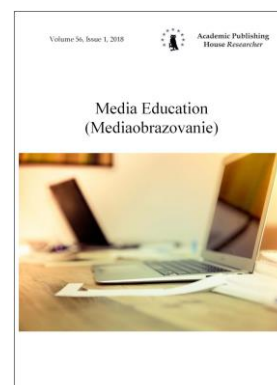


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Hermeneutical Analysis of Feature Films of English-Speaking Countries About University Students

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Abstract

The article is devoted to a hermeneutic analysis of English-language feature films about university students. For this purpose, the article presents an interdisciplinary review of scientific publications on the problem under study, investigates the results of scientific works of researchers in the field of cultural studies, sociology, film criticism, and media criticism. The analysis is based on scientific works written by C. Bazalgette (Bazalgette, 1995), A. Silverblatt (Silverblatt, 2001), U. Eco (Eco, 1998, 2005) and the key concepts of media education: “media agencies”, “media categories”, “media technologies”, “media languages”, “media representations”, “media audiences”. The study outlines the main trends and transformational processes that occurred during the development of English-language films. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the main stereotypes presented in audiovisual media texts, key story models characteristic for different development stages of cinematographic art of the 20th – 21st century, representative models of the most typical characters in terms of ideology, value and life orientations, etc.

Keywords: hermeneutic analysis, audiovisual media text, media criticism, USA, UK, film, students.

1. Introduction

University students have been the most active and progressive part of youth at all times, and it is no accident that films about university and college students evoke constant interest – both among the mass audience, media experts and researchers. This article is devoted to a hermeneutic analysis of feature films about students created in English-speaking countries (including analysis of stereotypes, ideological analysis, identification analysis, iconographic analysis, plot analysis, character analysis, gender analysis, etc.). Following A.V. Fedorov, we believe that a hermeneutic analysis involves comprehension of a media text through comparison with the historical, cultural tradition and reality; penetration into its logic; analysis of a media text through a comparison of media images in the historical and cultural contexts. The technology of this analysis is based on a combination of historical, hermeneutic analyses with structural, plot, ethical, ideological, iconographic / visual analyses, analysis of media stereotypes and media text characters (Fedorov et al, 2018).

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2. Materials and methods

The analysis presented in this research is based on English-language feature films about university students. The research methodological basis is the study of modern scientific works by Russian and foreign authors exploring this topic. The hermeneutic analysis of the English-language films is connected to the concepts worked out by C. Bazalgette ([Bazalgette, 1995](#)), A. Silverblatt ([Silverblatt, 2001](#)), U. Eco ([Eco, 1998; 2005](#)). We also rely on key media education concepts: media agencies, media/media text categories, media technologies, media languages, media representations and media audiences.

The following methods were used in this research: hermeneutic analysis of audiovisual media texts, comparison and classification, descriptive and analytical methods, and historiographical methods.

3. Discussion

Various researches have been devoted to different aspects of English-language feature films about university students. For example, B. Osgerby's studies concern representations of the younger generation in the media. His analysis reflects the socio-cultural changes that took place in the British mass media including films about youth made in the second half of the 20th century. The author notes that the media representation of the younger generation reflects social changes in society as a whole; it has an invariably metaphorical structure – “a metaphor for both the perceived hopes and fears of society. ... They are the recollections of youthful experience seen through a lens of popular discourse and subsequent life events” ([Osgerby, 2005: 422](#)). Positive images of young people of the first half of the 20th century, for whom youth was “eternal pleasure” ([Osgerby, 2005: 422](#)), prevailed in feature films of that period but gradually lost their carelessness.

Though screen images of university students presented in feature films of the 1960s and 1970s were rather positive, such enthusiasm was not universal, even in the midst of the teenager consumer cult the concept of “youth as an eternal pleasure” was accompanied by more gloomy images of youth – representations associated with the worst excesses and the most negative consequences of social changes ([Osgerby, 2005: 426](#)).

In later periods of the cinematography, images of student youth acquired an increasingly negative color. For example, British students' remonstrative attitude towards political events and the economic recession accompanied by unemployment and growth of social injustice caused a situation where a new counterculture was perceived as a direct breakdown of law and order in the country. University riots and demonstrations against the war in Vietnam were presented by mass media as an activity of subversive elements that seek to completely destroy the social and moral order in the country ([Osgerby, 2005: 429](#)).

During the 1980s and 1990s, active development of a new consumption society accompanied by displaying such negative youth phenomena in the British mass media as racial problems, negativism, drug addiction and juvenile delinquency contributed to creating media images of students as rather idle and negative young people. Gradually, this image was significantly transformed: contemporary cinematography increasingly began to focus on issues concerning relationships, changes in life values and worldview.

These trends can be observed both in British and American cinema that quickly and confidently took a leading position in the Western film distribution of the 20th century. Though initially the “Dream Factory” presented images of idealized students who experienced no financial difficulties and were absorbed with complex personal relationships with the opposite sex, later viewers could see quite different characters living in the adult world which is not always fair and full of contradictions.

Thus, D. James, considering the peculiarities of the American cinema in the 1960s, emphasizes the influence of social and political events on the representation of media images: the Beat Generation, Students for a Democratic Society, Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, hippies and the counterculture, the war in Vietnam, the Weathermen, the New Morality and the Women's Equality Movement. These are just some of the influential movements and social phenomena in the US that arose as a result of the diverse, ever-changing, continuous process of political and cultural activities ([James, 2002](#)). All these phenomena, in some or other way, were reflected in films created in English-speaking countries.

An extensive analysis of the teacher's image represented in Western films is given in works by T. Brown (Brown, 2011, 2015). The author singles out five major social roles of teachers represented in the cinema in different periods of its development. In the first four categories, according to T. Brown, the teacher acts as a key character in an audiovisual media text, and whatever errors of his activity are portrayed on the screen, the viewer can see that the teacher is doing everything possible to help his students improve and occupy a worthy place in life in the end. But in the modern cinema the role of the teacher has changed: teachers become more inert and formal; they stick to bureaucratic obstacles and disappointments instead of a noble role of preparing students for joining the adult society (Brown, 2015). A striking example here is a character from the movie *Irrational Man* (2015) – Lucas, Professor of Philosophy, who has little interest in life except for his own disillusionments and failures.

D.A. Korosteleva studies the theme of youth protests in the American cinema of the 1960s and 1970s (Korosteleva, 2002). Considering these issues of American cinema in this time interval, D.A. Korosteleva also addresses the transformational processes taking place in the representation of student youth under the influence of the counterculture, noting that “marginal culture has saved its hero from the necessity to be a bearer of positive traits, a role model, an ethical and aesthetic guide. In the 1960s, an absolutely unprecedented type of hero appears in American cinema that rejects all the traits traditionally interpreted as heroic. The counterculture abandoned upbringing based on giving positive examples (which did not exist in reality) and turned primarily to satire, grotesque or a mere statement of facts” (Korosteleva, 2002).

A study conducted by A. Artyukh revealed that “youth issues, sex, violence, rock and roll in the late 1960s and early 1970s were simply a salvation for Hollywood that seriously distraught in the face of significant demographic and social changes brought by the 1960s” (Artyukh, 2010). Later, in the 1970s, new trends emerged in American cinema related to commercialization and simultaneous transformation of the youth image on the screen: “craving for breaking the generally accepted norms, novelty and shocking behavior significantly decreased; there was a taste for art which gave pleasure and did not impose moral problems (television series and melodramas became popular, abstractionism and conceptualism lost their popularity). In short, there was born a paradoxical effect: the counterculture began to be regarded both as a source of “neo-conservatism” and as a reason for all the subsequent changes in American cultural and social life based on the fear of the social movements of the 1960s” (Korosteleva, 2002).

In modern conditions, Hollywood has taken a dominant position in the film industry about students since “most of the world's film hits belong to US cinema. Hollywood film makers create lifestyle values and attitudes in the minds of masses” (Bosov, 2017: 70).

Considering the thematic-genre structure of an American youth film, V.V. Zharikova comes to the conclusion that “a youth film is determined by the age of its main characters and a definite system of characters' dramatic relationships (conflict with parents and / or other adults, first love, peer misunderstanding, need for self-affirmation in the community); at a formal level it must reflect a vivid trend in the culture of mass or counterculture” (Zharikova, 2015: 8).

In fact, English-language film production about students, one way or another, raised the “eternal” themes of adolescence throughout all stages of its development – search for oneself in the adult world, love experiences, preparation for an independent life, professional growth, etc. These issues found reflection in the very first films about students such as, for example, *Student Prince in Old Heidelberg* (1927) telling about a strong romantic feeling of the Austrian prince to an ordinary barmaid; a tragic fate of a college girl-student in the drama *Confessions of a Co-Ed* (1931) who got pregnant by the man she was in love with, but circumstances prevented their marrying and she had to marry her fellow-student. Another film image – Sabrina, the main character in the film *Confessions of a Sorority Girl* (1994), who aspired to achieve the position of a college leader by lying, cheating, blackmailing, seduction and manipulation. Later, these challenges associated with the growth of student youth were reflected in the film *The Student Teacher* (1973) telling about intending students; the film *How I Got into College* (1989) telling a story of a young man whose beloved girl inspired him to go to college with her.

Student world reflected in English-language films at different stages was rather changeable – carelessness of wealthy and prosperous students of the 1930s-1950s gave way to the rebellious spirit and emergence of the youth counterculture in the 1960s and 1970s, and later on, the

themes of lawlessness, racial discrimination, sexual minorities, and drug addiction found reflection on the screen.

Another topic increasingly used in modern Western films about studentship in recent decades is the problem of the so-called “special man”. According to Y.G. Voronetskaya-Sokolova, this term characterizes “a person with a disability and maladies that disrupt the human life activities determining his special needs” (Voronetskaya-Sokolova, 2016).

It should be noted that this topic has been exploited in English-language cinema since the early 1930s: films *Life Begins in College* (1937) and *The Miracle Worker* (1962) are also devoted to it.

According to Y.G. Voronetskaya-Sokolova, the image of the “special man” in later feature films changed significantly under the influence of the political and socio-cultural context and “also certain changes in the film aesthetics. Present-day images of “special people”, like never before, turn into iconic figures of the screen, and this has become a natural response to the query of time. In this case, the meaning of the image is revealed only in the communicative situation – through the viewer’s perception of it, and the outcome of these subject-object relations depends on the perceiving personality, his goals, momentary mood and general culture context” (Voronetskaya-Sokolova, 2016).

In fact, there are a lot of English-language films about students with disabilities, young people with various physical and mental disorders. Among them – the film *Mask* (1985) telling about brave and resolute Rocky Dennis who manages to find his place in society and deserve people’s respect despite a serious illness; the film *Won’t Back Down* (2012) is a story about a bureaucratic approach to students with serious health problems; another story about a responsive speech college teacher falling for a beautiful yet deaf girl in a small school is told in the movie *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), etc.

4. Results

English-language films about university: place of action; historical, sociocultural, political, and ideological contexts

Historical period of media texts

English-language films about university and college students, to some extent, reflect social, economic and moral challenges characteristic of a particular stage in the development of film making. For example, the cinema of the 1930s-1950s opposing the “Great Depression” and the first time of the “American dream” that opened boundless opportunities for every young person regardless of origin and material wealth was characterized by a desire for a relatively light image of student life full of romantic adventures, music and entertainment (*College Humor*, 1933; *College Swing*, 1938; *Hold That Co-ed*, 1938; *Good News*, 1947; *She’s Working Her Way through College*, 1952; *The Affairs of Dobie Gillis*, 1953; *Bright Road*, 1953; *The Student Prince*, 1954; *Merry Andrew*, 1958, etc.).

Films showing student issues of the later 1960s-1970s, at any rate, touched upon the theme of youth protest and countercultural manifestations involving students. These phenomena are reflected in the films of this period as a violation of the generally accepted norms of behavior by young people, their shocking behavior and demonstration of social independence (*Pretty Maids All in a Row*, 1971; *Why Shoot the Teacher?*, etc.). These trends were dictated by social challenges of the time (the Vietnam War, the economic crisis, the sexual revolution, etc.).

Some time later, the era of avoiding acute social problems, numerous comedies and melodramas revealing relationships of young people and understanding the inner world of student youth replaced these trends (*French Postcards*, 1979; *Some Kind of Wonderful*, 1987; *How I Got into College*, 1989, etc.). There were stories about romantic or even mercantile teacher-students relationships among similar plots of the 1990s (*Foreign Student*, 1994; *Tina and the Professor*, 1995; *Foxfire*, 1996, etc.).

At the same time, the themes of youth crime, violence, drug addiction, freedom of manners, racial hatred and negative value orientations of the younger generation became more frequent in films about student life (*Foxes*, 1980; *Student Bodies*, 1981; *They’re Playing with Fire*, 1984; *Dangerously Close*, 1986; *Heathers*, 1988; *Stand and Deliver*, 1988; *The Chocolate War*, 1988; *Lean on Me*, 1989; *Politically Correct University*, 1994; *Foreign Student*, 1994; *Confessions of a Sorority Girl*, 1994; *Higher Learning*, 1995; *One Eight Seven*, 1997; *Notes on a Scandal*, 2006; *Bouquet of Barbed Wire*, 2010, etc.).

Sociocultural, ideological and religious contexts

Ideology, trends, objectives, world outlook, concepts of these media texts authors in the sociocultural context; ideology and culture of the world depicted in media texts

English-language films about students created in the 1930s-1950s are permeated with optimism and carelessness of student youth. It is no coincidence that there are so many musical films and comedies among them: *College Rhythm* (1934), *Life Begins in College* (1937), *Hold That Co-ed* (1938), *College Swing* (1938), *Merry Andrew* (1958), etc. The university teacher in the films of this period appears to the audience as a wise and fair mentor who defends students' interests (for example, professor from the comedy *She's Working Her Way through College*, 1952).

Speaking of the films shot in the 1960s and 1970s, according to D.A. Korosteleva, cinematography increasingly appealed to the "universal model of alternative behavior mainly composed of heterogeneous external manifestations (drugs, violence, alienation, denial) which gradually turned into some archetypal phenomenon firmly embedded in all forms and kinds of art. The external attributes of the counterculture in films, books, etc., even without any relation to the problems, is subconsciously associated by viewers with characters' belonging to an alternative social strata, and they consider the characters' behavior as a conscious or unconscious protest against some generally accepted norms regardless of whether the characters are actually bearers of this protest or not" (Korosteleva, 2002).

The representation of the teacher's image in film production also underwent a significant transformation. Real characters solving various professional and personal challenges replaced idealized images. Films of that period reflected the desire to reform the existing system and presented a new look at teacher-student relationships.

As for gender representations, unlike films about schools, most university teachers in the films (with some minor exceptions) are men. The student community is represented by both young men and girls.

Characters' world view in media texts

Students' world outlook concerns love, optimism, aspiration to achieve a high position in society. The dominant ideological values presented in the films about studentship are love, friendship, mutual understanding, search for like-minded people, belief that the brightest dreams will necessarily come true.

Life of most student characters is often associated with entertainment (not always within the law), love adventures, romance, and much less attention is paid to college or university studies.

The outlook of marginal representatives of the student community that often appear on the screen especially in the second half of the 20th century, as a rule, is deprived of the desire for high life motives: life is full of betrayal, deception, negativism and injustice, and personal time is occupied by empty talking about sex, drugs, and "easy money".

If we turn to the world outlook of university teachers presented in the analyzed English-language films, their life values are focused not only on professional issues. Alongside with pedagogical challenges, they pay much attention to personal well-being, family life, struggle with internal contradictions and experiences.

Structure and narration techniques in media texts

Place and time of action

The time frame for most English-language feature films about students corresponds to the period displayed on the screen. Action most often unfolds not only at a university, campus or college. The most traditional places for students' pastime include cafes, bars, dance floors, parks, streets, highways or roads, etc. D.A. Korosteleva notes that "characters are almost never isolated from the environment: along with the aesthetics of the machine world, cinematography focuses on the permanent fixation of mass gatherings (discos, bars, clubs, institutions, busy streets), that is, spaces where there is always disunity with the appearance of community" (Korosteleva, 2002).

Typical environment and household items

Most films about university students present a comfortable environment of a prosperous and financially secured student's world. Well-off characters have a well-organized private space: they live in well-furnished rooms, have everything necessary for living and entertainment, get to the

university on private cars, and do not spare money for cafes and bars. A stereotyped image of the living conditions of negative characters represents a different picture: shabby furniture, unsanitary living conditions, bad taste and kitsch. At the same time, both positive and negative characters are often found in the same leisure places - in public gardens, youth clubs, discos, etc.

Genre modifications

Genre typology of feature films about university students is represented by comedies, dramas and musical films. The later periods are characterized by a significant increase in the number of dramas and melodramas, horror films, thrillers and erotic films.

(Stereotyped) narrative techniques of representing reality

As V.V. Zharikova rightly notes, “most of youth films characters are stereotyped; they pass from one narrative to another for many decades” (Zharikova, 2015: 12). In fact, very often one can define images of characters of several types in student-themed films, among which there is a positive character who is most often opposed by a sufficiently strong rival (marginal, criminal, etc.); a “bad guy” or a loser who often becomes a real hero after coping with severe life challenges; a romantic and helpless beauty; representatives of youth subcultures or countercultures; fans of music trends, etc. Representatives of various ethnic groups (Asians, Afro-Americans, Mexicans, etc.), followers of various religious faiths; representatives of a non-traditional sexual orientation joined these typical film characters in later English-language films (*In , Out*, 1997; *When Night Is Falling*, 1995; *The Seminarian*, 2010, etc.).

Very often one can see an image of a benevolent and creative teacher who is opposed to a dictator educationalist. Alongside with these types of teachers we frequently meet instructors – organization men or bureaucrats on the screen; also disappointed teachers suffering from professional burnout; teachers striving to combat the existing system of education and established models of teacher-student relationship. It is increasingly possible to meet a university teacher in the films of recent years who is not always able to resist cruelty and violence among students (*One Eight Seven*, 1997; *Murder 101: College Can Be Murder*, 2007; *April Showers*, 2009; *Dead on Campus*, 2014, etc.).

Types of characters

Character’s age: the age of the student audience, as a rule, corresponds to the age category of late adolescence. The age of university teachers can be different.

Level of education: students represented in the analyzed English-language films are school leavers or college graduates. University lecturers, as a rule, have higher education degrees. The education level of other characters may be different.

Social status, profession: the majority of students come from well-off families with no financial problems. As a rule, students’ parents occupy a rather high social position. Among them you can meet professors, teachers, judges, directors and owners of large companies, police officers, etc. However, in many student-themed films, students’ families do not reach the attention of the audience, and the student appears as a completely independent young man for whom friends and fellow-students are the closest associates.

Character’s marital status: a significant part of the students do not have a family yet and are actively searching for a life partner.

As far as university teachers are concerned, their family life is also far from idyllic. Loneliness, disappointment or lack of mutual understanding in family life is a frequent phenomenon in the representation of a university educator image in English-language feature films.

Character’s appearance, clothing, constitution, temperament, and vocabulary: the appearance and vocabulary of the majority of students in the films created in the 1930s-1950s were in the framework of external decencies and did not violate the generally accepted rules of social behavior. Student images shown in films of later periods are quite different: they often have an evocative appearance (especially members of some youth counterculture), tattoos, hairstyles and clothes indicating that they belong to a certain youth subculture, etc.

The vocabulary of the student community is also ambiguous: alongside with characters who speak a good literary language there are students who use not only youth slang but also profanity in their speech (although, to a much lesser extent, than in English-language films about school). Students often prefer discussing personal relationships and their well-being to talking about education issues.

Most students are rather fit and comply with the generally accepted canons of youth, adolescence and beauty. If there are obese characters with excess weight in the films, as a rule, they are represented as outcasts, losers or objects of mockery and jesting.

The most characteristic features of the modern student community are pronounced individualism, purposefulness and aspiration for career growth. Sometimes the attainment of a goal determines the choice of any means regardless of their moral component (*Tina and the Professor*, 1995; *The Student*, 2017, etc.).

The appearance of teachers is also presented ambiguously. In the films of earlier periods the image of a university teacher was more reserved (a classical costume, a strict dress, a neat hairstyle, etc.); in contemporary films the image of the teacher is getting more and more democratic, and in comedies it is often comical.

Significant change in characters' life and the problem that occurred (violation of the usual mode of life):

Variant № 1 (students): the character finds himself beyond a standard, habitual life due to some new conditions or events. The most typical situations are the following:

- fellow-students or friends reject the character or the character aspires to join a sufficiently closed group at any price (*Confessions of a Sorority Girl*, 1994; *Dead on Campus*, 2014, etc.);
- the character is becoming mature thus adapting to the new role of an independent person. Often, the character has to sort out internal contradictions, to resist the majority, or revise own views on life values (*Foxes*, 1980; *Just One of the Guys*, 1987; *Heathers*, 1988; *Saved by the Bell: The College Years*, 1993; *Higher Learning*, 1995; *Good Will Hunting*, 1997; etc.).

Variant № 2 (teachers):

The character goes beyond the generally accepted social framework of teaching or behaving:

- the character chooses innovative or non-traditional methods of teaching or behavior, usually in the name of justice (*Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, 1977; *Children of a Lesser God*, 1986; *Stand and Deliver*, 1988; *Lean on Me*, 1989; *Waterland*, 1992; *One Eight Seven*, 1997; *Good Will Hunting*, 1997; *Lesson 21*, 2008; *The Perfect Student*, 2011; *The Student*, 2017; etc.).
- the character chooses incorrect or immoral models of interaction with students (*They're Playing with Fire*, 1984; *The Chocolate War*, 1988; *Tina and the Professor*, 1995; *Irrational Man*, 2015; *Killer Coach*, 2016; etc.).

Solution to the problem (students): the characters have to overcome a number of obstacles, undergo self-cultivation, learn to win and find a way out of a difficult situation to achieve their goal.

Solution to the problem (teachers): the teacher tries to correct the existing state of things using a tactful and confidential approach to students, new teaching methods and different treatment of students. Far from always (especially in films of the last two decades) the teacher-student relationships acquire the generally accepted model of a teacher and a student. In some cases, they acquire a romantic color or indicate a violation of moral and social standards.

5. Conclusion

The hermeneutic analysis of English-language feature films about university students has enabled us to draw the conclusions that this theme has always been popular in audiovisual media texts:

- film makers have invariably turned to problems concerning higher education, students' entry into adulthood, teacher-student interaction, promotion of value priorities for young people at all stages of cinematography from the silent cinema to the present stage of its development;
- genre specificity of feature films about students has expanded significantly with the development of the film industry. While the first half of the 20th century was presented by dramas, melodramas, comedies and musical films, later on horror films, thrillers and science-fiction films prevailed;
- representation of student life, as a rule, is based on a stereotypical depiction of reality characteristic of a particular sociocultural stage. Changes in the social, cultural and ideological spheres are reflected, to some extent, in audiovisual media texts;
- the image of a student at different stages of English-language cinematography is essentially changing: this is a reckless but at the same time a rather modest young man who values romantic relationships in the films released in the first half of the 20th century; later representatives of youth subcultures, morally and behaviorally liberated young people come to replace this image; many of

them are ready to violate not only moral but also legal norms including disorderly love connections, use of alcohol and drugs, criminal actions for the sake of personal success;

- images of university teachers have also undergone a significant transformation. Alongside with highly professional and erudite teachers there appear exhausted and indifferent teachers on the screen; their behavior and appearance became more relaxed, their conduct sometimes does not comply with the norms of pedagogical ethics and morality;

- the content of English-language feature films underwent significant alterations depending on sociocultural changes: shifting of social, economic, political and moral priorities, one way or another, influenced the representation of student life. Nevertheless, the key vectors in many student-themed feature films have remained unchanged: the theme of love, friendship, justice, pursuit of a dream.

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