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# Ideology in Eastern European Cinema During the Second World War: A Semiotical Analysis

## İkinci Dünya Savaşı Sırasında Doğu Avrupa Sinemasında İdeoloji: Göstergebilimsel Bir İnceleme

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### ABSTRACT

Eastern Europe was as an important front during the Second World War. This region was occupied by the Nazi regime for a long time. The art of cinema was also significantly affected by this occupation. Film production decreased drastically and came to a standstill in some countries. In countries that cooperated with the Nazis, however, film production continued. In this study, the extent of cinematic production in Eastern Europe during the war and the ways in which ideological discourse was developed are explored. Accordingly, in order to understand the cinematic production and ideological discourse in Eastern Europe during the Second World War, the Romanian-Italian co-production *Odessa in Flames* (*Odessa în flăcări*, 1942) directed by Carmine Gallone was analyzed with a semiotic method. The film depicts the recapture of Bessarabia by German, Italian and Romanian troops after the Soviet Union captured the region during the war through the story of a family from Chisinau. Semiotics not only allows signs to be analyzed as a meaningful whole, but also allows their social context to be decoded successfully. The reason why this method is preferred is that it allows for a comprehensive analysis of the subtext of a prominent film at a time when cinema is intertwined with ideology and propaganda. In direct proportion to this, the film was chosen because it successfully reveals the Axis powers' view of Eastern Europe. As a result of the study, it has been observed that the film provides an ideological basis for the presence of German and Italian soldiers in Romania, while at the same time conveying the message that the Soviet Union was a common enemy.

**Keywords:** Second World War, Eastern European cinema, semiology, cinema and ideology, Romania

### ÖZ

Doğu Avrupa, İkinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında önemli bir cephe görevi görmüştür. Bu bölge, uzun bir süre Nazi yönetiminin işgali altında kalmıştır. Sinema sanatı da bu işgalden önemli oranda etkilenmiştir. Film üretimi büyük oranda azalmış, bazı ülkelerde de durma noktasına gelmiştir. Naziler ile iş birliği yapan ülkelerde ise film üretimi devam etmiştir. Bu çalışmada, savaş sırasında Doğu Avrupa'da sinemasal üretimin hangi boyutta olduğu ve ideolojik söylemin inkişaf etme biçimleri ortaya çıkarıldı. Bu doğrultuda, İkinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında Doğu Avrupa'da sinemasal üretimi ve üretilen ideolojik söylemi anlamak adına yönetmenliğini Carmine Gallone'nin yaptığı Romanya-İtalya ortak yapımı *Odessa Alevler İçinde* (*Odessa în flăcări*, 1942) filmi göstergebilimsel bir yöntemle ele alındı. Filmde, Sovyetler Birliği'nin savaş sırasında ele geçirdiği Besarabya bölgesinin Alman, İtalyan ve Rumen askerleri tarafından geri alınması Kişinevli bir aile ekseninde hikâyeleştirilmektedir. Göstergebilim, göstergelerin anlamlı bir bütün olarak ele alınmasına imkân tanırken, onların toplumsal bağlamlarının



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## ÖZ

da başarılı bir biçimde çözümlenmesine olanak sağlar. Bu yöntemin tercih edilmesinin nedeni, sinemanın ideoloji ve propaganda ile iç içe geçtiği bir dönemde, öne çıkan bir filmin alt metninin kapsamlı bir biçimde analiz edilmesine imkân vermesinden dolayıdır. Film de bununla doğru orantılı bir biçimde, Mihver Devletleri'nin Doğu Avrupa'ya yönelik bakışının başarılı bir biçimde ortaya konulmasından dolayı tercih edilmiştir. Çalışmanın sonucunda, filmde Alman ve İtalyan askerlerinin Romanya'da bulunmasına ideolojik bir zemin üretildiği, aynı zamanda Sovyetler Birliği'nin ortak bir düşman olduğu mesajının verildiği görülmüştür.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İkinci Dünya Savaşı, Doğu Avrupa sineması, göstergebilim, sinema ve ideoloji, Romanya

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Eastern European cinema has had a strong cinematic aesthetic. One reason for this is the harsh transformations the region underwent during the twentieth century. The cinema of the region was affected by ideological fluctuations. Following the Second World War, the countries of the region were forced to take sides ideologically with the agreements made by the great powers. One of the developments that created the aesthetics of regional cinema during the Cold War was the Second World War and the subsequent division of the region. In this context, the Second World War stands in an important place. This study aims to reveal the cinema that existed in the region during the war.

In this study, the general situation of the Eastern European cinema during the Second World War was evaluated. What kind of cinematic approach the countries followed during the war was discussed. This approach cannot be separated from the cinematic policies of the occupying forces. Because of that, firstly the cinematic approach of Germany and Italy was emphasized, and then the cinematic policy they followed in Eastern Europe was explained. This evaluation was made for the region in general. Then, in order to understand how cinema was used in the occupied region, a sample film was analyzed semiotically. The 1942 film *Odessa in Flames* was chosen to reveal what the occupation forces aimed to achieve with cinema and what messages they wanted to convey.

Semiotics allows for a meaningful analysis of the signs that exist in everyday life. Founded by the Swiss Ferdinand de Saussure and the American Charles Sanders Peirce, it examines and categorizes objects according to the meaning they represent. According to this approach, meaning can exist not only in a literal sense but also in a connotation sense, implying that symbolic meanings can also be effective in the formation of meaning in a social context. Cinema is also an important field for semiotics. Because it uses the real images recorded by the camera while transforming what is in the director's imagination into reality. The images used in films both refer to actual reality and to the connotations desired to be conveyed. Therefore, they are highly amenable to semiotic analysis.

During the Second World War, Germany and Italy recognized the importance of cinema and pursued a cinema policy accordingly. During this time, they used cinema as an important propaganda tool. They also managed cinematic affairs in the occupied Eastern Europe. They ensured that mostly German and Italian films were shown in movie theaters, silencing dissenting voices. They also carried out direct filming in this region. *Odessa in Flames* is among the films shot during this period. Made jointly by Romania and Italy, the film justifies the presence of German and Italian troops in Romania and portrays the Soviet Union as a common enemy. The film centers on an affluent family in Bessarabia, a region captured by the Soviet Union during the war. Soviet soldiers mistreat the inhabitants and imprison people, especially children, in concentration camps to brainwash them. In the movie, the mother of one of these children starts working as a singer in the Soviet army to save her child. The boy's father becomes a commander in the Romanian army. At the end of the movie, family unity is restored, along with the Bessarabia region and the city of Odessa.

Basic dichotomies are applied in the movie from a semiotic point of view. Dichotomies such as good woman - bad woman, good man - bad man, good soldier - bad soldier are produced. The aim here is to refer to the two sides of the war and emphasize the difference between the good side and the bad side. Although the film was shot in Romania and in partnership with this country, it has traces of the aesthetics of the Italian cinema of the period. A petty bourgeois family's drama is depicted, and issues such as family unity and loyalty are at the center. Although stylistically similar to the Italian films of the period, the main aim was to achieve ideological supremacy in Eastern Europe. This is why the power of cinema is utilized. Through signs, the war is reflected on the cinema screen on an ideological scale.

## Introduction

The history of humanity is in a sense the history of oppression and domination. As Walter Benjamin said: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (2007: 256). However, the twentieth century stands in an important place in this respect. In this period, with the development of technology and mass media, oppression and domination reached unprecedented levels. In this period of countless wars, civil wars and mass killings, almost all the people of the world have either a citizens of a country which practiced colonialism, fascism, the use of chemical weapons, occupation, etc. or have been among the people of states that have been subjected to such practices. Technological advances have paved the way for subjugation. Michel Foucault described this: “Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting” (1977: 154).

Cinema is one of the most important mass media of the modern era (Öztürk, 2015) and has been used as an important tool for oppression and domination. Since it was one of the most important leisure time activities of people, especially in the period when television had not yet become popular, policy makers wanted to make maximum use of its power. For example, Lenin stated that cinema was the most important art for them (Kenez, 1985: 106).

Eastern Europe was an important front during the Second World War. The struggle took place not only on the battlefield but also in other fields. Cinema occupied an important place in this context. It has been an important tool preferred by regimes to make their voices heard. Following the Nazi occupation, the field of cinema was mobilized and documentary and fictional films were produced for propaganda purposes. This study aims to reveal what kind of cinema existed in the Nazi-occupied Eastern European countries. In order to reveal this, a sample film was selected and the content of this film was analyzed. The movie selected as the sample is a war film shot in Romania. A co-production produced by Italy and Romania. This study focuses on the cinematic environment in Eastern Europe during the Second World War. *Odessa in Flames* (Odessa în flăcări, 1942) is chosen as the sample for the study because it successfully summarizes the filmmaking logic in Eastern Europe of the period in terms of both content and production process. The film shows the cinema of the period in a multifaceted way. Along with the film, Romanian cinema is also a good example for the study. Because Romania was captured and recaptured multiple times by the two sides of the war and both sides made a special effort to establish dominance and to bring its citizens closer to their ideologies. Because of that Romania was one of the most vivid cinematic witnesses of the Second World War. Semiotics was chosen as the method. With this, it was aimed to make visible the discourses of the power that make the film

produced. By following the signs, the discourse desired to be produced through cinema in occupied Eastern Europe will be revealed and the codes of the cinema of the period will be unveiled.

## Semiotics and Cinema

A sign is simply an object, concept or phenomenon that refers to an entity other than itself. Semiotics is the approach that deals with these signs as a meaningful whole. It deals with all kinds of sign systems developed to communicate. The works of Swiss Ferdinand de Saussure and American Charles Sanders Peirce formed the basis of this approach. Saussure gave lectures on linguistics and his works were published after his death. Saussure's studies were mostly in the field of linguistics. While the signifier is an object or sound, the signified is its image formed in the mind. These two constitute the sign. Saussure accepted that signs are social concepts. The names given to things and the meanings visualized in the mind are social formations. The relationship between signifier and signified is causeless, there is a social agreement between them. Social consciousness plays an important role here (Cobley, 2005: 4).

Charles Sanders Peirce carried out his studies in the USA in the same period with Saussure, is considered as another founder of semiotics. According to him, meaningful systems should be subjected to an evaluation filter based on logic, aiming to deal with signs with the sharpness of comprehension of mathematical science. He stated that signs should be recognized as social phenomena and divided them into three categories; icon, index and symbol. An icon is a sign that resembles the object it represents. Painting or sculpture is an example for this. Index is a sign that refers to a specific being. It is a sign that refer to something different from itself, such as smoke refers to fire, and it'll lose its signifier characteristic in case the object that makes it a signifier disappear. Symbol, on the other hand, is a sign whose relationship with what it represents is established as a result of a social consensus. The olive branch representing peace is an example of this (Civelek and Türkay, 2020: 777).

Roland Barthes stated that with semiotics, any system in which meaning is constructed can be analyzed. He presented his semiotic approach through four distinctions, the first three of which were taken from Saussure's General Linguistics Lectures and the last one was added by himself. The first distinction is between language and speech. The social part is language and the individual part is speech. Language is a system that exists in the social sphere and is obligatory to be used in order to communicate. Speech, on the other hand, is the use of language on an individual basis. These two phenomena are not independent of each other. The second distinction is between signifier and signified. The signifier is defined as an auditory sound sequence or a visual symbol, and the image created by

this symbol in the mind is called the signified. For example, the pen that is spoken or seen is the signifier, while the image of the pen that is visualized in the mind is the signified. The sign is formed by the combination of these two. However, the relationship between signifier and signified is causeless. In other words, a concept has no causal connection with the sequence of sounds that signifies it. The third distinction is between syntagm and paradigm. While paradigm is the selection of similar concepts, syntagm is the combination of the selected elements to form a meaningful whole. The fourth distinction is between connotation and denotation. Denotation is the meaning that is initially visualized in the mind. Connotation is the second level of meaning. A signifier in the denotation can become the signifier of a different sign (Barthes, 1986). For example, a flower may refer only to the image of a flower in the denotation meaning, while in the connotative meaning it may become a signifier of love.

There is a saying in the famous French director Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1963); "cinema is truth at 24 frames per second" (Laist, 2015: 190). In the cinema, as in photography, a reality is produced from pieces of reality. Cinema is not just an artist's painting. A crowded set crew makes an effort to turn what is in the director's imagination into reality. What is transformed into reality are moments selected from fragments of reality. This feature makes cinema a very fertile field for semiotics. Even though the narrative is fictional, the signifiers of the imaginary become real people, things or nature. This inevitably necessitates that what is told in cinema must somehow refer to the real. However, what is meant by the signifier does not always have to be concrete reality. For example, although an object may seem to refer to what it depicts as an image, it can also refer to something very different from its context due to the metaphorical, surreal narrative that cinema allows. For example, a key ring does not only have to be the signifier of a key ring, it can also refer to an old relationship or the life lived in a house. Likewise, an image of a sunrise can refer not only to the weather getting brighter, but also to the bad days being left behind, to the story turning positive. Therefore, cinema has the power to contain parts that are suitable for all of Peirce's triple sign categorization (Kimdem, 1979: 68). This is one of the reasons why cinema is a powerful narrative technique. It allows for connotations as well as denotations, for icons and indexes as well as symbols.

### **An Overview of German and Italian Cinema of That Period**

During the Second World War, almost all of Eastern Europe was occupied by the Nazis. The cinematic policies of Germany and Italy influenced the cinema of the region throughout the war. First, the cinematic approaches of these two countries will be emphasized, and then, in the next section, the context in which

cinema was shaped in Eastern Europe under their influence throughout the war will be explained.

The Nazi government's relationship with German cinema began immediately after they took power. On March 28, 1933, less than two weeks after taking office as Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels declared that German cinema would become an important instrument of the national project of cultural renewal and reform (Weinberg, 1984: 105). Bruns (2009: 16), quoting Goebbels' speech to his distinguished audience at the Hotel Kaiserhof, a popular meeting place for film artists and executives, states that Goebbels said, "Cinema and the new government will walk together on the road to renewal." Goebbels said he was confident that cinema and filmmakers would defend the new spirit of the times and bring to life the inner meaning and composition of a new world. Guided by their new ideology, they would establish a young, dynamic culture rooted in National Socialist beliefs, deeply committed to the spiritual welfare of the Volk (the people) and distinguished by its moral integrity. In fact, not only Goebbels but also Hitler himself had a keen interest in cinema. Sensing the growth of the cinema industry in the world, the two believed that propaganda would be most effectively shaped through the medium of cinema (Hoffman, 1996: 95).

There are two main events that enabled the Nazi regime to radically control the cinema. One of them was the "Reichsfilmgesetz" law passed in 1934, which brought the movie industry under control through censorship and financial regulations. The other was the nationalization of the UFA studios in 1937. The process of nationalization secures the future of the film industry in the National Socialist state and reinforces unequal power relations. Cinema came completely under the control of Hitler and the Nazi party (Bruns, 2009: 74).

When it comes to Nazi-era cinema, the first name that comes to mind is Leni Riefenstahl. The best known documentary of this period is the 1934 film *Triumph of the Will* (Welch, 2007, s. 55). The film had its first screening on March 28, 1935 at the UFA-Palast in the Berlin zoo. A massive advertising campaign and official publicity was organized (Saritaş, 2018: 341). At the Sixth National Socialist Party congress in Nuremberg the documentary film was presented as a film about Hitler himself (Sennett, 2014: 55). This film was crucial in demonstrating the power of Hitler and the National Socialists and to show who had come to power (Watson, 2016: 41). Kracauer also drew attention to the opening sequence of the movie. Hitler's airplane appearing out of the clouds with divine power, landing in Nuremberg. Kracauer compares this scene to a bad imitation that seems to have been torn from Wagner's magnificent and tragic compositions (Kracauer, 2004: 122-128). After this date, Riefenstahl came to the forefront as Hitler's personal filmmaker. The 1935 film *Freedom Day* (Tag der Freiheit! - Unsere

Wehrmacht) stands out as a Nazi propaganda Documentary. It is about the German army regaining its strength, but the documentary turns into a self-contradictory parody. Rather than the desired images and portrayal of empowerment, the documentary shows a very weakened army (Wehrmacht) that would almost totally destroy Europe four years later. The 1938 film *Olimpia* is a look at the superiority of the Aryan race through sports, which Nazi Germany was obsessed with. Cinema became a tool for Riefenstahl to create her own myth and aesthetic perception, it also became an opportunity to reshape reality (Soussloff, 1996: 21).

Although Nazi Germany discovered the power of cinema as a propaganda tool early on its rule, and tied the entire industry to itself through legal steps, it never achieved the desired effect. This was due to the intense repression that caused many talented filmmakers and writers of the period to flee the country, as well as the hysteria and mood created by the Nazi regime did not match the nature of cinema. In this sense, when trying to understand the cinema of the Nazi era, one should not ignore the situation in Europe.

Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, long before Hitler. Cinema was no less important in Italy under Mussolini regime than in Nazi Germany. In 1924, the Unione Cinematografica Educativa (L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa), whose acronym LUCE means "light" in Italian, was launched to produce news and documentary films. In 1925, Mussolini informed various state institutions to produce educational, informative and propaganda films through LUCE (Brunetta, 2009: 61-62). Mussolini and his administration recognized the importance of cinema at an early date and took important steps in this regard.

Until the 1930s, cinema in Italy was dispersed between Turin, Milan, Rome and Naples, but over time it shifted towards the political and bureaucratic center of the country. A consensus emerged between the fascist regime and the industry. Rather than fictional films that directly propagandized the regime, simple films that distracted the audience from contemporary reality were mostly produced. There was a secret agreement between the regime and the industry (Morandini, 1997: 353-354). The cinema studio Cinecittà in Rome started its operations in 1937. Mussolini also attached great importance to Cinecittà (Bondanella, 1993: 5), which became the center of Italian cinema. The studio allowed the fascist ideal to be reflected in cinema, as seen in Carmin Gallome's *Scipio Africanus: The Defeat of Hannibal* (Munzi, 2004: 85). Although militarist, anti-Soviet, Italian historical films or films about Italian colonialism in Africa were made, until 1943 the films were mostly of a more escapist nature, in line with the values of the petty bourgeoisie (Morandini, 1997: 355).

### Swastika in Eastern Europe: Eastern European Cinema During the Second World War

In Eastern European countries under the rule of Nazi Germany, social life continued under wartime conditions. During this period, cinema activities were also carried out. While the films of the occupying powers constituted the majority of the films shown in movie theaters, the filmmakers of the occupied countries were able to produce non-political films, albeit under difficult conditions. For example, although the movie theaters in Greece mostly showed films from Germany, Italy and Hungary, only three Greek films were produced during the occupation. Two of them could be shown in movie theaters because they did not have a political subtext. *Duce Tells How He Conquered Greece*, an animation about the failed Italian invasion attempt, was shot in 1942, but was only released in 1945, after the German occupation (Karalis, 2012: 35-36). In Czechoslovakia, too, film production was drastically reduced during the occupation. While the number of films produced in 1939 was forty-one, this number dropped to eleven in 1944. In 1945, only one movie was produced. During this period, almost all the owners of the film companies were German. Czech films were allowed to continue as long as they avoided what Goebbels called "stupid nationalism". It was forbidden to criticize Germany in films. Nor could references to the Czech legion and Jews be presented in a positive way. Czech films had to be shown with German subtitles. Movies were basically about entertainment (Hames, 2009: 10). However, in Poland, one of the countries most affected by the war, even though the Germans continued to screen films in movie theaters during the war, the film industry came to a standstill and no film was produced until the end of the war. In addition to German narrative films, propaganda films were also shown in movie theaters. Polish comedy films shot before the war were also shown in theaters (Haltorf, 2019: 69-70). Hungary had a relatively free cinematic environment due to its partnership with the Germans. During this period, a significant number of Hungarian films were produced and these films had a wide audience both inside and outside the country. However, in order to ensure its cultural superiority, the Nazi regime paid special attention to the screening of German films in Hungary and made efforts to purify Hungarian cinema of Jews. Likewise, they exerted a certain pressure on the choice of the subjects of the films (Frey, 2018: 289-291). Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania were mostly consumers. German, Italian and Hungarian films were mostly shown in these countries throughout the war (Kallis, 2011: 180; Elsie, 2010: 135; Frey, 2011: 164). The Nazi occupation had an impact not only on film production but also on the fate of the films produced up to that point. In Greece, for example, most of the film archive was destroyed during the occupation. This was not only because the Germans damaged public buildings. The Nazis used the film material for the production of various equipment (Karalis, 2012: 35).

During the occupation, films were also produced with the support of the alliance's major partners, the Germans and Italians. *Odessa in Flames* was shot in Romania in 1942 as an Italian-Romanian co-production. Directed by Italian director Carmine Gallone, the film was about the liberation of Moldova from the Soviets (Stojanova, 2019: 249-250). The German film *People in the Storm* was also shot in Croatia under the direction of Fritz Peter Buch. The film depicted the Germans' clashes with the Serbs, and portrayed the Croats and Slovenians as friends and the Serbs as enemies. The aim was to justify the occupation. Similarly, the German occupation of Greece and Yugoslavia was turned into a documentary called *Death of Yugoslavia/War on the Balkans* (Smrt Jugoslavije/Rat na Balkanu) (Rafaelic, 2011: 104-105).

During the occupation years, many Eastern European cinemas experienced significant developments. For example, Filopimin Finos in Greece established a sound and editing studio with his own resources in 1942 and named it Finos Films. This studio became a center where important works emerged for the country's cinema after the occupation. Finos and his partners, including sound technician, production director and designer Markos Zervas, brought together scriptwriters, directors, actors and film technicians of all kinds and provided the opportunity to share experiences (Karalis, 2012: 36). The cinema infrastructure in Croatia was also strengthened during this period. The country's separation from Yugoslavia by Germany and its independence had a great impact on this. In 1941, the *Legal Decree for the Protection of the Aryan Culture of the Croatian People* was published. Similarly, film regulations were prepared. Accordingly, cinemas owned by Serbs and Jews were confiscated. Inspectors were appointed to the others. The screening of films from all countries that the Nazis were at war with was banned. A censorship desk was established (Rafaelic, 2011: 100). This period also had great importance for Hungarian cinema. Due to the Hungarian government's alliance with the Nazis, Hungary expanded its borders towards Slovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. Since US and French films did not come during the war, it provided film needs of Eastern Europe to a large extent (Frey, 2018: 271-272; Frey, 2011: 164).

### *Odessa in Flames* (1942)

*Odessa in Flames* (*Odessa în flăcări*, 1942) is a Romanian-Italian co-production directed by Italian Carmine Gallone. Shot in Romania, the film depicts the Soviet Union's occupation of Bessarabia, which was part of Romania at the time, and the Axis Powers' subsequent recapture of this region and the city of Odessa, centering on a wealthy family living in Chisinau.



**Figure 1.** Poster of the film *Odessa in Flames* (1942)

Living in Chisinau in Bessarabia, Maria and Michelle have a marriage that is going badly. Maria, who used to be a famous singer, gave up singing after her marriage in line with Michelle's wishes and takes care of her son Nico at home. Although she does not do her profession, she can participate in small programs. One day Maria goes to a village fair with her friend Sergiu, a secret Soviet agent, and on the same day Michelle leaves for Bucharest with her mistress. Nico stays at home with the babysitter. On the same day Soviet troops entered Bessarabia and soon captured Chisinau. Nearby Chisinau, Maria returns home as soon as she receives the news, but her son Nico has been taken to a concentration camp by Soviet soldiers. Michelle also receives the news at the hotel and immediately sets out to return home. But Romanian soldiers refuse to let her cross the border.



**Figure 2.** Citizens are being forcibly evacuated

An important figure in the Soviet army, Sergiu is assigned as the commander of the army in Bessarabia. As Maria struggles to reunite with her son, she accepts Sergiu's offer to work as a singer for the Russian administration in Bessarabia. Her goal is to find her son. Michelle also serves as a commander in the Romanian army, and during this time he searches for his wife and son. After close to a year, the Axis Powers launch an

offensive in the Bessarabia region and retake Chisinau. Michelle goes to his neighborhood and learns through a poster that his wife is a singer. At the same time, Maria is singing at the opera in Odessa, while continuing to search for her son. Sergiu is in a deep depression, feeling remorse for all the people he killed as a Soviet commander, and also thinking that as a failed commander he will be punished either by the Soviet Union or by the Nazis. He is deeply in love with Maria. He accepts Maria's offer to run away together after finding Nico. He tries to find Nico, but his efforts are noticed by the Soviet side and he is killed. Just before he dies, he tells Maria the location of the cellar where his child is kept. Maria, together with Sergiu's secretary, finds the child, the same day the Axis invaded Odessa. Michelle immediately finds her husband and child. Family unity is restored with the capture of Odessa.

### Semiotic Analysis of *Odessa in Flames*

*Odessa in Flames* was shot in 1942 during the Second World War. Set in Romania, the movie was based on a real event. In June 1940, the Soviet Union invaded the Bessarabia region of Romania. A year later, Romania joined the Axis Powers, and soon after, with the support of the German and Italian armies, Romania recaptured Bessarabia and Odessa from the Soviet Union (Ioanid, 1996: 232).

The movie depicts this military operation in an epic style. In its narrative, structured on an ideological basis, distinctions are made between absolute good and evil in the war atmosphere. The Romanians are portrayed as innocent, displaced, nationalistic people fighting for their homeland. The Soviet Union side, on the contrary, is portrayed as obsessed people who are far from humanitarian traits, whose minds are clouded by communist ideology, and who take pleasure in bloodshed.

Throughout the movie, epic narrative and melodramatic narrative intertwine. While the heroism of the Axis soldiers is presented in an epic manner, the audience is also presented with the drama of a broken family. The melodramatic narrative takes the film away from being a documentary film, and makes it a movie with high spectatorial pleasure, aimed for the ordinary viewer. This is important because, as we have seen in the previous chapters, even though the war was going on in Eastern Europe at the time, the people's viewing habits continued. The film takes this into account and builds a strong melodramatic narrative.



**Figure 3.** Reunion of the family

This preferred narrative structure becomes an ideological extension of the ongoing war at the front. With the melodramatic narrative, the destruction caused by the war on the individual level is revealed, while the "injustice" of the other side is more emphasized. The lives lost during the war are brought to the forefront, and the message is given that the innocent Romanian people are fighting for territorial integrity and their losses. A catharsis is achieved at the cinematic level. At the end of the film, after the liberation of Odessa, while the heroism of the Axis soldiers is shown, a montage shows them marching in Red Square in Moscow. This is an indication of the Axis's rightness, strength, belief in victory and that they will be victorious.



**Figure 4.** The soldiers of the Axis Powers are marching to Red Square

The deployment of Axis armies in Romania is justified through the Soviet invasion of the country. The Soviet threat ensures that Romanians stand "on the side of the truth". It is also emphasized that this has a historical origin. The film also touches upon the historical connections of the Romanians' cooperation with the

Axis powers. In the bedtime story Maria tells her son Nico that the Romans conquered the Dacians, the ancestors of the Romanians, and made them part of the civilized West. This refers to the archaic nature of the alliance between Romanians and Romans. Although the Dacians will be affirmed as the ancestors of the Romanians in the Romanian cinema that will develop according to nationalist codes after the Second World War (Nasta, 2013: 20-21). In the movie *Odessa in Flames*, the opposite message is given. The discourse that Romanians were civilized by the Romans is highlighted.

The film builds its narrative through fundamental dualities. This is a reference to the two sides of the war. Representations play an important role in this context. Good soldier - bad soldier, good man - bad man and good woman - bad woman dichotomies are created. The aim is to make a comparison between the sides of the war. All positive traits are attributed to the Romanian and Axis side, while negative and malign traits are attributed to the Soviet Union. The following table is illustrative in this context;

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Woman	Maria	An innocent struggling mother whose son and land were forcibly taken from her.
Woman	Luba	A devilish woman who has no maternal qualities, whose mind is shaped by Marxist ideology.
Man	Michelle	A man who realizes his mistake and fights for his family and homeland.
Man	Sergiu	The evil Soviet agent and soldier who kidnapped children to indoctrinate them in Soviet ideology and ordered the deaths of many people.
Soldier	Axis Power's soldier	Fair, strong, proud soldier who fights for his country.
Soldier	Soviet Union soldier	Slaughterous, irresponsible, evil soldier.
Narrative	Melodramatic narrative	It was preferred to emphasize the individual aspect of the war. It depicts the destruction caused by the crimes committed by the Soviet Union in Romania on an individual level.
Narrative	Epic narrative	The message is that the armies of the Axis Powers are victorious, strong and just.

**Figure 5.** Semiotics Chart of *Odessa in Flames*

As can be seen, the film presents an atmosphere in which the ideological discourse in the occupied Eastern Europe of the period is made visible. The war that is currently going on at the front is reflected on the movie screen through signs. Therefore,

the ideological discourse is presented to the audience in its rawest form.

## Conclusion

The Second World War is an important turning point in world history. With the war, in which tens of millions of people lost their lives and many more were injured, the world map was reshaped and the earth was ideologically divided into two. Eastern Europe was one of the regions most affected by the war. The forces on the two fronts of the war faced off in this region. Film production in Eastern Europe decreased during the war, but continued. Along with the battlefields, the virtual universes created through cinema were also fields where the struggle continued. One of the productions that came to life in this context is *Odessa in Flames*, shot in 1942. When the question of the purpose of this Romanian and Italian co-production directed by the Italian Carmine Gallone is raised, we come across two answers. The first is to justify the reasons for the presence of the Axis powers occupying Eastern Europe, while the other is to take part in the film production pie in this region. The film both targets the popular audience with its preferred narrative style and fulfills the need to give a political message by making its ideological position very clear.

At the beginning of the movie, Maria and Michelle's marriage is unstable. Although they are married, they live different lives. With the occupation and the subsequent military intervention, the problems in their marriage are solved and the family unity is restored in a stronger way. While the film restores the territorial integrity of Romania, it also ensures the unity of a family from Chisinau. The ideological discourse in the film is constructed not only in a national context but also at the level of the family that constitutes it. Although Romania was neutral at the beginning of the war, it joined the Axis powers after losing an important piece of territory to the Soviet Union. As if in reference to this, the Romanian father Michelle is initially shown as irresponsible, thoughtless and deceitful. When his country is occupied, he realizes the "truth" and joins the Romanian army immediately. In a sense, through Michelle, Romania's position in the eyes of the Axis powers is put on the scales and the message is sent that he has finally found the right path, and as a gift, he is reunited with his land, his huwifesband and his child.

Bessarabia is a relatively poor region in Eastern Europe. However, the film centers on an affluent family living a relatively petty bourgeois life. It is seen that the film adopts an aesthetic that is contrary to the cinema of the Soviet Union, which was shaped on a socialist scale. Emphasizing the structure of class society and centering on an individual narrative rather than a social one, thus the film constructs its ideology also in terms of form and aesthetics. This is a pattern seen in the Italian cinema

of the period and is also reflected in the view of Romanian society.

### Ethical Declaration

In this study, all the rules stated in the “Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research (Türkiye) and Publication Ethics Directive” were followed.

### Ethics Committee Approval

The authors declare that the research is one of the studies that does not require ethical committee approval.

### Conflict of Interest and Funding

No conflict of interest and funding has been declared by the authors.

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All stages of the study were designed and prepared by the authors.

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