

UDC 372

The Analysis of Stereotypes of Politically Engaged Media Texts in Media Studies in Student Audience (by the Example of Renny Harlin's films "Born American" (1986) and "Five Days of War" (2011))

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Abstract. The development of skills for the analysis of media texts is an important task of media education. However, media literacy practice shows that students have problems with the discussion / analysis of some genres in the early stages of media studies, for example, the difficulties in the process of understanding and interpreting the author's conception, plot and genre features. This article substantiates the methodological approaches to the analysis of politically engaged media texts in media studies in the student audience.

Keywords: Media education; media literacy; media competence; media text; analysis; universities; students; media studies; film; cold war; policy; ideologies.

Introduction. The famous British theorist of media education Len Masterman has repeatedly emphasized that it is necessary to teach the audience to understand the following: 1) who is responsible for the creation of media texts? who owns the media and controls them? 2) how is the effect achieved? 3) what value orientations are created? 4) how does the audience perceive it? [Masterman, 1985]. Of course, this kind of approach is mostly related to the texts which are outside the artistic sphere, and is not suitable for the outstanding works of media culture. However I think it is quite suitable for the opuses designed for mass audience, especially for the clearly politicized ones. Especially if you see that it evidently has much in common with the theoretical concepts of U. Eco [Eco, 2005] and A. Silverblatt [Silverblatt, 2001, p.80-81].

Indeed, the idea of U. Eco that the three important systems should be singled out in the analysis of media texts: the author's ideology; market conditions which determined the concept, the process of creation and success; the narrative techniques [Eco, 2005, p.209], is very similar to Len Masterman's concept of media education.

There's no need to explain how important it is for the students, the future specialists in political and culture studies, historians, art historians, pedagogues, to develop their abilities to analyze media texts of different kinds and genres.

However, media literacy practice shows that students have problems with the discussion / analysis of some genres in the early stages of media studies, for example, the difficulties in the process of understanding and interpreting the author's conception, plot and genre features. Let's try to substantiate the methodological approaches to the analysis of politically engaged media texts in media studies in the student audience.

It would seem that the times of the Cold War are gone, and the image of the evil "Russian bear" is no longer relevant for the Western screens. However our analysis [Fedorov, 2010] showed that media stereotypes of the Cold War are still alive nowadays. Let's prove it by the example of two politically engaged films of Renny Harlin "Born American" (USA-Finland, 1986) and "Five Days of War" (USA-Georgia, 2011).

Guided by the approaches of L. Masterman, A. Silverblatt and U. Eco, the students can create the structural schemes of these two media texts, one of which had been conceived at the peak of ideological confrontation between the USSR and the USA in the 1980-es, and the other has been shot recently.

The structure of western “confrontational” action films

Born American. USA, 1986. Director R. Harlin.

Market conditions which determined the concept and the process of creation of the media text. The Cold War of the 1980-es between the West and the Soviet Union, which aggravated during the Afghan war unleashed by the Kremlin and when president Ronald Reagan came to power in the USA, spawned a series of anti-Soviet media products including R. Harlin's film which stood out for its clearly defined ideological position that fully met the political situation.

Author's ideology, value orientations of the media text. The ideological message of the film is simple and clear: the superiority of American values of democracy over totalitarian and communist ones; anti-Sovietism.

Historical period, scene of action. Finland and the USSR of the mid 1980-es, border areas.

The setting, household goods. Streets and houses in Finland and the USSR, the KGB torture chambers. Wretched Soviet life.

Methods of representation of reality. The Soviet interiors, costumes, etc. are clearly depicted in a gloomy and grotesque manner, while the Finnish ones – in advertisingly positive.

The characters, their values, ideas, clothing, constitution, vocabulary, mimics, gestures. Positive characters are simple and sympathetic American guys, their main aim in life is entertainment; negative characters are evil personnel of the prison and KGB, the adherents of communist ideas. The latter look openly grotesque with hysterical mimics and gestures, primitive vocabulary. Soviet characters are dressed in plain and unattractive clothes. American characters are dressed in comfortable and high-quality clothes for teenagers.

Significant changes in the lives of the characters: tricking the vigilance of the Soviet border guards, the American guys illegally cross the Finnish-Soviet border “just for fun”.

Originated problem: the locals suspect that the Americans killed a Russian girl and emphasize their hostile disposition in every way; the American guys offered their armed resistance, killing them with admirable ease and skill, but as a result they fall into the clutches of the cruel KGB officers.

Searches for the solution of the problem: the American guys are trying to break free from Soviet prison.

The solution of the problem: the luckiest of them manages to escape and return to the West.

The effect on the audience: the film's box office was not very impressive - 3,4 million dollars [Born American: Box Office, 1986], but paid back its budget (significant for Finland) was rather modest by Hollywood standards. Consequently its uncomplicated plot was able to attract the attention of the younger audience in the U.S. which was prepared for this kind of spectacle by a long-term anti-Soviet ideological propaganda.

5 Days of August / 5 Days of War. USA-Georgia, 2011. Director Renny Harlin.

Market conditions which determined the concept and the process of creation of the media text. A short war in August 2008 between Russia and Georgia caused by the armed conflict in the region of South Ossetia which separated from Georgia. R. Harlin's film is marked by the clearly expressed pro-Georgian and pro-American ideological position, fully meeting the political conditions prevailing in the Western political study and media approaches.

Author's ideology, value orientations of the media text. The ideological message of the film is still simple and clear: the superiority of pro-Western values of the independent Georgia over great-power policy of Russia.

Historical period, scene of action. South Ossetia and Georgia, August 2008.

The setting, household goods. Towns, villages, mountains, streets and houses in South Ossetia and Georgia, office of the President of Georgia, staff rooms. Tbilisi is represented on screen as a city of ancient beauty, pretty women, laughing children and cozy restaurants. Household goods correspond to the characters' status (the ruling elite, the military, American journalists and civilians).

Methods of representation of reality. Georgian and Ossetian interiors, costumes, etc. are represented in a neutral key, without any grotesque, the national character is seen in the interior and people's clothing in the scene of the Georgian wedding.

The characters, their values, ideas, clothing, constitution, vocabulary, mimics, gestures. Positive characters – sympathetic American journalists, their main aim is to deliver the reliable audio-visual information about the ongoing events to the USA; peaceful Georgian people, noble Georgian soldiers. The vocabulary of the positive characters can be impudent at times, however at crucial moments they stand up for democratic values. Negative characters – spiteful and brutal Russian military men destroying civilians without regret. Russian “commandos” in “Five Days of August” look less grotesque than in “Born American”, although the most ruthless of them are remarkable for their threatening facial expressions and gestures, primitive vocabulary. The characters wear festive (the wedding scene), plain clothes (the journalists), standard military uniform. Physical development of the military characters is clearly above average.

Significant changes in the lives of the characters: the American journalists come to the Georgian wedding, when a surprise attack of Russian forces begins.

Originated problem: the lives of the Americans as well as the lives of the ordinary locals are threatened because of military actions.

Searches for the solution of the problem: the American journalists are trying to survive in war conditions, simultaneously shooting revelatory material about the atrocities of the Russian soldiers which they are trying to deliver to the United States.

The solution of the problem: the American journalists manage to survive and deliver their revelatory report to the U.S. (by the way, they don't manage to do that at once, because according to the authors of the film the Western media broadcast only the Russian version of the events at first).

The effect on the audience: at the cost of \$20 million the film grossed a tiny sum of \$17,500 in the U.S. box office [5 Days of War: Box Office, 2011]. In other Western countries the film was shown only in a few movie theatres and sold on DVD. Thus, despite the anti-Russian campaign of the Western press, connected with the conflict in August 2008, the films' effect on the “target audience” was minimal.

During the discussion of so obviously engaged media texts we draw attention of the student audience to the use of the basic techniques of manipulative influence in these films. For this purpose we use:

- “sifting” information (reasoned selection of true and false in media materials, purification of information from the “rouge” and “labels” by comparing with the actual facts, etc.);
- removing “typical”, “simple folk”, “authority” aureole from information;
- critical analysis of aims and interests of “the agencies”, i.e. the source of information.

Thus the following methods of manipulative influence are analyzed in the classroom:

- **“orchestration” – psychological pressure on the audience in the form of constant repetition of certain facts regardless of the truth.** In the case of “Born American” and “Five Days of August” it is a total emphasis on the positive qualities of the American characters and the negative qualities of the Russian ones;

- **“selection” (“juggling”) – the selection of certain tendencies, for example, only the positive or negative, distortion, exaggeration/understatement of these tendencies.** In R. Harlin's films there is only “black” and “white”, all the positive events are connected with the actions of the American characters, and all the negative events – with the Russian ones;

- **“putting on rouge” (embellishing the facts).** Despite the fact that in “Born American” the American characters commit a number of criminal offenses punishable in any civilized country (illegally crossing the state border, killing several residents of the Russian village), the filmmakers depict them with evident sympathy, as purely positive heroes. In “Five Days of August” the Georgian military men are shown as exceptionally noble warriors without fear and reproach; the fact that they are fighting on the territory of South Ossetia which separated from Georgia 20 years ago (with the people's hostile attitude to Georgian authorities), is almost entirely taken out of the plot;

• **“sticking labels” (e.g. accusatory, insulting, etc.).** In “Five Days of August” all the most negative labels are stuck to the “Russian aggressors”. “The sun is shining, the grass is green, silence, the journalist is standing in a garden. He plucks an unbearably ripe apple from a tree and bites it with a crunch. Cows are passing by. A little spider is stirring he web. A froggie is sitting in the pool. Then alarming music begins to sound, louder and louder. Countless soldiers emerge from the horizon. Infantry, armored vehicles. helicopters. Having killed some civilians, the Russians drive the rest of them together. The Americans manage to shoot a war crime from behind a fence. The leader of the Russians, a giant tattooed blonde with bright Finnish eyes and beautiful Finnish accent (a bit later he will report that the is a Cossack; the actor’s name is Mikko Nousiaynen), demands to give out the mayor and shoots a Georgian old woman dead. Then the others, more or less” [Zelvensky, 2011]. In “Born American” similar labels are awarded to almost all Russian characters (not only the border guards and KGB agents turn out to be negative characters, but also the whole population of the Russian village, even the Orthodox priest is a rapist and a murderer);

• **“playing simple folk”, including for example a most simplified form of information presentation.** This technique is used in both films by R. Harlin: the plot is served in a very simplified form, without semitones, without any deepening into the characters’ psychology and their motives.

The discussion ends with a problem and test question which determines the audience’s skills of media text analysis: “With what media texts can you compare the given work? Why? What do they have in common?”

And I must say that the students who watched Igor Voloshin’s film “Olympus Inferno” (2009) rightly pointed out its obvious resemblance to the “Five Days of August”. To support his position during the discussion one of the students referred to the opinion of some Alexandra posted at the website kino-teatr.ru. Here are some fragments from this text: “As expected, a purely government work. Just imagine, the events took place in August, and a full-length feature film comes out in March! ... Everybody knows that art often serves the purposes of state ideology. ... And don’t tell me that Americans shoot this kind of films, why can’t we shoot them too? Yes, we can, nobody prohibits doing so. But why must we follow the Americans? ... If their movies lie, why do you think ours are truthful? Politics is politics. Nobody will tell you the truth. ... Everything looks pretty stupid. The Russians are good and noble, and the Americans are dumb. ... Everything except skirmish bears ideology! Just listen to their dialogues! In short, it’s not a film, it’s agitation” (<http://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/79821/forum/f2/> 4.04.2009 22:52).

Of course the budget of “Olympus Inferno” was very modest compared to the American counterpart, but thanks to the premiere on Channel One (2009) its audience was incomparably greater. As for the structure of stereotypes of “confrontational” action films, it is very similar to “Five Days of August”. According to the plot a young American Michael goes to South Ossetia on the eve of the war and witnesses the attack of the Georgian troops and shoots a video. Contrary to the claims of the Western media that the big and aggressive Russia attacked the small and independent Georgia, Michael decides to send the video to the United States. Of course violent Georgian military men are trying to stop him... Thus in Igor Voloshin’s film (though not so straightforward and rough as in “Five Days of August”) the similar stereotypes are used, including “orchestration”, “selection”, “putting on rouge”, “sticking labels” and “playing simple folk”. The laws of politically engaged media texts are unfortunately the same...

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Filmography

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5 Days of August / 5 Days of War. USA-Georgia, 2011. Director: R. Harlin. Script-writer: Mikko Alann. Cast: R. Friend, E. Chrigui, R. Coyle, H. Graham and others.

Olympus Inferno. Russia, 2009. Director: I. Voloshin. Script-writers: D. Rodimin, N. Popov, A. Kublitsky, S. Dovzhik. Cast: G. Devid, P. Filonenko, V. Tsalatti, A. Maliya and others.

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Анализ стереотипов политических медиатекстов в исследовании медиасредств студенческой аудиторией (на примере фильма Ренни Харлина «Рожденный американцем» (1986) и “5 дней в августе” (2011))

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Аннотация. Развитие умений анализировать медиатексты является важной целью медиаобразования. Однако практика по медиаграмотности показывает, что у студентов возникают проблемы с обсуждением / анализом некоторых жанров на ранней стадии медиаобучения, например, трудности с процессом понимания и интерпретации авторской концепции, сюжетных и жанровых особенностей. В статье обосновываются методические подходы к анализу политического медиатекста в медиаобучении студенческой аудитории.

Ключевые слова: медиаобразование; медиаграмотность; медиакомпетентность; медиатекст; анализ; университеты; студенты; медиаобучение; фильм; холодная война; стратегия; мировоззрение.