutina, 2011). This situation has radically transformed the work of a cinema researcher by raising the significance of empirical work not only with films, but also with various sources reflecting the diverse aspects of cinematic imagery’s creation and consumption (Gunning, 2008: 190–191). Pure theory’s loss of authority against the backdrop of the growing interest in media archeology, a historicized and contextualized knowledge about cinema, bears witness to a transformation of the image of society shaping the perspective of film studies. As noted by Dudley Andrew, the disappearance of references to Louis Althusser from the texts of film students is emblematic of the radical revision of the notion of cinema as a single object to be critically analyzed as a manifestation of mass culture (2006, 2009).

A historical projection of the above-mentioned interest in the cinematic experience was the discussion of cinema’s contribution to the establishment of a modern person’s anthropology. In terms of theory, this had to do with a re-discovery within film studies of Walter Benjamin’s and Siegfried Kracauer’s theories which have played a key role in conceptualizing exactly how cinema, as a new widely accessible medium, shaped the typically modern experience of space, time, materiality, etc. (Murphet, 2008; Moltke, 2018). The context of modernity reveals both cinema’s positive political potential, and its aesthetic potential as cinema continues shaping visual language in the era of new media (Manovich, 2001). For instance, Miriam Hansen, drawing on Habermas’ concept, considers cinema of the first decades of the twentieth century as an embodiment of the public sphere (1994). It is worth noting that the discussion of cinema’s role in modern culture was accompanied by a revision of film studies’ canon and of the priority of narrative cinema. An interest in early cinema, where the presentational moment of pure showmanship as an attraction prevails over the narrative component, has been the most important tendency in the evolution of film studies in the 1990s–2000s (Samutina, 2010). This shift of scholarly attention resulted in the development of an alternative model of cinema consumption that implies cinema’s involvement in a contemporary urban environment. The retrospective nature of conceptualizing the connection between cinema and modernity notwithstanding, a study of this kind was not purely antiquarian. The model of a cinematic attraction has proven useful for the understanding of present-day blockbusters. In terms of historical sociology, this research program could be seen as a contribution to the success of the problematics of multiple modernities (Savelieva, 2012). The inquiry into competing models of cinema and their significance for modern culture has given relevance to the metaphor of “invention”,<sup>19</sup> which invites a new perspective on cinema’s transformations on the cusp of the twenty-first century (Gunning, 2008).

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19. Cf. typical collective volume titles: *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Charney, Schwartz, 1996), *Inventing Film Studies* (Grievesson, Wasson, 2008).



Historicity is becoming the overriding characteristic of cinema as an object of research. The factors of the growing significance in the context of the digital revolution of archives containing not only films but also related artifacts (from media publications to amateur trailers), the conceptualization of canons that forms alternative perspectives on the cinematic process, the transition of problems of filmic realism into the plane of discussing the status of film as a document, the examination of viewer reception as a specific form of collective memory, and the debates about the cultural potential of analog cinematograph and its fate in the digital future all testify to the role historical reflection plays in the exploration of the state and the fate of cinema as a medium.

If this perspective was used in evaluating the domestic sociology of cinema, one can state that Russian researchers are still largely guided by the theoretical and methodological benchmarks of the 1960s and 1970s when cinema was seen as a performing art, filling out questionnaires was the principal research method, movie theater attendance was assessed primarily by respondents' social and demographic characteristics, and one of the main goals of research was gauging peoples' artistic taste (Fokht-Babushkin, 2005; Vorobieva, 2017: 12; see also: Semenov, 2002). The post-Soviet sociology of cinema crystallized the ideology of police science typical of Soviet sociology that produces a concrete, empirical, and applied knowledge catering to the tasks of state administration (Filippov, 2015). To give a quintessential example from a recent article by the leading Russian sociologists of cinema Michail Zhabsky and Konstantin Tarasov, "The practical cinematic policy of the Russian state has every chance to yield a positive result if only it relies on the intellectual resource of the revamped science of cinema with a powerful sociological core" (2019; cf. also Marshak, 2019).

In contrast to Anglo-American academia, the theoretical-backwardness of sociological analysis of cinema in Russia has not yet been sufficiently compensated for by progress in cultural studies and film studies. Akin to many other fields of research into popular culture, film studies in Russia are still in the state of dispersion.<sup>20</sup> Several fields may be named conditionally as suitable for the maturation of sociological reflection on cinema.<sup>21</sup> Along with standalone projects shaping the tradition of film studies in Russia and creating benchmarks for examining cinema as a contemporary cultural phenomenon and the types of sociality cinema forms (above all, works by Oleg Aronson, Natalia Samutna, Nikolay Izvolov, Dmitry Komm: Aronson, 2003, 2007; Samutina, 2005, 2009; Izvolov, 2005; Komm, 2012 and others), attempts at research into cinema are made in the framework of social philosophy (Kurennoy, 2009; Pavlov, 2015; Raskin, 2019, Filippov, 2006, and others) and critical theory (Yarskaya-Smirnova, 2001; Ousmanova, 2010; Gornyykh, 2013, and others).<sup>22</sup> These studies expand the aesthetic limits of cinematic legacy and

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20. Meanwhile, engaging endeavors in the social history of cinema were occasionally undertaken in the Soviet humanities (Zorkaya, 1976), and some of them even acquired the status of classics in the western academic tradition (Tsivian, 1994).

21. This overview is only preliminary and lays no claim to presenting an exhaustive bibliography.

22. Particularly, I should mention here the special issue of the *Logos* journal (2014, no 5/6), dedicated to Cinema Studies (guest editor—Alexander Pavlov). In this issue, we can find the insightful collection of the works concerning the phenomenon of "bad cinema".

increase the analytical potential of studies into social imagination. Western Slavic studies and the related domestic research into problems of genre ideology and the construction of identity based on Soviet cinematic material (e.g., Kaganovsky, 2008), studies into the presentation of social institutions (on fashion representation, see (Dashkova, 2016)) and the functioning of Soviet cinematic culture (Roth Ey, 2011)<sup>23</sup> also play a major role here. However, research into contemporary cinema is largely related to the analysis of cinematic presentation and visual ideology (cf., e.g., Norris, 2012). Meanwhile, only a handful of works are devoted to the empirical investigation of transformations in the practices of cinema consumption. In the next section, I am going to try and mark out the outlines of sociological reflection as presented in contemporary film studies, and demonstrate its potential for use in the study of Russian cinematic culture.

### **“The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship”: The Cinematic Culture and Sociological Imagination**

While Jeffrey Alexander’s texts declared the logic of autonomization of the cultural from the social, film studies, as transpires above, describe the perspective of saturating the cinematic with the social and making the social an integral element of film studies’ object of research. In characterizing changes in the field of film studies in the era of media convergence, Dudley Andrew states that “Not only were new modes and genres dredged up for discussion, films themselves were increasingly set aside in favor of other objects of study (audiences, television, advertising). As for cinema studies, it has lost much of the vague definition it had, yet as an institution, a ‘society’, it swelled with new types of scholars, many of whom found movies and related phenomena to be a fine—even an exceptional—site to monitor social processes” (2009: 910)<sup>24</sup>. This definition reflects the fact that film is progressively seen less as a self-sufficient object of analysis, and more as an instrument of social scrutiny and is viewed in the institutional context. Tom Gunning’s text demonstrates another strategy related to establishing the social nature of the object of film studies. In his article on film studies as a form of cultural analysis, he suggests describing this object as “film practices” and gives it the following definition: “Film practices include both theories and filmmaking, but also the many other discourses and actions that surround films, understanding these as social actions having effects, and influencing the cultural role of film” (Gunning, 2008: 190). The concept of “film practices” implements a flexible approach to identifying forms of cinematic existence in agreement with the growing diversity and segmentation of today’s society. One could say that this concept consistently instrumentalizes the model of “culture circuit” developed by cultural studies (Johnson, 1983). This model implies that a cultural phenomenon is examined

23. Some scholars’ works feature fascinating examples of applying sociological theories of Norbert Elias (Bulgakova, 2005), Harisson White (Kaspe, 2017) and others, to film analysis.

24. See also: “Movies—or at least special movies whose significance I hope to justify—are perceptual spaces in which interpretive practices are enacted, modified, and carried over into non-filmic social practices” (Patton, 2007: 3).

from an institutional perspective, taking into account the different forms of its existence, that is, from the creation of a cultural product to its reception / consumption and inclusion in daily life of various communities.<sup>25</sup> Following this logic, Gunning writes that, in analytically differentiating between a film's production, its textual peculiarities, and its presentation and reception strategies, the interrelations between these aspects of a film's existence must also be borne in mind (191).<sup>26</sup> Evidently, this requires not only combining different disciplinary perspectives,<sup>27</sup> but also perfecting those approaches that would serve as empirical extensions of the film practices theory, such as ethnography (including digital ethnography), receptive studies, studies of physicality, etc.

Consequently, one could say that contemporary film studies reveal the multilayered nature of the cultural turn and manifests a variety of points of entry into non-reductionist sociology. As shown above, the problems of cinema as an experience, which may be examined empirically on the material of various "film practices", become the focal point of re-conceptualizing the field of culture in contemporary society. Carrying this program out is contingent on the sociological critique of aesthetic biases, which serves as normative limitations blocking the work of sociological imagination, and thereby preventing a proper understanding the place of certain phenomena in the cultural field. As Tim Corrigan aptly phrased it, in pointing out both the relativity of aesthetic forms and the diversity of practices of cinema consumption, "We go to the movies for many reasons: to think, not to think; to stare at them, to write about them. We may go to a movie to consume it like cotton candy; we may go to a film where that candy becomes food for the mind" (1994: 2). Adaptation studies that have now become an independent field of research may serve as a poster child for the constitutive role of relativizations of this kind. This field of studies emerged from rejecting the presumption of the priority of literary texts and the idea of faithfulness to the original. This allows researchers to examine an interaction between cinema and literature, to scrutinize the strategies of interpreting classical texts and their reception by different audiences, and the social implications of this cultural work. At the same time, today, new forms of the cinematic experience (live cinema) based on the interaction of cinema and theater, cinema, and opera, etc., are also being studied from this perspective (see, e.g., Barker, 2013; Atkinson, Kennedy, 2017).

Reflecting on the aesthetic presumptions of a cinematic experience paves the way for the analysis of the formation and functioning of assessment categories used in public discourse, which makes the toolkit of pragmatic sociology relevant (Lamont, Thévenot, 2000).<sup>28</sup> For example, to rate a new film, viewers describe their impressions not only by

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25. In essence, this entails a rehabilitation of the previously marginalized investigative strategies. Gunning gives an example of reception studies, which ought to acquire an equal footing with other lines of research, saying that "reception does not simply add a dimension to a film—it is the reason the film is made" (191).

26. In this connection, he criticizes the thesis by a classic of film studies by Kristian Metz, regarding the need to distinguish film as a cinematic text from cinema as a concept denoting everything to do with films, but external to them.

27. For an attempt at surveying an interdisciplinary interaction as an explication of the "circuit of culture" model, see Johnson et al. (2004).

28. Not coincidentally, a significant number of works by contemporary sociologists is devoted to the figure

addressing traditional aspects of the cinematic narrative (plot line, visuals, characters, music, etc.), but also by invoking manufacturing determinants (“blockbuster”, “3D”), historical projections (“genre”, “life-like realism”), and the film’s purpose (“entertainment” or “educational value”), and so on. The correlation between the different appraisal categories selects the mode of historicity of cinematic consumption that characterizes different formats of cinema’s existence in the conditions of media convergence, as well as the specifics of individual film practices (cf. Samutina, 2009).

The multiplicity of evaluation criteria is just a singular expression of the diversity of today’s cinematic experience. The democratization of the cinematic culture manifested in the present-day viewer’s cinematic competence, their proficiency at using techniques of taking possession of films (from VHS and DVD to a smartphone) and collecting information about them, as well as in the heightened reflexivity and citationality of contemporary cinema make cinema a more fundamental part of daily life and blur the lines between “average” spectators, fans, and cinephiles. The most crucial process in this sense is that of the privatizing of the cinematic experience (Klinger, 2006; Tryon, 2009), and bringing about not only new types of cinema consumption, but also new forms of sociality related to cinema.<sup>29</sup>

The sociological analysis of films per se is no less relevant, either. As noted above, its development received a great boost from the perspective of viewing feature films as representations of social reality and acknowledging the role films play in constructing identities and reflecting on the semantic resources of social action. Today, a wide range of thematic vectors for the social exists in cinema; along with conceptualizing problems of identity (ethnic, gender, class, etc.) which is a priority for the tradition of cultural studies, representation of various institutions, such as school, sport, fashion, the army, medicine, etc., is also becoming a major research object. In this respect, films are an indispensable source for the diagnostic reflection on anthropology and the institutional organization of contemporary societies, and for the construction of social roles and frameworks of social interaction.

It is, however, becoming increasingly clearer that when a cultural dimension is introduced into the analysis of criteria, the concept of representation does not allow us to describe the potential of cinematographic fiction. This notion has a residual connotation of the cinematic text’s correlation with reality. Cultural studies reconsidered the concept of realism from the standpoint of criticizing the naturalization of ideological meanings (Turner, 1993: 180–182). Meanwhile, the development of sociological textual analysis, whether literary or cinematic, had to do with a turn to studying genres as structures of social imagination. This shift was premised on rejecting the negative image of cinematic genres as presented by the criticism of mass culture (both conservative and progressive),

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of a film critic (Kersten, Verboord 2014; Duval, 2015).

29. For example, communities for the discussion, archiving, and creation of amateur cinematic content that used to engage predominantly in networking, but also organized online gatherings (“house parties”), serving as an alternative to going to the movies as well as to a private viewing (Tryon, 2009: 83–124).

and on refusing to view them only as primitive and archaic cultural forms.<sup>30</sup> In the works of Will Wright, John Cawelty, and other scholars, generic constructs of the cinematic narrative are interpreted as systems of conventions representing persistent forms of dramatic enactment for the axiological conflicts that are essential for today's spectator. The logic of studying genres had to do with giving up a presumption of pure entertainment, illusion, and the conservative nature of generic narratives. This led to questions about the nature of imagination as a sphere that plays a salient role in the anthropological constitution and social self-actualization of a contemporary person, about the character of the cinema recipient's inclusion into an imaginary world, the specifics of conventions and realistic allowances in that world, and the means and the limits of respective narrative constructs and their transformations (Gudkov, Dubin, Strada, 1998: 22–24). Putting together a toolkit to examine generic narratives that would combine techniques for the analysis of recipients' experiences with the methods of objectification to allow assessing the significance and function of a certain genre within the space of culture paves the way to understanding cinema as part of the public sphere, as pointed out by Miriam Hansen, and later by Michael Saler. At the same time, genre problems also bring about other perspectives of sociological reflection. On the one hand, this is a question of how the category of genre functions as an ideal type construct in the process of discursive identification of cinematic pieces and how it correlates not only with the narrative's peculiarities and the presence of formulaic elements, but also with factors of institutional context. On the other hand, turning to the viewer's experience allows us to single out non-narrative elements in the experience of cinema reception linked to, for instance, the perception of movie star images and, ultimately, an understanding of specific practices of cinema reception, which represent a transgression of the viewer experience and which entire communities gather around today. These presuppose moving beyond the boundaries of both the narrative and the filmic, and are related to freeing the viewer's imagination, and its expansion into the various spheres of daily life. This means studying both the multiple forms of film reception, with the transformative reception in particular, and exemplified by practices such as film tourism (Reijnders, 2016) or cosplay. Then, the matter of cinematic literacy is linked to the scrutinizing of the significance of film viewing skills in the contemporary person's anthropological constitution, and the transformation of cinema-inspired imagination into a socially and politically meaningful sphere of communication.

I am going to illustrate the potential for the development of sociological reflection on cinema by using a project to study communities of Soviet science-fiction cinema-lovers as an example. This project emerged as a continuation of a study of the cult movie phenomenon, aimed at scrutinizing Soviet cinema as an object of nostalgic attachment in the context of global changes in the filmmaking culture (Stepanov, Samutina, 2009). Contrary to the notion of nostalgia for all things Soviet as a prevailing conservative form of the mass post-Soviet cinematic experience, the concept of a "cult movie" was meant

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30. In his book, Tudor cites a noteworthy example of such interpretation of a western by W. J. Barker: "The cowboy's faithful horse—the object of such solicitude, pride, and respect—probably represents the hero's narcissistically overvalued phallus and also the father as totem animal" (2013/1974: 182–183).

to denote the sum-total of practices of emotionally loaded and, simultaneously, reflective cinema consumption which was becoming ever more important for the post-Soviet viewer in the new media context. The construct of a cult-like reception was more likely to indicate a variety of possible grounds for an affinity to Soviet cinematic texts (from the extravagant plot lines and daily life realities estranged through historical distance, to the forgotten artists and novel subtexts), which could stand in direct opposition to their ideological message. Studying the reception of Soviet cinema in the framework of this project compelled us to also look into the strategies of forming personal archives and the forms of viewer activity (which was more of an ideal type model of the alternative consumption of Soviet cinema than an efficient means of gauging the scale of its dissemination). These days, 10 years later, the popularity of the idea of a cult, generally, and the Soviet as a cult object, in particular, is gaining visibility, and is no longer limited to practices of cinephile communities; it is also being appropriated by the media industry<sup>31</sup> and is becoming a benchmark for film critics (Gorelov, 2018; Anurov, Vasiliev, Komissarova, 2018; Trofimov, 2019). Studying this phenomenon is crucial for the understanding of how Soviet cinema functions as a form of cultural legacy.

Endeavoring to transfer the work of analyzing the contemporary reception of Soviet cinema onto the empirical plane, one turned to studying communities of Soviet sci-fi cinema-lovers, which gained considerable prominence on the cusp of the 2000s. The key role of sci-fi cinema-lovers' communities in shaping the practices of contemporary fan culture is widely recognized (Hellekson, 2018, 66). It is no wonder, that in this sense, the phenomenon of active audiences in the post-Soviet culture was represented by these very communities. Moreover, they offer a unique example of self-organization among Soviet cinema-lovers: no other genre produced such a well-defined fan community. Simultaneously, sci-fi is a key object for the understanding of imaginary worlds that are not only becoming ever more important for contemporary culture (Saler, 2012), but are also in constant interaction and convergence which cannot help but affect the fluidity and permeability of fan communities' boundaries (Bury, 2017). As noted above, fan communities receive recognition in film studies: the relevance of a film geek figure is a sign of democratization of the cinematographic culture in connection with the arrival of the DVD and cinema's expansion into the system of new media (Staiger, 2005: 95–115; Klinger, 2006: 17–53). In this sense, analyzing the activities of Soviet cinematic sci-fi cinema-lovers' communities does not only allow us to examine the forms of receptive activity in connection with a particular cinematic genre, but is also indicative in terms of the cinematographic culture's evolution on the whole.

Online discussion boards attest to the various techniques of appropriating the Soviet cinematic legacy depending on the distribution mechanisms available, from reproducing films on videotapes and DVD, exchanging information about television programming, collecting film production data and information on favorite actors, to designing virtual

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31. As exemplified by the channel Dom kino which takes advantage of the "gold reserve" of Soviet cinematic legacy (films by L. Gaidai, E. Ryazanov, G. Danelia, V. Menshov, etc.), but presents these pieces like western blockbusters in its teaser ads.

models of cinematic spaceships, creating elements of computer interface, remixes, and movie-inspired videoclips. Demand for these techniques and changes in the intensity of activity allows us to draw conclusions regarding their connections to specific media and social situations. New media and social network development and the appearance of thematic film portals and internet archives in the latter half of the 2000s—early 2010s led to a gradual extinction of typical earlier forms of communication (Stepanov, 2020).

Finally, a study of communities of cinema fans is of interest from a historico-sociological perspective. Whereas in sociology and cultural studies, fandoms have acquired legitimacy as an object of research, Slavic studies have little to say on this particular subject, or on the reception of Soviet cinema in general. Not coincidentally a scholar of Soviet and post-Soviet cinematographic culture Sudha Rajagopalan, when commenting on the state of this field, asks a question, “Is there room for fan?” (2013). In film studies, the question of the fans’ place in the evolution of the international film industry is quite actively discussed in the context of audience research. Kristin Roth-Ey touches upon this matter while examining cinematic culture’s development during the Thaw period (2011), but the question of how visible fan practices were under the specific conditions of the Soviet film industry has not been systematically answered yet. The cinema fan communities under discussion here are a source of fascinating material in this respect, as their activity, to a great extent, relates to the popularity of the Soviet cult films they were fans of—*Guest From the Future* (1985, P. Arsenov), *Kin-dza-dza* (1986, G. Danelia), *Moscow—Cassiopeia* (1973, R. Viktorov), and *Teens in the Universe* (1974, R. Viktorov), which were enjoyed from the moment of their appearance on the big screen.<sup>32</sup>

Following the principle of the primary construction of a cultural object, let us consider the issue of cinematic sci-fi identification as an object of attachment of the communities under scrutiny. These fan groups’ peculiarities are evident in comparison with a diverse and highly organized community of fans of literary science-fiction, who quite quickly made themselves at home on the internet and launched a large-scale internet archive of texts representing the tradition of Russian and Soviet literary science-fiction.<sup>33</sup> Cinema’s lack of cultural authority in this community determines the ambivalent status of the cinematic sci-fi fan community.<sup>34</sup> Emerging mostly on the periphery of a literary sci-fi fan community, participants of cinematic sci-fi fandoms engage in some very peculiar forms of fan activities. Most striking in this respect is the phenomenon of Aliso-mania/Natashamania that characterizes fans’ obsession with the image of the protagonist of the *Guest from the Future*.<sup>35</sup> That said, this is also a typical media fandom that actively displays its cinematic experience in new digital formats.

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32. It is worth noting here that a certain conditionality of the first part of the concept of “cinematic sci-fi”, as the latter includes not only movies screened in theaters, but also TV shows.

33. A further study should allow one to give a more detailed description to the role of scholarly and technical intelligentsia representatives in forming these fandoms.

34. For considerations regarding the reasons for this, see Pervushin (2019).

35. A colorful description of this phenomenon can be found in the internet encyclopedia, Lurkmore (2018). This phenomenon’s significance is due to the predominance of males among the members of the communities under scrutiny.

Content-wise, the notion of Soviet cinematic science-fiction describes a cinematic experience uniting the members of these communities with a certain degree of conditionality. Firstly, we are talking about certain examples of the cinematographic genre targeting mostly, but not exclusively, a young audience. Notably, the corpus of favorite films expanded through the addition of a number of other films produced abroad, but included in the cinematic experience of late Soviet generations (e.g., such as the Hollywood film *Flight of the Navigator*). At the same time, films that garnered international acclaim for Soviet science-fiction (such as *Road to the Stars* by P. Klushantsev, and *Solaris* and *Stalker* by A. Tarkovsky) are, rather, of little interest to fandom participants. In contrast, G. Danelia's non-children's film *Kin-dza-dza*, which had a cult following as soon as it premiered, made the cut and entered the corpus of fan favorites. Thus, in considering the conceptual limits of the phenomenon under discussion, we have to bear in mind how fandom participants redefine the limits of the genre and construct their own hierarchies within it. It is also important that this work concerns not only the Soviet cinematic legacy proper, or the experience of Soviet cinema reception, but also the contemporary cultural experience of fandom participants. Indicative in this respect is the appearance on fan websites and discussion boards of anime sections, which may be seen as evidence for these fandoms' inclusion in the transnational and trans-fandom context.

Their attachment to Soviet cinema makes these fan communities an appealing object of analysis in the context of discussing the significance of nostalgic sentiments for contemporary society. Research into nostalgia generally, as well as in Slavic studies in particular, has come a long way from developing general models explaining nostalgia's significance for modern times to establishing the necessity of studying these phenomena in context (Nadkarni, Shevchenko, 2004; Mihelj, 2017). The study of nostalgia in connection with cinema, originally related predominantly to analyzing contemporary cinematic interpretations of the past, offered various interpretations of nostalgia: this emotion may stem not only from a sense of belonging to a "great history", but also from an assertion of a clean break from the past embodied in constructing a private outlook on grand historical events (Samutina, 2005).<sup>36</sup> Works interpreting nostalgia in connection with problems of cinema consumption mostly emphasize the positive role of nostalgic sentiments providing contemporary viewers with psychological support (Klinger, 2006: 135–190; Hunt, 2011).

The problems of cinematic nostalgia have already caught the eye of both domestic and foreign scholars within the framework of research into the representation of Soviet cinema on Russian TV (Borusyak, 2010), on the DVD market (Pravdina, 2009, 2010), and studies into its reception by users of nostalgic online-discussion boards (Rajagopalan, 2012). Discussions among members of Soviet cinematic sci-fi fans allows one to outline specific features of a nostalgic experience, and shed light on the internal conflicts that are absent from the above-mentioned studies. As has transpired from the previous characterization, nostalgia here refers to a childhood cinematic experience, which regains

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36. This matter is studied on the material of contemporary Russian cinema in Norris (2012) and Levchenko (2013).



relevance in opposition to the “toxic” media context of the post-Soviet era, and becomes a cornerstone for a positive generational self-identification. Important here is the through line dramatized in the films of this genre, an ideology of optimistically looking-forward to the future that plays a crucial role in constructing this positive self-identification. Different correlations between a futuristic impulse and strife to preserve the Soviet experience, the need for its generalized conceptualization, and its significance for the understanding of the present can be distinguished as applied to different communities at various stages of their development. That said, these communities’ genre orientation is not without internal conflict due to the need to inscribe a childhood cinematic experience into the contemporary cultural context. A considerable part of intellectual work undertaken by the members of these communities has to do with placing favorite films in the context of international, particularly Hollywood-produced sci-fi cinema, presenting a wide range of fantastic imagination and better-quality special effects. Another related topic is whether remakes or sequels of favorite films are possible under the present-day Russian film industry conditions.

The example I have chosen has to do with the problems of cinema reception, but at the same time, seems representative of the sociological problematics of contemporary film studies. Thus, it is the experience of cinema reception, formed in a certain aesthetic and historical framework and communicated by means of a certain system of value judgments and a complex of film practices, that is subjected to scrutiny. The examination of this cinematic experience presupposes a re-conceptualization of the aesthetic hierarchies and dispositions existing in the field of cinema (as well as in fan community), as well as the notions about the emotional attitudes towards Soviet cinema. It can also be seen in correlation with the structural characteristics of this community, from the members’ ages to their professional activities. The interpretation of this experience involves revealing its mutual dependence on cultural transformations at different levels that take place in the Russian-speaking context and, simultaneously, in sync with global changes in media consumption. This offers an opportunity for the analysis of what mechanisms today help cinema function, and how the related sphere of imagination forms new communities and sets benchmarks for their members’ lives.

## Conclusion

My considerations set out to reveal the value of film studies as a starting point for the understanding of the cultural turn in sociology. The above insights attest to the fact that a medium that is key to the development of contemporary culture (at least during most of the twentieth century) is of marginal interest to the discipline of sociology as compared to other forms of cultural activity. By tracing down the history of interrelations between sociology and film studies, I tried to discover how this situation came to be. It is, however, clear that this issue merits further exploration. At the same time, my analysis shows exactly how, thanks to cultural studies’ mediation, sociological reflection on cinema becomes a prerogative of film studies in the 1990–2000s, and an indispensable part of rede-

fining cinema as a research object undergoing transformations under the conditions of changing visual and media culture. The logic of this re-definition has to do with the shifting away from rigid critical interpretations and with revealing cinema's anthropological input into the formation of contemporary culture, and the role of cinematic imagination in shaping the public sphere of modern society. The realization of how problematic the boundaries of this phenomenon are in the context of current media culture essentially frees cinema as an object in relation to other media and, in a broader sense, to the various contexts of its existence. An empirical investigation of cinema as an experience necessitates incorporating an analysis of a sociological questionnaire into the program of cinema aimed at a meaningful interpretation of cinema's functioning as a medium, and a rejection of reductionist models of sociological interpretation of this phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> An awareness of a complex interplay between the industry, text, and audiences, and of the non-homogenous dynamics of the cinematic process increases the weight of the historical sensibility in social analysis.

The shapelessness of the sociology of cinema in this situation is hardly fatal. There is also little reason to expect this field to be burgeoning any time soon. As my inquiry shows, this would entail evaluating the state of affairs and the mechanisms of reproduction in such disciplines as film studies, media studies and cultural studies, sociology, history, and ethnography, which, as demonstrated earlier, is especially relevant to the Russian situation. The word "sociology" attracts questions addressed to the various fields of knowledge and, accordingly, to different institutional structures. As applied to the sociological profession, this means incorporating theoretical perspectives and research methods in our scholarly toolkit that are aimed at analyzing the subjective dimension of social processes and their media- and symbolical mediation. This in turn necessitates an acknowledgement—no longer a declaration, but a practical acceptance—of the sphere of imagination as an independent and fully-fledged object of sociological interest. For the humanities, this term offers opportunities to discover cinema's anthropological potential and its usefulness for the study of various forms of social experience not only today, but also in the past seen from a novel perspective, thanks to the cinematograph.

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37. It is needless to say that the sociological reflection on cinema has only been briefly described above.

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## “Coming soon?”: социология кино и культурный поворот

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На протяжении XX века кино играло и до некоторой степени продолжает играть ключевую роль в формировании социального воображения и антропологии современного человека. Тем не менее, как показывает обзор английской научной литературы, кино, в отличие от искусства и музыки, остается для социологов второстепенным предметом анализа. В статье предпринята попытка рассмотреть состояние социологической рефлексии о кино в контексте культурного поворота в социологии как в международном, так и в национальном контексте. Реконструируя историю взаимодействия между социологией, киноведением и культурными исследованиями, автор не только приводит свидетельства недостаточного интереса социологов к изучению кинематографа, но также обсуждает пути разворачивания социологической проблематики в киноисследованиях на рубеже XX–XXI вв. и использования кино для изучения социального воображения. Пример исследования сообществ любителей советского научно-фантастического кино демонстрирует один из возможных путей развития социологически-ориентированной программы изучения кинематографа.

*Ключевые слова:* социология кино, культурсоциология, киноведение, культурные исследования, социальное воображение, кинематографический опыт, фан-сообщества