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Feature film *Love, Simon* (2018) as a gay manifesto in cinema on school theme*

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Abstract. In the course of the hermeneutic analysis of the audiovisual media text, the author draws the following conclusions: 1) Western media took several decades to legalize non-traditional sexual orientations in general and in the school environment, in particular; 2) comedy drama *Love, Simon* (2018) is the pioneer film produced by a major Hollywood studio, featuring a gay protagonist being an underage school student; 3) homosexuality of the protagonist is presented by the film authors with the maximum degree of attractiveness for the audience (the synthesis of genres of comedy and melodrama, a charismatic performance, storyline following the key recipes of the most popular films on the school theme of the past), which provided impressive box office success; 4) the positive feedback of the American media critics on the film illustrates that political correctness of the Western society now extends not only to a tolerant attitude towards homosexuality among adults, but also among schoolchildren: this is eloquently expressed by the low age rating assigned to this the film (PG13); 5) the film *Love, Simon* contains signs of propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation among minors, which formally falls under the Russian law No. 135-FZ (2013).

Keywords: film, school theme, student, media, media text, cinema, USA.

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Introduction

In this article, we draw upon the hermeneutic analysis of the film *Love, Simon* (USA, 2018) that plays a role of a gay manifesto in films on school topic. As in our previous works [Fedorov, 2017; Fedorov & Huston, 2017; Fedorov & Levitskaya, 2017; 2018; Fedorov, Levitskaya et al., 2017; 2018], we rely on the technologies developed by K. Bazalgette [Bazalgette, 1995], A. Silverblatt [Silverblatt, 2001, pp. 80-81], W.J. Potter [Potter, 2001] and U. Eco [Eco, 1998; 2005].

Materials and Methods

The research material is an audiovisual media text on the school theme - the film *Love, Simon* (USA, 2018). The main method is a hermeneutic analysis (including ideological, identification, iconographic, plot and character analysis, etc., using the technologies developed by K. Bazalgette [Bazalgette, 1995], A. Silverblatt [Silverblatt, 2001, pp. 80-81], W.J. Potter [Potter, 2001] and U. Eco [Eco, 1998; 2005]. We have also analyzed American media's response to this film [Chang, 2018; D'Addario, 2018; DeMara, 2018; Frosch, 2018; Goldstein, 2018; Jenkins, 2018; Kenny, 2018; Morgenstern, 2018; Travers, 2018; Truitt, 2018; Wiegand, 2018, etc.].

Discussion

In 2013 the Federal Law prohibiting propaganda of homosexual relations among minors (No. 135-FZ, 2013) came into force effecting some other legislative acts with the view to protect children from information propagating the negation of traditional family values (Federal Law "On the Protection of Children from Information Detrimental to Their Health and Development" No. 436-FZ dated 29 December 2010 (as of 2 July 2013). Article 5. Types of information detrimental to the health and(or) development of children). This Law interprets such propaganda as the dissemination of information aimed at forming non-traditional sexual attitudes among minors, attractiveness of non-traditional sexual relationships, distorted image of social

equivalence of traditional and non-traditional sexual relationships, or the forced imposition of information of non-traditional sexual relationships, which can attract interest to such relationships. If these actions do not make up a criminal offence, offenders shall entail the imposition of an administrative fine in the amount of 4,000 to 5,000 rubles for citizens; in the amount of 40,000 to 50,000 rubles for officials; and media agencies can be fined up to 1,000,000 rubles or get administrative suspension of activity for up to 90 days.

In this regard, the liberal model of homosexual relations among high school students, that was shown without any consequences in the Russian remake of the Spanish TV series "Physics or Chemistry" in 2011, is now facing legal challenges. The context of Federal Law No. 135, explains why a recent American hit on school theme, *Love, Simon* (2018), which with the production budget \$ 17 million grossed \$ 57.2 million in worldwide box office (of which \$ 40.8 was in the US box office) and for the first three weeks consistently ranked among the top ten American box office films [Box Office, 2018], has not come out on Russian screens.

Love, Simon is far from the first film produced in the US and in the Western countries on the whole, with minor characters of homosexual orientation. Over the past quarter of the century, there have been quite a lot of media texts featuring young homosexuals: *Edge of Seventeen* (USA, 1998), *The Mudge Boy* (USA, 2003), *Summer Storm* (Germany, 2004), *Curiosity of Chance* (Belgium - USA, 2006), *North Sea Texas* (Belgium, 2011), *G.B.F.* (USA, 2013), *Geography Club* (USA, 2013), *Monster Pies* (Australia, 2013), *Boys* (Holland, 2014), *Date and Switch* (USA, 2014), etc. However, *Love, Simon* was advertised as the first ever American film about school homosexuality, delivered by a large studio (in this case, 20th Century Fox), which provided screening in 2434 American cinemas with an age rating of PG-13.

Moreover, this comedy melodrama not only brought money three times its budget, but also received good reviews in press - 92 US reviewers on average gave the film 7.4 points out of ten possible.

The screen adaptation of B. Albertalli's popular novel *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, directed by Greg Berlanti, tells the story of the first love of a handsome high school student, Simon, who discovers his homosexuality. He tactfully scoffs at his old-fashioned forty-year-old parents, happily married for twenty years, "they still look like they've toppled off the top of a wedding cake" [Roeper, 2018], smiles at his younger sister, who's really into cooking. At the end of the film, Simon kisses his (also teenage) African American boyfriend (racial political correctness in action) on the Ferris wheel in the amusement park, with the enthusiastic applause of classmates, some of whom now seem to even envy his unconventional sexual orientation ...

Of course, it would be absolutely impossible to imagine such a story in American cinema, not only during the time of Hays Code (1930-1967), but also in much more liberated 1970s-1980s. After all, even in the daring by the standards of the 1960s, the drama of W. Wyler's *The Children's Hour* (1961), the theme of (unrequited) sexual attraction of a female teacher to her friend was shown extremely chastely and timidly. The theme of homosexual relations erupted in full view in American cinema about school only in the comedy *In & Out* (1997), released by one of the major studios - Paramount Pictures, but it was focused on the homosexual orientation of the teacher, not students. Later on, gradually, gay teenage characters, even without the help of large Hollywood studios, won their place in the sun, step by step contributing to social acceptance to non-traditional orientation of not only adults (by the 1990s it was practically a norm in European and American cinema), but also of secondary school students.

Thus, the release of the film *Love, Simon* in 2018 was targeted at carefully prepared ground. Hence, it is clear that, according to the leading American film critics, this *silvery romantic, stunning, exciting, charming, sweet, fresh, warm, humorous, cordial, tender, sensitive, sympathetic, friendly, good-natured and, most importantly, life-affirming* story of a seventeen-year-old gay school student [Chang, 2018; D'Addario, 2018; DeMara, 2018; Frosch, 2018; Goldstein, 2018; Jenkins, 2018; Kenny, 2018; Morgenstern, 2018; Travers, 2018; Truitt, 2018; Wiegand, 2018] "is so honest, funny and real that it never ceases to capture your imagination and uplift your spirit" [Reed, 2018]. According to Bruce DeMara, the film has a high-quality casting

and a well-thought-out script [DeMara, 2018], and Doreen St.Felix, a columnist for the prestigious New Yorker, admits that the emotional impact of the film's coda "made the theatre roar. And it was their cheering, not the kiss, that made me emotional" [St. Félix, 2018].

Some American reviewers have clearly emphasized the propaganda direction of Greg Berlanti's picture, since it "should also attract LGBT teens starved for onscreen representation, while older gay viewers will likely wish there had been a coming-out movie this buoyant back in their day" [Frosch, 2018], and *Love, Simon* is precisely the kind of movie its main character so desperately needs — which means, Simon is about to become the model for an entire demographic that has had to do without, until now. ... For the longest time, gay audiences had to content themselves with being relegated to best friend roles... A film like this will be analyzed, critiqued, and debated from countless angles (homophobes will accuse of it "turning people gay," while queer advocates may fault it for casting a straight-identifying actor in such a high-profile gay role), but there's no question that it's a start" [Debruge, 2018]. Peter Debruge points out that "if this pioneering film is a success (a big "if," since the young men who need it most might be too self-conscious to see it in theaters), expect more female-friendly gay-male love stories marketed at teens — the ultimate upside of which will be a chance to show those struggling with oppression, suicidal thoughts, and the other trappings of the closet that they are not alone, and need not feel ashamed".

There are very few skeptical reviews of the film *Love, Simon* in the US media. Incidentally, it was noted that the film has "the thin gloss and one-thing-after-another rhythm of a pleasant but lightweight TV show", with teenage characters who "carefully and conveniently self-censor their language to stay comfortably within the confines of a PG-13 rating" [Hassenger, 2018].

However, many American critics [Goldstein, 2018; Travers, 2018, etc.] in this connection linked the film not teenage television series, but to famous coming-of-age comedies for a teenage audience directed by John Hughes (1950-2009) - such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1984) and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986). The comparison, in our opinion, is completely justified, but with one fundamental caveat: the pattern of light comedies about teenagers and their heterosexual attractions has been adjusted for gender and was used in the film *Love, Simon* in homosexual context.

It should be noted that a media literacy organization *Common Sense Media*, was one of the first to publish a supporting pack of materials for parents and teachers about the film with label "Great for families" [Slaton, 2018]. The parents' guide highlights the positive message of the film: "the movie's messages are about acceptance, inclusion, remaining true to yourself, and treating others with care and kindness. Several incidents of homophobia are used to teach lessons about atonement and empathy. Strong family bonds play a crucial role. Courage and integrity are themes" and stress the fact, that the protagonist is a positive role model: "Simon is a relatable "everyguy": He's accepted and liked by other students, and his family members (including a younger sister) are kind and supportive. He does well in school, is easy to live with, and doesn't do drugs, and though he makes mistakes, he atones for them and attempts to do better -- many parents will likely consider him a positive role model for teens". The most important section of the film's guide called "Families can talk about" suggests several essential questions that parents can discuss with their children after the film, e.g. "How does Simon demonstrate courage and integrity? Why are those important character strengths? How does the movie depict bullying? What should teens do if that happens to them?...Are drinking and drug abuse glamorized?", etc. [Slaton, 2018]. However, none of the suggested questions directly addresses the issue of teenage (homo)sexuality.

Results

The hermeneutic analysis of the film Love, Simon (USA, 2018)

Historical, cultural, political, ideological contexts. Features of the historical period of media texts' production, market conditions that contributed to the idea, the process of creating media texts, the degree of influence of political and social events on media texts.

The historical period of the creation of the media text is the second decade of the XXI century, the time when worldwide films on school theme sharply increased the presence of non-traditional orientation characters (usually as a supporting character, a protagonist's friend). In the US, the release of a comedy melodrama *Love, Simon* can be viewed in the context of the victory of political correctness, including sexual sphere. And the fact that one of the major Hollywood studios for the first time made the school student protagonist gay, proves that the notion of sexual political correctness has virtually legally spread to minors.

The worldview of the characters and the hierarchy of values depicted in the media text

The worldview of the school students in the film *Love, Simon* (2018) is determined by the desire to find their own way in life, above all, in the sexual sphere. Almost all of the characters-students (and adults too) are optimistic, easy going, they neither have any problems with classes, nor family troubles, and the protagonist, having realized his non-traditional orientation, is ironically lenient about his parents who obviously enjoy conventional family values.

Structure and methods of narration in the media text:

- location and time of action: suburbs of Atlanta, the USA, 2017. The main locations are school classes, corridors, houses, a school yard, an amusement park;

- furnishing, everyday objects: modern school classes, comfortable and cozy house of the protagonist, car.

- (stereotyped) ways of depicting reality: most of the characters fit well into the frame of positive ones, there is technically a single villain - a school blackmailer.

Typology of characters: character features, appearance, physique, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures, the presence or absence of the stereotypical manner of representation in the media text:

- age of the characters: about 17 years old. The age of other characters varies from 10 to 60;

- level of education: incomplete secondary education for schoolchildren; higher education for teachers and parents of the protagonist;

- social status: financial situation of the characters, apparently, is quite well-off;

- family representation: the protagonist's parents have been happily married for twenty years;

- appearance, clothing, physique, vocabulary. The characters are dressed according to the fashion of the end of the second decade of the 21st century. Almost all of the schoolchildren (except for the blackmailer) are cute and slim, friendly, are ready to support in a difficult moment; their vocabulary is devoid of crude expressions that could violate the age rating of PG-13. Adult characters (Simon's parents, the teacher), though shown as archaic heterosexuals, are also quite sympathetic. The protagonist, a high school student Simon, is attractive and intelligent, and this, of course, is especially important for the success of the media text, as it would be much more challenging for the film's authors to make the mass audience empathy with a gay teenager of dull or tacky appearance and marginal behavior. By the way, a similar device was used by Pasquale Festa Campanile (1927-1986) in the frivolous comedy *Nobody is perfect / Nessuno è perfetto* (Italy, 1981), where a former military man, having undergone a sex change operation, turned into ... a charming young woman in a sparkling performance by Ornella Muti. This comedy was a great success with the European audience precisely because the main role was played not by a real transsexual, but by the famous Italian movie star, fully armed with femininity. Thus, if the adult film *No one is perfect* has become a kind of an anthem for the transsexuals' charm, then *Love, Simon* offers a minor audience a controversial gay model to follow.

- a significant change in the characters' lives

A schoolboy who realizes his minority orientation becomes the object of blackmailing by his classmate who accidentally learned about his online correspondence.

- *the character's problem arises* from the protagonist's doubts (though not too painful) about whether to come out of the closet.

- *solution of the problem*

The protagonist ventures to openly declare her homosexuality and kisses an African-American boyfriend accompanied by enthusiastic applause of his classmates.

Conclusions

In the course of the hermeneutic analysis of the audiovisual media text, we came to the following conclusions:

- Western media took several decades to legalize non-traditional sexual orientation in general and in school environment, in particular;

- a romantic comedy *Love, Simon* (2018) is the pioneering film released by a major Hollywood studio, featuring a gay teenager as the protagonist;

- homosexuality of the protagonist is presented by the film authors with the maximum degree of attractiveness for the audience (the synthesis of genres of comedy and melodrama, a charismatic performance, storyline following the key recipes of the most popular films on the school theme of the past), which provided impressive box office success;

- the positive feedback of the American media critics on the film illustrates that political correctness of the Western society now extends not only to a tolerant attitude towards homosexuality among adults, but also among schoolchildren: this is eloquently expressed by the low age rating assigned to this the film (PG13);

- the media text's message visibly contains signs of propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation among minors (vulnerable to social influences, teens who are in the process of searching for their identity), which makes it subject to the Russian law No. 135-FZ (2013) and prevents from being shown in Russian cinemas.

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