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ARTICLE

THE BORDER AS A SPACE OF NEGOTIATION: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE IMAGE OF THE "OTHER" IN SHAKEN AIMANOV'S FILM, *THE END OF THE ATAMAN*

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KEYWORDS

National identity, Kazakh cinema, Shaken Aimanov, *The End of the Ataman*, Eastern genre, image of the "other," chain of Orientalism, representation.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

In preparing this article, the artificial intelligence model Claude Fable 5 (Anthropic) was used for the following tasks: drafting the abstract in Kazakh; refining and stylistically editing the title, abstract, and keywords in all languages; formatting the list of references in accordance with MLA style. All AI-generated output was reviewed, verified, and edited by the author, who bears full responsibility for the article's content.

ABSTRACT. This article examines the image of the "other" in Soviet-era Kazakh cinema through Shaken Aimanov's film, *Konets atamana* (*The End of the Ataman*, 1970), analyzed within the context of the Eastern genre — the Soviet counterpart of the American Western. The classical Eastern reproduced a colonial logic of representation: Russian characters acted as bearers of progress, while Central Asia was portrayed as an object of modernization. The article explores how a Kazakh director, working within a genre historically marginalizing Kazakh subjectivity, rethinks its logic from within and asserts national identity as a cultural resource. The methodological framework of the study is based on an analysis of representation that combines three analytical axes: the fluidity of the border between the categories of "self" and "other"; the reinterpretation of the image of "savagery" in the Kazakh Eastern; and the construction of the image of the "other" — Xinjiang — from the perspective of a Kazakh subject. The analysis demonstrates that the film's protagonist, Chekist Chadyarov, is constituted through the constant crossing of geographical, political, and cultural borders: national identity is transformed from an object of representation into a strategic resource, and the border becomes a space of negotiation. For the first time in the Soviet Eastern, the function of the hero as a "screen" for viewer identification is assumed by a Kazakh protagonist. At the same time, in its depiction of Xinjiang the film reproduces an asymmetry of representation, creating what may be called a "chain of Orientalism." The article concludes that *The End of the Ataman* functions simultaneously as genre cinema conforming to Soviet ideological norms and as a new space of cultural identification for Kazakh audiences, in which national culture and tradition gain an autonomous voice.

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МАҚАЛА

КЕЛІССӨЗДЕР КЕҢІСТІГІ РЕТІНДЕГІ ШЕКАРА: ШӘКЕН АЙМАНОВТЫҢ «АТАМАННЫҢ АҚЫРЫ» ФИЛЬМІНДЕГІ ҰЛТТЫҚ БІРЕГЕЙЛІК ЖӘНЕ «ӨЗГЕ» БЕЙНЕСІНІҢ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯСЫ

Автор қолжазбаның соңғы нұсқасын оқып, мақұлдады және мүдделер қақтығысы жоқ деп мәлімдейді.

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© 2026 Автор(лар). Құрманғазы атындағы Қазақ ұлттық консерваториясы жариялаған. Осы мақала Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) лицензиясының шарттарына сәйкес таратылады (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Лицензия түпнұсқа еңбекке тиісті түрде сілтеме жасалған жағдайда материалды коммерциялық емес мақсатта пайдалануға, таратуға және кез келген тасымалдағышта көшіруге рұқсат береді. Сонымен қатар материалға өзгерістер енгізуге, оны өңдеуге немесе туынды шығармалар жасауға жол берілмейді.

Дәйексөз үшін

Мацумото, Акира. «Келіссөздер кеңістігі ретіндегі шекара: Шәкен Аймановтың “Атаманның ақыры” фильміндегі ұлттық бірегейлік және “өзге” бейнесінің трансформациясы». *Saryn*, т. 14, № 3, 2026, 20–31 б, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59850/SARYN.3.14.2026.384>. (Ағылшынша)

Тірек сөздер

Ұлттық бірегейлік, қазақ киносы, Шәкен Айманов, «Атаманның ақыры», истерн, «өзге» бейнесі, кеңестік ориентализм, репрезентация.

Алғыс

Автор мақаланы жетілдіруге ықпал еткен құнды пікірлері мен ұсыныстары үшін журналдың анонимді рецензенттеріне алғыс білдіреді. Сондай-ақ автор жарияланымға мүмкіндік бергені, қолжазбаны дайындаудың барлық кезеңінде көрсеткен қолдауы мен құнды кеңестері үшін нөмірдің шақырылған редакторы Гульнара Ойратовна Абикееваға шынайы алғыс білдіреді.

ЖАСАНДЫ ИНТЕЛЛЕКТ
ҚҰРАЛДАРЫН ПАЙДАЛАНУ
ТУРАЛЫ МӘЛІМДЕМЕ

Мақаланы дайындау барысында Claude Fable 5 (Anthropic) жасанды интеллект моделі келесі міндеттер үшін пайдаланылды: қазақ тіліндегі аңдатпаның алғашқы нұсқасын құрастыру; барлық тілдердегі атауды, аңдатпаны және тірек сөздерді жетілдіру және стильдік редакциялау; әдебиеттер тізімін MLA стиліне сәйкес рәсімдеу. ЖИ жұмысының барлық нәтижелерін автор тексеріп, өңдеді және мақала мазмұнына толық жауапкершілік алады.

Аңдатпа. Мақала Шәкен Аймановтың 1970 жылы түсірілген «Атаманның ақыры» фильмі негізінде кеңестік кезеңдегі қазақ киносындағы «басқа» бейнесін зерттеуге арналған. Фильм американдық вестерннің кеңестік баламасы саналатын истерн жанры контекстінде қарастырылады. Классикалық истернде отаршылдық репрезентация логикасы көрініс тапты: орыс кейіпкерлері прогресс тасымалдаушылары ретінде көрсетілсе, Орталық Азия модернизация нысаны ретінде бейнеленді. Мақалада қазақ режиссерінің тарихи тұрғыда қазақ субъектілігіне қарсы бағытталған жанр ішінде жұмыс істей отырып, оның логикасын іштен қайта пайымдап, ұлттық бірегейлікті мәдени ресурс ретінде қалай бекітетіні зерттеледі. Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізі – үш талдау өлшемін біріктіретін репрезентация талдауы: «өз» және «өзге» категориялары арасындағы шекараның икемділігі, қазақ истерніндегі «жабайылық» бейнесін қайта пайымдау және қазақ субъектісі тұрғысынан «өзге» – Шыңжаң – бейнесінің құрылуы. Талдау көрсеткендей, фильмнің басты кейіпкері, чекист Чадьяров географиялық, саяси және мәдени шекараларды үнемі кесіп өту арқылы қалыптасады: ұлттық бірегейлік репрезентация нысанынан стратегиялық ресурсқа, ал шекара келіссөздер кеңістігіне айналады. Кеңестік истернде алғаш рет көрермен идентификациясының «экраны» қызметін атқаратын қаһарманның функциясы қазақ кейіпкеріне ауысады. Сонымен қатар Шыңжаңды бейнелеу кезінде фильм репрезентация асимметриясын қайта өндіріп, өзіндік «ориентализм тізбегін» құрайды. Қорытындыда «Атаманның ақыры» бір мезгілде кеңестік идеологиялық нормаларға сәйкес жанрлық кино ретінде және қазақ көрермені үшін ұлттық мәдениет пен дәстүр өз дауысына ие болатын мәдени идентификацияның жаңа кеңістігі ретінде қызмет ететіні тұжырымдалады.

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СТАТЬЯ

ГРАНИЦА КАК ПРОСТРАНСТВО ПЕРЕГОВОРОВ: НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ И ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ ОБРАЗА «ДРУГОГО» В ФИЛЬМЕ ШАКЕНА АЙМАНОВА «КОНЕЦ АТАМАНА»

Автор прочитал и одобрил окончательный вариант рукописи и заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Для цитирования

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Ключевые слова

Национальная идентичность, казахское кино, Шакен Айманов, «Конец атамана», истерн, образ «другого», советский ориентализм, репрезентация.

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Заявление об использовании инструментов искусственного интеллекта

При подготовке статьи использовалась модель искусственного интеллекта Claude Fable 5 (Anthropic) для следующих задач: составление чернового варианта аннотации на казахском языке; доработка и стилистическое редактирование названия, аннотации и ключевых слов на всех языках; оформление списка литературы в соответствии со стилем MLA. Все результаты работы ИИ были проверены и отредактированы автором, который несет полную ответственность за содержание статьи.

Аннотация. Настоящая статья посвящена образу «другого» в казахском кино советского периода на материале фильма Шакена Айманова «Конец атамана» (1970), рассматриваемого в контексте жанра истерна – советского аналога американского вестерна. Классический истерн воспроизводит колониальную логику репрезентации: русские персонажи выступали носителями прогресса, а Центральная Азия представлялась объектом модернизации. В статье исследуется вопрос о том, каким образом казахский режиссер, работая внутри жанра, исторически маргинализировавшего казахскую субъектность, переосмысляет его логику изнутри и утверждает национальную идентичность как культурный ресурс. Методологической основой исследования является анализ репрезентации, объединяющий три аналитические оси: флюидность границы между категориями «свой» и «чужой», переосмысление образа «дикости» в казахском истерне и конструирование образа «другого» – Синьцзяна – с точки зрения казахского субъекта. Анализ показывает, что главный герой фильма, чекист Чадьяров, конституируется через постоянное пересечение географических, политических и культурных границ: национальная идентичность превращается из объекта репрезентации в стратегический ресурс, а граница – в пространство переговоров. Впервые в советском истерне функция героя – «экрана» зрительской идентификации – переходит к казахскому персонажу. Вместе с тем при изображении Синьцзяна фильм воспроизводит асимметрию репрезентации, образуя своеобразную «цепочку ориентализма». Делается вывод, что «Конец атамана» функционирует одновременно как жанровое кино, соответствующее советским идеологическим нормам, и как новое пространство культурной идентификации для казахского зрителя, в котором национальная культура и традиция обретают собственный голос.

Introduction

This article examines the image of the “other” in Soviet-era Kazakh cinema through Shaken Aimanov’s film, *Konets atamana* (*The End of the Ataman*, 1970), considered within the context of the Eastern genre — the Soviet counterpart of the American Western. The classical Western was built on a binary structure in which the role of the bearers of civilization was assigned to white settlers, while the Indigenous peoples of America were depicted through the stereotyped image of “savagery.” The Soviet Eastern largely reproduced an analogous logic: Russian characters acted as bearers of progress, while Central Asia was presented as an object of modernization and development. This scheme was closely tied to the imperial logic of the Soviet civilizing project, according to which Russians were to “bring progress” to the peoples of Central Asia. By setting their action in the pre-revolutionary era, films of this genre depicted the “backwardness” of the region as a natural and self-evident condition. The Eastern thus became one of the genres within which Soviet assistance to “backward” peoples was presented as necessary and historically inevitable.

The article addresses the question of how Shaken Aimanov works within the genre of the Soviet Eastern — a genre historically grounded in a colonial logic of representation — and how the director succeeds in rethinking this logic from within. Particular attention is paid to how the distribution of roles between “civilization” and “savagery” changes when the genre is taken up by a Kazakh director. *The End of the Ataman* occupies a special place in the history of Kazakh cinema: it was Aimanov’s final directorial work and, at the same time, the first film of the tetralogy about the Chekist Chadyarov. The character, played by Asanali Ashimov, forms a new type of Kazakh hero in Soviet cinema — a hero combining national identity with the function of a Soviet subject.

Research on the Soviet Eastern has focused primarily on the problem of Soviet orientalism. Alexander V. Prusin and Scott C. Zeman, Matthew J. Payne and Sergei Lavrentyev view the Eastern as an instrument of Soviet imperial policy, within which Central Asia invariably occupies the position of the “other.” These studies are important for understanding the genre; however, they risk reproducing the very logic they seek to criticize: in them, Central Asia once again appears as a voiceless object of analysis. Studies devoted to the self-representation of Central Asian cinema, by contrast, offer a different approach. The works of Gulnara Abikeyeva and Rico Isaacs emphasize the special role of the national cinemas of the union republics in shaping their own cultural identity within the Soviet system. Recent scholarship confirms the productivity of this line of inquiry. Tamar Koplatadze argues for the consistent application of postcolonial theory to the Soviet experience of Central Asia and the Caucasus, criticizing the tendency to reduce analysis to a “Russian” perspective (470). Also illustrative are studies of representation in the cinemas of other republics of the region: Bakhtiyor Alimdjanov and Kamila Akbarova analyze female images in Soviet-era Uzbek cinema in terms of orientalization and modernization (Alimdjanov and Akbarova 305), while Banu Ramazanova examines contemporary Kazakhstani documentary cinema as a space for reflecting on national identity and collective memory. The fullest account of the film to date is Peter Rollberg’s. Rollberg reads *The End of the Ataman* as a sophisticated game of deception between friend and enemy, classifies it as an Eastern

rather than a civil-war adventure, and notes that it cautiously touches on Soviet taboos while avoiding overt propaganda: unusually for the genre, no Russian character guides the hero "in the right direction" (231). His approach, however, remains primarily historical. The present study shifts the emphasis to the analysis of representation itself.

At the same time, *The End of the Ataman* has thus far scarcely been considered within the frameworks of genre theory and postcolonial studies. This lacuna constitutes the starting point of the present study. Most existing works treat the film primarily as a spy thriller or a historical-revolutionary picture, without asking what happens at the moment when a Kazakh director turns to a genre historically marginalizing Kazakh subjectivity.

Methodology

The methodological basis of the study is an analysis of representation combining two analytical perspectives: an analysis of the image of the "other" in the Soviet Eastern, and an analysis of self-representation — that is, of how the Kazakh subject constructs itself within this genre. The study is organized around three analytical axes. First, it considers the fluidity of the border between the categories of "self" and "other." Second, it analyzes the reinterpretation of the image of "savagery" in the Kazakh Eastern. Third, it examines how the image of the "other" — in this case, Xinjiang — is constructed from the perspective of a Kazakh subject.

Unlike previous scholarship, this framework introduces two distinct shifts. On the one hand, studies in the tradition of the critique of Soviet orientalism (Prusin and Zeman; Payne; Lavrentyev) analyze the ideological structure of the genre, within which the positions of "self" and "other" are treated as essentially fixed, while Peter Rollberg's historical account documents the film's context and its play of ambiguity but is comparatively reticent on representation as such. The present study focuses precisely on what both perspectives leave at the margins: the mobility of the subject of representation and the fluidity of the border between "self" and "other." On the other hand, the framework takes seriously an internal contradiction of the eastern that has rarely been addressed: a genre that lends itself from the outset to ideological legitimization is used here in a way that pushes ideology into the background. Precisely because the genre forcibly divides "us" from "them," scholarly attention has tended to concentrate on how the self-image is constructed; yet for a people historically depicted as the "other," the question of how they in turn depict their own "other" is no less important. This consideration motivates the third analytical axis of the study — the construction of the image of Xinjiang from the perspective of a Kazakh subject.

Results

The film's protagonist, the Chekist Qasymkhan Chadyarov, is a character shaped through the constant crossing of borders. Geographically, he moves between Soviet Kazakhstan and White Guard-controlled Xinjiang. Politically, Chadyarov is a Chekist posing as a defector. At the level of identity, he acts simultaneously as a Kazakh and as a Soviet subject. It is precisely this state of constant balancing between different positions — and the impossibility of finally settling on one side of the border — that forms the basis of his character.

Aimanov deliberately intensifies this indeterminacy through visual means. In most scenes, Chadyarov's face remains impenetrable: the viewer sees almost none of his emotional reactions. The hero acts, yet does not disclose his own motives or inner state. This reticence is not a weakness of the character but an important artistic device. A hero who does not fully reveal himself becomes a space of spectatorial projection. The enemies, by contrast, are marked with complete clarity: their intentions, emotions, and political allegiance leave no room for doubt. This effect is achieved above all through lighting. When the camera turns to Chadyarov himself, the interplay of light and shadow does the work that dialogue refuses to do: shadow falling across his face becomes, as it were, the visible trace of an unspoken voice. Rather than clarifying his expression, the lighting partially withholds it — and it is precisely into this shadowed reticence that the viewer is invited to project an inner life the film never spells out. Against the background of such definiteness, Chadyarov's taciturnity makes him a figure with whom the viewer can identify (See Fig. 1).



Figure 1. A still from *The End of the Ataman* (Qazaqfilm Studio, dir. Shaken Aimanov, 1970).

Here a fundamental shift emerges in comparison with the traditional Soviet Eastern. In the classical model of the genre, the function of the “transparent” hero — a kind of “screen” for viewer identification — was usually performed by a Russian character. In *The End of the Ataman*, this role passes for the first time to a Kazakh hero. At the same time, Aimanov preserves the genre's basic conventions: the revolutionary era, gunfights, horse chases, and the characteristic reddish visual palette. The red tonality arises in part from concrete elements of the mise-en-scène — lighting and the carpets that fill the backgrounds of many interiors — and it intensifies noticeably in shots centered on Chadyarov. Significantly, this is not an ethnic color-coding, whereby Russian characters would appear “white” and Kazakh characters “red”: Kazakh figures, too, are at times rendered in pale tones, and the scenes set among the Chinese population are likewise tinged with red. The reddish cast operates instead as a device of attention: the palette warms at those moments when the film directs the viewer

toward Chadyarov's gaze, his unspoken intentions, and the position in which his body is placed. Insofar as these are precisely the moments in which the hero's political situation is at stake, the distribution of red comes to overlap with the film's ideological structure — but as an effect of this attention-guiding function, not as a fixed symbolic equation of red with ideology. The contrast becomes visible in the scenes involving Father Iona: their conspicuously artificial sets and props — a quality also noted by Rollberg (230) — have the effect of rendering these scenes markedly whiter than the rest of the film, while the more "natural" spaces tend toward red. Although some of this variation may owe something to the film stock and cameras of the period, the consistency with which the warm tonality accompanies the film's moments of heightened attention suggests deliberate choice rather than technical accident. The genre structure of the film remains recognizable, but its subject is redefined.

The greatest tension arises in those scenes where Chadyarov is forced constantly to adapt his identity to the political and social situation. Here, Kazakh identity becomes an instrument — something that can be deployed or concealed depending on circumstances. The border between the categories of "self" and "other" ceases to be a fixed line and becomes a space of negotiation. It is precisely in this mobility, and in the conscious use of one's own identity as a resource, that the self-representation of Kazakh subjectivity manifests itself: not in defiance of the Soviet narrative, yet without dissolving into it completely.

We now turn to how the image of the "other" — Xinjiang — is constructed in the film. The local population is depicted as a victim of White Guard domination. Chadyarov, coming to the defense of the oppressed, finds himself incorporated into a narrative of liberation. However, the local inhabitants never become full subjects of their own history, remaining above all objects of assistance.

Here the same asymmetry of representation is reproduced to which the Kazakhs themselves had previously been subjected in the Russocentric Eastern. An "other," depicting an "other," does not automatically overcome the logic of unequal representation. In this case, one may speak of a distinctive chain of Orientalism: where Russia had previously acted as the force "civilizing" Kazakhstan, the Soviet Kazakh now becomes the figure "liberating" Xinjiang. The structure of representation is preserved — only its subject changes.

Xinjiang is presented in the film as a space of intermixture in which Orthodoxy and Islam coexist under White Guard occupation. Orthodoxy functions as a symbol of counter-revolution and moral decay — above all through the figure of Father Iona, who combines his religious office with work for Dutov's counterintelligence. Islam, by contrast, is present as a background yet stable element of the space: through mosques, dress, and the texture of everyday life. It is fundamentally important that the Islamic space is depicted as not fully subordinated to the Orthodox counter-revolution. It exists according to its own logic, outside the full jurisdiction of the White Guard world. Xinjiang is thereby constructed not as an "Islamic threat" but as an occupied space in need of liberation.

A question arises: is the reproduction of this asymmetry a limitation of Aimanov himself, or a conscious strategy? The film provides no unambiguous answer.

Yet it is precisely this internal contradiction that makes *The End of the Ataman* a considerably more complex text than a simple Soviet propaganda film.

To understand why Aimanov turned to the Eastern genre in his final directorial work, one must consider his general attitude toward the problem of representation. The director regarded Soviet cinema as a space addressed simultaneously to domestic and external audiences, and therefore held that cinema was obliged to display genuine national particularities. It was these, in his view, that formed the basis of the "international Soviet family," and their embodiment on screen was not a right but a duty of the filmmaker (Aimanov 49–52).

At the same time, the eastern posed a particular difficulty for this task, since the genre itself was historically inclined toward the stereotyping of the national "other." Yet the genre also possessed a strategic advantage: the action of the eastern typically unfolds in the revolutionary era, which secured its ideological legitimacy within the Soviet system. This created room for maneuver. Working within an ideologically safe genre, Aimanov gained the opportunity to correct national representation without exposing himself to direct censorship risk.

The turn to the Eastern was thus not an accidental choice but a deliberate artistic strategy: a genre historically marginalizing Kazakh subjectivity was transformed into an instrument of its affirmation. Aimanov used the ideological protection of the genre in order to rethink it from within.

Two limitations of this study should be acknowledged. As a case study of a single film, its conclusions cannot be automatically extended to the Soviet eastern as a whole or to Kazakh cinema of the period, and comparative analysis of other films remains necessary. Moreover, the argument that the film offered Kazakh audiences a new space of cultural identification concerns the film's textual address to the viewer; it would need to be tested against historical evidence of actual reception.

Conclusion

In summary, *The End of the Ataman* demonstrates how a Kazakh director works within a genre historically marginalizing Kazakh subjectivity. Aimanov neither dismantles the genre's conventions nor steps outside Soviet ideology. Instead, he redefines the binary structure of "civilization — savagery" from within: he changes the ethnicity of the subject, renders the border between "self" and "other" fluid, and transforms Kazakh identity from an object of representation into a strategic cultural and political resource.

As a result, the film functions on two levels simultaneously. For the Soviet viewer, it remains genre cinema conforming to the ideological norms of its time. For the Kazakh viewer, the film becomes a fundamentally new space of cultural identification.

Finally, the analysis undertaken here allows us to pose a broader question: to what extent did this logic of constructing the "other" influence the image of Japan in the subsequent films of the tetralogy — *The Trans-Siberian Express* and *The Manchurian Variant*? For a number of Central Asian intellectuals, Japan was often perceived not as an "oriental enemy" but as a country under the pressure of American imperialism. Further study of this problem may contribute to a deeper understanding of how Soviet-era Kazakh cinema rethought global political and cultural relations through the genre forms of popular cinema.

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