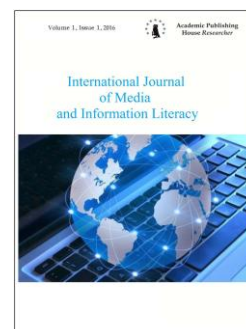


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Hermeneutical Analysis of the Film *Dead Poets Society*

Olga Gorbatkova ^{a,*}, Anastasia Levitskaya ^b

^a Rostov State University of Economics, Russian Federation

^b Taganrog Institute of Management and Economics, Russian Federation

Abstract

The article is devoted to hermeneutical analysis of the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989, directed by Peter Weir). Reviews of Russian and foreign film critics are included into the analysis. The author presents the historical, ideological, political, social and cultural contexts, that influenced the film production; the main characters, the narrative structure and techniques used by the media text's producers.

Interpreting the results of hermeneutical analysis of the film *Dead Poets Society* the authors come to conclusion that:

– the media text clearly shows the main trends of the state policy in the educational, social and cultural fields;

– the plot does not directly reflect the important events in the political life of the country, but there is a certain trace. Socio-political, economic objectives, ideological upbringing, religious education to varying degrees are reflected in the storyline of the media text (fundamental values are family, religion, love, loyalty, justice, generosity, kindness, mutual assistance, ability to take responsibility for actions, etc.);

– the plot is immersed in the educational process, only slightly touches on love themes and is absolutely devoid of sex scenes;

– the media text's concept is: socio-moral struggle (for personal happiness, love, truth, right for self-identification, freely express one's thoughts and ideas, etc.); confrontation against teachers' dullness, conservatism, bureaucratic approach;

– this media text gives the idealized image of the teacher: intellectual, competent, respectful communicator of humanistic moral values and norms of behavior;

– students' activity is centered around education and self-identity;

– this media text promotes the humanistic ideal of a romantic character, attractive for the high moral and human qualities;

– the film's authors present a strict social distance between teachers and students; unwavering authority and respect for the teacher, the prestige of the teaching profession in the eyes of students.

Keywords: hermeneutical analysis, film, media text, teacher, school, students.

1. Introduction

The article presents the hermeneutic analysis of the film *Dead Poets Society* (USA, 1989)

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: gorbatkova.olga@yandex.ru (O. Gorbatkova),
a.levitskaya@tmei.ru (A. Levitskaya)

directed by Peter Weir - one of the unique film productions of the 1980s, the narrative formula of which is driven by the school theme. This work raises some very important and still topical today, problems of the educational system as a whole: the role and significance of the teacher in the lives of students, the relationship of children and parents, the manifestation of selfishness on the part of adults towards children, the search for one's calling and purpose in life, professional and personal self identification.

Evidently, far not every teacher, like the protagonist of Peter Weir's film, will dare to fight routine or take on the mission of dramatically changing the established educational system at school and school's lifestyle, even clearly recognizing the acute importance and the need for change. In this context, we believe that the film *Dead Poets Society* can make a difference in young generation's outlook which is still at the stage of formation, although the audience of the film is by no means limited to this age category.

We set the objective to conduct a hermeneutic analysis of the film (as an audiovisual media text) through comparison with the cultural tradition and reality; deconstruction of the logic of the media text; the disclosure of the influence of historical, political, and religious factors on the point of view of the author and the audience.

2. Materials and methods

The research material is an audiovisual media text on the school theme; the main method is the hermeneutic analysis of the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989), including: the analysis of stereotypes, ideological analysis, identification analysis, iconographic analysis, plot analysis, character analysis, etc.). The review of related literature by international film critics and scholars (Gallo, 2016; Keyes, 1999; Overstreet, 2014; Puccio, 2006; Schwartz, 2011; Thompson, 2004, etc.) and Russian researchers (Kudryavtsev, 2008; Nefedov, 2009; Podolnikova, 2018; Usov, 1995) has been made, too.

It is important to add that the media analysis technologies authored by C. Bazalgette (Bazalgette, 1995), A. Silverblatt (Silverblatt, 2001: 80-81), W.J. Potter (Potter, 2001), U. Eco (Eco, 2005) and A. Fedorov (Fedorov, 2016; 2017; 2018) serve as the fundamental basis for the presented hermeneutic analysis.

3. Discussion

The film received critics' praise (BAFTA Award for Best Film, César Award, David di Donatello Award for Best Foreign Film, Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay) and became a success with the audience. It can be assumed that *Dead Poets Society* is one of the few legendary film productions on school topic, not only in the history of American cinema but on the international scale as well.

The film takes place in the late 1950s in Vermont, in a prestigious private men's school Welton with longstanding established educational traditions and strict rules. The educational institution's philosophy is based on four postulates: tradition, honor, discipline and perfection. The manifestation of individualism, independence, freedom of expression, rebellious moods within the school walls, is not encouraged.

In general, this is the story of young boys who are endowed with certain abilities and want to realize their desires and dreams, who enter this school not on their own initiative, but at the will and insistence of dictatorial parents. Nevertheless, the life of young film characters is subject to change, and strict weekdays are replaced by a series of bright events, innovations and ambiguous situations. Many of these changes are due to a new literature teacher John Keating, characterized by a very unusual approach to the organization of the educational process, which sharply contrasts to the teaching techniques of his colleagues - adherents of the "traditional schooling". John Keating is an ardent opponent of conformist views and judgments, boring, monotonous classes, clear algorithms, and the presence of rigor and rigidity in the pedagogical process. "To his Welton superiors, Keating is a troublemaker who strays too far from Welton's acceptable teaching policies" (Gallo, 2016).

The authors of the media text create the image of a teacher who unfolds pedagogical activity, not conditioned by the constrained boundaries of the "traditional school". Keating's teaching practices are laced with kindness, humor, and enthusiasm. All this let the audience think that the students' zeal for acquiring knowledge has been triggered by mutually respectful relationship with

the teacher and not in compliance with discipline.

An energetic pedagogue captivately reads poems and draws the attention of school boys to the fact that life is rapid and fleeting, and it is necessary to be guided by the principle "Carpe diem" that is "Ceize the day" in Latin. This philosophy permeates the narration, beginning with the first frames and ending with the culmination scene. One can agree that *Dead Poets Society* "doesn't have the action sequences or special effects that seem to insure ... success. Still, it's a film that deserves to be seen" (Gallo, 2016).

At first, the new teacher arouses surprise among young people with his eccentricity: John Keating urges students to address him: "O Captain! My Captain!", which some students find embarrassing. However, very quickly high school students feel respect for the teacher and begin to study literature with passion, take an interest in poetry. What is important – the new professor's teaching techniques are not rejected by the students, but, on the contrary, activate their interest and avid desire to receive new knowledge.

The teacher tries to broaden the pupils' horizons, to teach them to appreciate every day of their lives, moreover, to live it with interest and benefit, to think and reason, determine life goals and plans: "Now, my class, you will learn to think for yourselves again. You will learn to savor words and language. No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world".

Keating wants to save the obedient boys, however spoiled by wealth, from a narrow understanding of the success imposed by society (Overstreet, 2014). "And medicine, law, business, engineering – these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love – these are what we stay alive for", he says. Art, he is convinced, can help the young heart to be guided by conscience and passion as a life compass. Of course, John Keating starts with destroying well-established stereotypes, he takes students outside the classroom, encourages them to explore an unknown world (Overstreet, 2014). At one of the lessons, the teacher makes the students tear the pages of introduction out of the textbook, believing that "Armies of academics going forward, measuring poetry. No! We'll not have that here... Now, my class, you will learn to think for yourselves again".

After a while, students learn that Keating was a member of the unsanctioned Dead Poets Society while he was at Welton. One of the most promising students, Neil restarts the club and contrary to all prohibitions, children sneak off to the cave at nights, recite their favorite poems, funny or horror stories, reflect on life, sing songs, play music. Thus, the club "Dead Poets Society" becomes a kind of the world model where the characters would like to live.

What happens at the beginning in the form of "madness" acquires a healing rational foundation, the attitudes of high school students are being transformed. For example, Neil discovers his heart set on acting, gets the role in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and realizes that acting might be his vocation. His friend finds courage to confesses his romantic feelings to the girl, being aware that this can turn into big trouble for him. Thus, "changes affect the dozing souls, and they rise to the struggle between the "I" and the crowd – an eternal conflict, but new each time" (Podolnikova, 2018).

For all that, the tragic turn in the film happens when those, who the future fate of the young man, Neil, depends on, are not at all eager to show sensitivity, and respect for his choice and awareness of his future calling. Neil's father, seeing the son's talent on the stage, feels that Neil can realize himself more fully than he does. But father who lives in his isolated world will never admit it to himself (Overstreet, 2014).

The fact is *Dead Poets Society's* author's approach reflects the dominant socio-cultural situation of the conservative 1950s, when it was still customary to obey patriarchal traditions, so Neil, whose father wants him to become a doctor, is only one of the many. But it is he who is entrusted with the mission of striving to be himself to the last, so that in the balance this aspiration will outweigh the life. However, even this, undoubtedly, dramaturgically strong moment is not the true culmination (Podolnikova, 2018). Neil Perry's suicide could have cooled down the enthusiasm of his classmates, but in reality it only reminds of the responsibility that must be borne by every choice and deed committed, turning out to be the last and most an important lesson, learned by the boys (Nefedov, 2009).

The author's assessment of the confrontation between conservative and creative approaches, the spatial limitation of one approach and freedom, openness to the other's world of the other, is revealed by purely plastic, visual means ... the clock chimes at the Town Hall, the circular rise of

birds off the lake, and the next shot – also a circular motion during a noisy break between classes (the camera is placed at the bottom of the stairs, and up the steps are chattering kids). In contrast to birds, the movement of students is limited by this span, it is closed, set, programmed by the space of the school building, the discipline of the training requirements, the framework of the educational system, which seems to have proved its advantages (Usov, 1995).

A powerful emotional impact is exercised by the closing scene of the film. Perhaps, it is one of the strongest finales in film history. When John Keating is fired, he enters the classroom to pick up his things during the lesson, and tension is broken by one of the students standing up on the desk and saluting him: *O, Captain, my Captain!* Then more and more students jump on their desks, too and solemnly repeat this phrase again and again. And this, perhaps, is above all praise for the teacher, solace and gratitude.

Dead Poets Society raises eternal problems, and the predictability of the finale does not disappoint, but justifies the audience's hopes: main characters are no longer burdened with misleading attitudes, their thoughts are independent, and so they are free. The film succeeds at giving one a deep breath of the thirst for change, the desire of the young men locked in college to free themselves from their parents and obligations, to explore a new, hitherto unknown world ... Poetry serves merely as a conductor of electricity: it is not a sin to try, as it is not a sin to try yourself in something different besides imposed by others. ... In fact, Keating's methods can be treated differently. In general, his unconventional approach, charisma (performed by Robin Williams) wins over. He tells the boys the right things: live full life, so that at the end of your journey you have something to remember, so that you do not regret that you lived a gray, pale, empty, ordinary life (Mor, 2007).

We agree with S. Kudryavtsev that "Peter Weir directed a good and clever picture of adolescents ... The young mentor not only through the mystery of *Dead Poets Society*, introduces students to the subject of English literature, perhaps not that critical for their future careers. He also unobtrusively, delicately, with true respect to the personality, through his behavior teaches moral lessons, explaining those truths that somehow are considered commonplace and are instilled, as a rule, by force. A high level of the director's effort is also noticeable in the painstaking and thoughtful of Peter Weir's teamwork with the teenagers, who made up a wonderful and, most importantly, natural and emotional actors' ensemble. Therefore, without a stretch, you can compare Weir himself with his amazing main character, Professor Keating, who will remain his pupils' kind and grateful memory (Kudryavtsev, 2008).

The distinguished media educator Stal Penzin (1932-2011) appreciated *Dead Poets Society*: "In contemporary cinema I do not know another work, where the second, spiritual life program of the youth was so full. Poetry and theater are not just part of the school curriculum, they permeate their thoughts and dreams, become the meaning of existence. ... I think the film is consciously aimed at confronting modern teenagers from vulgar American films" (Penzin, 2009: 430).

However, despite the abundance of positive reviews, there have also been some sharply negative opinions, asserting, for example, that "Keating's ways of striking out new ground mostly superficial, immature, problematic, risky and highly manipulative. Though the villain here is not Keating (he just seems like the fool who doesn't realize he's taking himself too seriously and is unwisely leaving himself open to anything bad that might happen to his students). The true villains are the caricatured ones, such as the rigid parents who don't listen to their children and the inflexible conventional educators who don't listen to their hearts" (Schwartz, 2011). Keyes agrees that situations in the film are shameful, static and manipulative (Keyes, 1999), some other critics add that they are too stereotypical, predictable and implausible (Puccio, 2006; Thompson, 2004).

We are not inclined to agree with these statements, the message of the media text being to be able to find oneself in a vast world and to gain the right of an autonomous world outlook ("But only in their dreams can men be truly free. 'Twas always thus, and always thus will be"), the teacher does create conditions and circumstances that assist students to transform their worldview, be able to express their own opinion, point of view. We believe that *Dead Poets Society* belongs to the rare kind of drama films that contribute to the awareness of the life value.

4. Results

The hermeneutic analysis of the film Dead Poets Society (1989)

Setting, historical, cultural, political, ideological contexts. Peculiarities of the historical

period when the media text was created, market conditions that contribute to the idea and the process of producing the media text, the degree of influence of events of that time on the media text.

The media text was created at the end of the 1980s, the time when in American cinema there was a tendency of intensive increase in audio-visual texts on school/student theme. At that time American audiovisual texts were less politicized than in the previous decade, the style of the 1980s' movies was lighter, more glossy and far less ironic and ambiguous than in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Prince, 2007: 8). Nevertheless, as in the 1970s, the characteristic feature of the majority of the Western countries' films about school and university life in the 1980s was the demonstration of freedom in depicting adolescent sexuality.

Against this background, *Dead Poets Society* is very different from that kind of audiovisual media texts, offering dramatic narrative structure and convincing picture of private school education system in the 1950s, taking into account the cultural, political and ideological contexts, which however, were related to the disturbing situation in mass American school of the 1980s, when it turned out that in the richest and most developed country of the capitalist world, 26 million citizens cannot read or write, and about 72 million are so-called functionally illiterate (meeting a minimum standard of literacy) (Paynter, 1983: 49). It is noteworthy that this crisis was rooted in the late 1950s, when in the process of restructuring the secondary education system, a course was taken to create an "educated elite" of society. This contributed to the emergence of a number of negative factors: reducing the level of requirements for the majority of students; elimination of some important subjects from the mass school programs. Moreover, the situation was aggravated by the lack of financial resources and poor quality of teaching, which gave rise to talk about the "mortal danger" hanging over American public schools (Paynter, 1983: 49). The struggle for the democratization of secondary education, the central theme of which was the elimination of private schools, forced the elites in the 60–70s to decrease their open support for private educational institutions. However calls for "school pluralism" in the early 1980s meant renewal of the endorsement of the system of private schools, the provision of financial assistance, and state subsidies (Paynter, 1983: 50).

The crisis of the American system of public education has become one of the content components of important problems: the growth of society's stratification; the strengthening of antagonisms in society, which accompanied the development of society in the post-war period. That said, the degree of influence of the events taking place in the period, which accounts for the creation of P. Weir's film, was mediated. *Dead Poets Society* focuses neither on the economic and political problems of American society, nor on the love story lines (which are very common in American/European film industry in 1970 - 1980), but first of all it spotlights the role of education, teacher-student relations, parents and children, finding one's calling in life.

The worldview/attitudes of the media text's characters

The world outlook/attitudes of schoolchildren in the *Dead Poets Society* is connected with the desire to gain knowledge and determine the choice of profession that will let them excel in future, life path, the search for one's destiny and place in life, gaining independence and the right to make decisions. In general, student characters are optimists, friends who are ready to help and support at a difficult moment, they are purposeful, sincerely devoted to their dream. At the beginning of the film, young people are completely controlled by authoritarian parents, who deprive them of independence and autonomy, freedom to express their point of view. But then serious changes related to the acquisition of their true personalities occur.

The hierarchy of values in the media text

Leading values of the characters in the analyzed media text include such important landmarks as education, acquiring professional skills, self-realization in life, family, friendship, love, respect, tolerance, justice, decency, honesty, striving for moral and spiritual ideals. Unselfishness, kindness, loyalty, purposefulness, mutual understanding, teenage love, respect for the authority of the older generations and teachers, are inherent to them.

The stereotype of the characters' success lies in following the highest values of friendship, devotion, love, the ability not only to dream, but also to make independent decisions, to take responsibility for oneself and the collective. There are no material values in the foreground of the media text, but spiritual and moral ones. Self-realization in a professional, creative way, in romantic relationship, the ability to consciously and maturely determine life goals and plans –

these are the basic ideas of the characters about success.

Narrative structure and techniques:

- *the location and time setting of the media text:* the USA, 1950s. The main location is a campus of the private boarding school, school classes, a library, a principal's office, students' rooms in the dormitory, a school yard and the adjacent territory. Schoolchildren only occasionally appear outside school;

- *the environment, objects of everyday life of characters of media text:* is typical for emblematic ideas about an elite educational institution of that time (classes, light school hallways, large school canteen, student rooms are equipped with all necessary furniture for accommodation and study, school yard and adjacent territory are neatly taken care of;

- *(stereotypical) techniques of depicting reality:* the media text does not sharply separate the characters into "positive" and "negative". In the film, every character has its own plot significance.

Typology of characters: features of their character, appearance, vocabulary, body language, the presence or absence of the stereotypical manner of characters' representation:

- the age of the characters: the average age of senior students is 17-18. The age of other characters (teachers, parents) varies from 40- to 60-something.

- level of education: incomplete secondary education for schoolchildren; teachers, obviously, have university degrees;

- social status: the material situation of the characters is not accented, although, apparently, most students come from wealthy families;

- the marital status of adult characters: teachers are not portrayed as married with children; school children usually come from both parents families;

- appearance, clothing, body language, vocabulary. The characters are mostly dressed in uniform/business suits, modestly and ascetically, in general, dark colors prevail. Characters schoolchildren are handsome, fit young men of medium height. In most sequences, they are cheerful, active, building plans for the future, energetic and hopeful. Most of their time is assigned to studying, communicating and thinking.

Communicative process is built with observance of subordination. There is no profanity in the film, however one episode features students smoking and drinking alcohol beverage.

The appearance of the teachers is similarly formal, the teachers' clothing resembles a uniform (a dark suit, a white shirt and a tie). Teachers are disciplined and adhere to conservative methods of teaching. The absolute opposite of the majority is the teacher John Keating - energetic, creative, determined, eccentric, optimistic, a supporter of progressive views, possessing a wide cultural horizon, dedicated to his work.

Character Arcs

Each character has his own challenge and character arc (Neil discovers his heart set on acting, gets the role in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and realizes that acting might be his vocation. Against circumstances, his friend finds courage to confesses his romantic feelings to the girl he likes. Todd, a modest, shy and insecure boy, afraid of reading his own poems in front of the class, gradually gets rid of his fear and inhibition).

The challenge that the character faces and its solution:

- pattern 1: the problem of interpersonal nature: suffering from unrequited love; the solution of the problem becomes gaining confidence and courage to manifest one's feelings and gaining personal happiness;

- pattern 2: search for professional and personal identity, for one's calling in life; to solve the problem a character is engaged in an uncompromising struggle with the older generation for freedom of choice, perseverance, upholding point of view and victory;

- pattern 3: the problem of fears and insecurities; solution of the problem is found due to pedagogical skill and talent, the teacher changes the character of the senior student, views and attitudes. In the end, he gets rid of the inhibitions and becomes confident;

- pattern 4 (pedagogical): conservative educators are challenged by an ardent opponent of the standard school framework, who tries to change the entrenched teaching methods; to establish friendly, trust-based relations with students. The solution of the problem: the struggle with the conservative boss (school principal) leads to the dismissal of the unorthodox teacher, however, remaining true to his beliefs, he manages to gain authority and respect of the students, thus, the goal is achieved.

5. Conclusions

As it has been mentioned above, the film got both critics' acclaim, and professional community's approval. What is even more significant in the social context of its impact on mass audience – the real in-service and pre-service teachers were inspired by this media text. The wave of the following acknowledgements descended in social media worldwide after Robin Williams' (as John Keating) death in 2014. "O captain!! my captain!! you inspired me to be a teacher!!! and I know you have inspired a generation," tweeted Sujana Chitrakar. "Feel like I lost a mentor. Robin Williams as Mr Keating changed my path in life. Dead Poets Society led me to teaching," added Cori Marino. "He made you feel like it matters, that poetry matters," says Jonathan Taylor, a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Leicester, who was 16 when he saw the film. "I loved the film so much that maybe on one level it is the reason I became a teacher. Roselyne Marot, a science teacher from Belgium, watched *The Dead Poets Society* as a teenager. "(He) gave me motivation to become a teacher," she says. "I decided then that if I ever became a teacher, I would be more of the Robin Williams style in that movie, rather than the classical style. He has been in the corner of my mind any time I've been in a teaching situation. And will always be." There have been many more comments like these (Townsend, 2014).

The analysis of *Dead Poets Society* defines a range of important problems: the role of the teacher in the life of the younger generation; the choice of the future profession and life path, the search for one's vocation and place in life; self-identity; interpersonal relationships (friendship, unrequited love); generation gap (children vs. parents, teachers of the "old school" vs. teacher-innovator); moral choice between truth and lies, loyalty and betrayal, self-sacrifice. Certainly, the content is based not only on cause-effect relationships, but also on associative, polyphonic relationships ... the context of the centuries-old culture of mankind, philosophical questions about an individual, the freedom limitations, the perniciousness of compromise, the problem of moral choice, life and death (Usov, 1995).

The film clearly traces the main trends in the US public policy in the educational and socio-cultural areas of the 1950s, the atmosphere of time, although the plot is not directly related to key events in the US history in the 1950s. The students' activity is aimed at learning and acquiring knowledge, self-identification, professional and creative expression. In the media text, an idealized image of a teacher is presented - an intellectual, a respected, and a competent person, a communicator of socio-cultural, humanistic moral values and norms of behavior.

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