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## The influence of film criticism on the interpretation of the film by the audience

D.K. Manokhin <sup>a, \*</sup>, M.A. Srybnaya <sup>a</sup>, Y.I. Tyazhlov <sup>a</sup>, S.V. Ushakova <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Belgorod National Research University, Russian Federation

### Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of the specificity of the influence of the film criticism on the perception, understanding and evaluation of the film by the audience. The authors consider film criticism in the context of the phenomena of media competence, media education and media enlightenment and designate media-enlightenment potential of the film criticism. This potential lies in the fact that film criticism can form post-receptive activity of the audience and the development of the visual culture. In this context, the article discusses the specificity of using the notions of media education and media enlightenment in the discourse of modern media analysts, as well as the problems of the functioning of contemporary Russian film criticism in the future, in the perspective of opportunities for implementing media-education enlightenment tasks.

In order to identify the specificity of impact of film criticism on the interpretation of the film by the viewers, the authors conduct an experiment. Its conditions imply the division of the participants into two groups, one of which before the film is offered the text of the film review of the authoritative film critic. After viewing, participants in both groups take test tasks. On the basis of a comparative content analysis of the results of test tasks, the authors come to the conclusion that a preliminary acquaintance with the text of the film review predetermines the focus of attention and evaluative judgments of the recipients, forms their metadiscourse thesaurus. The presence of these characteristics can be regarded as the actualization of the media-enlightenment potential of the film criticism and as the indicator of the formation of media competence of the audience.

**Keywords:** media education, media enlightenment, media competence, film criticism, cinema, film review, audience, film interpretation, experiment, content analysis.

### 1. Introduction

Modern information flows put the audience in front of the need to develop individual mechanisms for interpreting information, its evaluation and systematizing, so the strategies of information consumption, dissemination and filtering become currently important. It is no coincidence that today such notion as "information diet" and "information hygiene" are used in the practice of everyday life.

The effectiveness of the audience's interaction with the mass media greatly depends on its media competence, which is defined as the complex of the motives, knowledge, skills that facilitate the selection, use, critical analysis, evaluation, creation and transmission of media texts of various

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\* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: [manokhin@bsu.edu.ru](mailto:manokhin@bsu.edu.ru) (D.K. Manokhin), [m.srybnaya@mail.ru](mailto:m.srybnaya@mail.ru) (M.A. Srybnaya), [yandzho@yandex.ru](mailto:yandzho@yandex.ru) (Y.I. Tyazhlov), [s\\_ushakova@bsu.edu.ru](mailto:s_ushakova@bsu.edu.ru) (S.V. Ushakova)

kinds, forms and genres, it also facilitates the analysis of complex processes of media functioning in society (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2017: 18).

In the conditions of permanent transformation of the media environment, the notion of media enlightenment as a non-institutionalized, spontaneous, natural, non-mediated form of development of media competence is updated. Media enlightenment, which is a part of nonformal education and informal, incidental and random learning, combines both general educational tasks and tasks of media education and media criticism (Tyazhlov, 2015).

The film criticism is able to provide effective interaction between the audience and the film industry and we think, that it can be regarded as a representative sphere for studying the media-enlightenment potential of modern mass media. Currently, film criticism takes functions of media criticism in the field of audiovisual content, which determine the expansion of the content of this notion. The closeness of the notions of media criticism and film criticism "up to interpenetration" is noted by leading researchers in this field (Korochensky, 2003; Fedorov, 2010, p. 19).

## 2. Materials and methods

The task of revealing the possibilities of the film criticism in the developing of media competence of the audience required the experimental data. An experiment had been conducted, which made it possible to identify the possibilities for the formation of a viewer's evaluation under the influence of information about the film. In the experiment 87 first-year students of Journalism department who did not begin their studies in the specialty were tested.

The experiment had two stages.

During the first part of the experiment, first-year students of Journalism department, who had not started their studies yet, were divided into 2 groups. Both groups were offered the film *Diva* (director Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1981). The length of the film is 117 minutes. The film was shown with a break of 10 minutes. Students were not previously acquainted with this film and did not have any information about it. It is considered that the film *Diva* opened the direction "Cinema du look" in the French cinema of 1980-1990. This film is regarded as the first film of the "new wave" of French cinema, the first postmodern film, as well as the first film of neo-baroque stylistics.

It was assumed that the film may cause difficulties in perceiving and contradictory reaction of unprepared viewer. Its visual stylistics, the mechanisms of plot construction, genre uncertainty, grotesque images of characters, conditioned by the epic intramural attributes (scenery, cult of analog recording means and carriers), the pace (long plans, unhurried editing) do not correspond to the standard code of modern mass cinematography.

It was expected that for many of participants of the experiment the film might seem "slow", too long, and the plot might be not enough action-packed, complicated.

Before the experiment the first group of participants was offered a review of the film written by the famous film critic S. Kudryavtsev (Kudryavtsev, 2008). We allowed a thought that the audience may be unfamiliar with other reviews by S. Kudryavtsev, but the name of this film critic is widely met on the popular site "KinoPoisk" and could serve as an additional marker for verification. The second group watched the film without any preliminary preparation.

S. Kudryavtsev's review plan:

A. Brief narration of the plot.

B. Characteristics of the plot, visual stylistics, musical and sound accompaniment, camera movement, intraframe attributes, succession and influences.

C. A brief comparative description of other films of this director.

During the experiment, students were not allowed to contact each other, discuss the film, or comment while watching. After viewing the tape, the test-takers were offered test tasks.

The second part of the experiment was carried out in accordance with the methodology and algorithm of the first part. During the second part of the experiment, first year students of the Journalism Department, who had not started their studies yet, were divided into 2 groups. Both groups were offered the film *Permanent Vacation* (director J. Jarmusch, 1980). A short running time of the film (75 minutes) allowed to show it without interruption. Students previously were not familiar with the film and did not have any information about it. The four participants in the experiment were familiar with the name of the famous American director Jim Jarmusch, but did not have any significant information about his works.

*Permanent Vocation* is his first full-length tape, while almost all his films attract the careful attention of film critics.

The film for the second stage of the experiment, which was supposed to verify the data obtained in the first stage, was chosen not accidentally. We considered it necessary to carry out the second part of the experiment on the material different from the first part, since it was suggested that some nonobjective characteristics of the film and the formal-substantive qualities of the review can help to correct the data obtained during the experiment to a certain extent.

That is why we carefully selected a different film, which meets the requirements of the experiment. As in the case of the film *Diva*, it was assumed that the picture *Permanent Vocation* could cause difficulties in perception and contradictory reaction if the viewers are unprepared.

Both *Diva* and *Permanent Vocations* are characterized by a non-traditional code for modern mass cinematography: non-normative visual style (including a pronounced "film" texture – a noticeable grain that can be identified by modern viewers as noise); mechanisms of plot construction (absence of a pronounced conflict); grotesque images of characters; scenery (marginal Manhattan districts of the 1980s); the pace, characterizing the creative manner of the director (long plans, shot by a static camera, minimal editing).

These characteristics allowed us to predict that the film may seem "slow", too long, and the plot – not enough action-packed for many participants of the experiment.

Before the experiment the first group was offered a review of the film written by the editor of the Internet magazine "Cineticle" Sergei Deshin (Deshin, 2010). The second group watched the film without any preliminary preparation. The proposed review was reduced to 3 thousand symbols (mainly due to a detailed analysis of the plot), which made it comparable to the size of S. Kudryavtsev's review of the film *Diva*.

S. Deshin's review plan:

A) Characteristics of the plot and the director's style.

B) Characteristics of the sound accompaniment, visual style, camera movement, tempo rhythm.

B) Comparison of the narrative composition of the film with the plot of the novel by Jerome David Salinger *The Catcher in the Rye*.

It must be emphasized that S. Deshin's review in contrast to S. Kudryavtsev's review, does not contain a consistent retelling of the plot. This factor to a certain extent limited the possibility of content analysis, the results of which turned out to be not so bright, rather than as a result of the first part of the experiment.

During the experiment, the participants were not allowed to contact each other, discuss the film, or comment on the film while watching.

After viewing they were offered test tasks.

### 3. Discussion

Film criticism is an important tool for the formation of "visual literacy" (Debes, 1969; Messaris, 1994; Moore, Dwyer, 1994; Considine, Haley, 1999), which is understood today as a set of vision-competencies that can be developed by a human (a human being can develop). J. Debes, who introduced the term "visual literacy" into research practice, states: "Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able to comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication (Debes, 1969: 26).

A. Dorr in the article "Media Literacy" in the Oxford Encyclopedia speaks about visual literacy as an important component of media literacy in general: "Particularly when images are realistic, as in much photography, film, and television, the naive user may not realize how much these images too are constructed and must be interpreted" (Dorr, 2001: 9496).

The development of media literacy and media competence of the audience is traditionally associated with media education practices in the context of formal education.

The notion of media education began to appear in the scientific literature from the 1950s and appears, first of all, as a systematic teaching students and schoolchildren how to interact with the media: "it is education that aims to increase students' understanding and enjoyment of how media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality" (Tyner,

1998: 119). In this media education is usually presented in the context of "classroom practice" (Masterman, 2004).

D. Buckingham, writes that the key goal of media education is often defined as "developing students critical abilities". At the same time, the researcher is convinced that "media education should not be exclusively confined to schools" (Buckingham, 2003: 107, 191).

H. Jenkins in the book "Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide" writes: "Many media literacy activists still act as if the role of mass media had remained unchanged by the introduction of new media technologies. Media are read primarily as threats rather than as re-sources" (Jenkins, 2006: 259).

Analyzing various approaches to the development of media literacy, R. Hobbs pays attention to positive examples of initiatives of representatives of the US media industry. R. Hobbs emphasizes that among the participants of the discussion about the strategies of the development of the audience media literacy there is an opinion that such initiatives should be encouraged: "According to this view, media organizations have a social responsibility to help people develop consumer skill» (Hobbs, 1998).

Traditional strategies for classroom teaching seem particularly ineffective in the situation described by the media teacher M. Prensky, when the generation of digital natives (born digital, digital generation) teaches digital immigrants that have adapted to new realities. "I've coined the term digital native to refer to today's students. They are native speakers of technology, fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet. I was referring to those of us who were not born in the digital world as digital immigrants. We have adopted many aspects of the technology, but just like those who learn another language later in life, we retain an "accent" because we still have one foot in the past. We will read a manual, for example, to understand a program. Our accent from the predigital world often makes it difficult for us to effectively communicate with our students" (Prensky, 2006).

In this context, the specialist in the field of transmedia storytelling R.R. Gambarato, speaking about media literacy development strategies in the era of new media, pays attention to the fact that "in addition to the academic learning experiences, the current new media eco-system demands more informal learning spheres, such as the ones found on YouTube, online forums, blogs, vlogs, etc." (Gambarato, 2018).

The idea of non-institutionalized training of the audience for critical perception of media is consistently promoted by one of the most significant Russian researchers in the field of media criticism A.P. Korochensky, who says that "not only the institutions of "academic" education and enlightenment, but also the structures of civil society, media and journalism that have a great potential for dissemination of knowledge and development of citizens' communication experience of can and have to take part in the formation of a modern communication culture" (Korochensky, 2004: 41).

One of the premier researchers in the field of media education in Russia A.V. Fedorov supposes that media criticism is an ally for media education. A.V. Fedorov identifies six educational directions in Russia, including not only training of future professionals in the field of media, teachers, students and schoolchildren within the formal educational programs, but also remote media education through media (Fedorov, 2008: 59).

The permanent transformation of the media environment actualizes the notion of media coverage as a non-institutionalized, spontaneous, natural, non-mediated form of development of media competence and media literacy.

At the same time, in Russian academic community a conventional practice of using the terms "media education" and "media enlightenment" has not been developed. In scientific publications, these terms often appear as contextual synonyms, and their meanings are not clearly separated (Bakanov, 2007; Lebedev, 2017; Mokroguz, 2016; Fateeva, 2012).

However, there are attempts to separate these two notions. Thus, in the article "Media Education and Media Enlightenment as Attributes of the Information Society", the authors L.B. Beloglazova and A.A. Butenko separate these notions in the context of the publication without distinguishing distinctive features.

The authors present media education as "the result of computerization", the "form of distance learning", and media enlightenment as "enlightenment through the screen", "educational shows" (Beloglazova, Butenko, 2014: 95-99). In the work "Media Education, Media Enlightenment,

Media Criticism, and Film Criticism as Factors of Forming Media Competence," we are trying to give a clear definition of these two relevant notions (Tyazhlov, 2015).

Media enlightenment content has a heterogeneous character. It consists of different texts which have different functional orientation. One of the most significant content-forming areas is a film criticism, which received a new impetus for its development due to democratization of media processes.

However, today many experts state the crisis of Russian film criticism (Ratgauz, 2012; Yampolsky, 2012), which may discredit its ability to provide effective interaction between the audience and the film industry.

Experts state the weakness of the traditional Russian methodology of film studies (Dondurei, 2011; Prokhorov, 2011; Salis, 2011, Johnson, 2011); snobbery and selectivity of Russian cinematology (Stishova, 2011); the uncertainty of the social role of film criticism (Director v. Critic, 2002) and the destruction of ties inside the professional community (Stishova, 2011); the functioning of professional film critics outside the global public sphere (Prokhorov, 2011), integration into which today is identified with the release of expert film critics on the Internet.

At the same time, the film criticism tries to comprehend its own positions and delineate the limits of its influence (Chernenko, 2016; Ratgauz, 2012; Yampolsky, 2012; Filippov, 2006; Stishova, 2011; Mantsov, 2013, Korneev, 2012).

#### 4. Results

According to the results of the first stage of the experiment, in the group of respondents who had read the review before watching the film, there were more positive responses – 50 %, while in the group of respondents who had not got the review, there were 50 % of the mixed responses. The number of those who absolutely did not like the film, in both groups was 20 %.

Argumentation of the attitude towards the film of respondents who didn't read the review, in the majority of answers was based on the plot, which was given various subjective appraisal characteristics ("good", "confused", "complicated", "incomprehensible", "tedious", "lack of clarity", "understatement"), on the acting ("picked up perfectly", "did not like acting of some supporting actors") (30 %), on the personal preferences ("French cinema is tiresome").

In some questionnaires, the following characteristics were noted: "musical accompaniment" (1), "atmosphere of the 90's" (1), "humor" (1), archaic ("perhaps if it was shot nowadays, it could be more interesting" (1), "dubbing" (1), the camera man's work ("beautiful shots") (1), elitism ("critics, to whom film was made, will decide if it is good or not"), "the title of the film does not correspond to the events occurring in it" (1), love line (2) ("it was fascinating to observe the development of the love story", "It was interesting to see how love for art grows into something more - a fantastic dependence on the person who creates this art"). Twenty percent of the responses in this group did not contain any arguments.

In 70 % of the answers of students who had read the review written by S. Kudryavtsev (Kudryavtsev, 2008), there were noted different structural characteristics of the film: "change of venue"; "There are scenes that are difficult to understand for average person"; "An interesting ending"; "a lot of water"; "The director managed to ... build a plot on the contrasts of beautiful love for music and the criminal world", "holding a parallel of two worlds".

At the same time, the emphasizing of additional structural elements in most cases does not exclude the general evaluation characteristics of the plot ("interesting", "uninteresting", "confused", "difficult to perceive", "generally curious," "too long").

In 40 % of responses the musical and sound accompaniment is commented: "Undoubtedly, the music harmoniously accompanies the action on the screen"; "Beautiful music"; "I liked the sound engineer's work"; "A chic selection of musical accompaniment".

It is important to emphasize that S. Kudryavtsev in his review also pays great attention to musical and sound accompaniment: "... with a tremendous musical and sound accompaniment and a marvelous movement of the camera. It is not strange that it was the operator Philippe Rousseau, composer Vladimir Cosma and sound engineer Jean-Pierre Rue who received the César Award.

In 30 % of the responses, as in the critic's review, the decorations were assessed: "non-conventional scenery"; "such combination of luxury goods and everyday objects"; "I wanted to look narrowly into the details, every detail becomes an art object".

In 40 % of the responses, as in the proposed review, there is an evaluation of the director's work: "I liked the director's vision", "If I were a director, I would have laid the plot in 20 minutes", "An interesting director's approach", "The director managed to make something really very beautiful from ordinary things".

Acting was described in 30 % of the responses, which in general is an integral part of the majority of non-professional reviews: "presentation of characters' temper"; "A good acting"; "I liked acting".

In some questionnaires there were expressed next evaluative judgments: "work of camera man"; "an analogy with the *Garnet bracelet* by A.I. Kuprin"; "fantastic nature and unreality of certain events"; "For one-time viewing"; "will help to free of insomnia".

A comparative content analysis showed that in 40 % of the cases the respondents' argumentation (up to the wording) was clearly determined by the text of the review (Table 1).

**Table 1.** An example of a comparative content analysis of respondents' answers and a review proposed them during the experimental phase of the study

<b>Respondent's review</b>	<b>S. Kudryavtsev's review</b>
// Young postal clerk // (1) // passionately // (2) adores the opera diva. // Entirely by accident, he turns out to be involved in the game between the police and illegal distributors of records (piracy) // (3).	Jules, // young post employee // (1), // obsessed with passion // (2) to the opera. He gets a tape with the voice of his adorable mulatto opera diva, which has never been recorded before. Unexpectedly for himself // the young man is involved in a dangerous game between representatives of competing record companies and the police // (3).
// He gets a record of the performance of the opera diva he adores, who is against pirate records // (1). Because of the appearance of a tape with the voice of the singer Jules // is involved in the struggle of competing record companies // (2).	Jules, young post employee, obsessed with passion to the opera. // He gets a tape with the voice of his adorable mulatto opera diva, which has never been recorded before // (1). Unexpectedly for him // the young man is involved in a dangerous game between representatives of competing record companies and the police // (2).
a) ...he gets a tape with the voice of mulatto opera diva... b) // The plot is banal, like in any other film about love for music // (1). c) ...combination of luxury goods and everyday objects... d) ...paralleling two worlds...	a) ...he gets a tape with the voice of his adorable mulatto opera diva... b) Very // simple plot ( which is, by the way, often used in musical films) // (1) due to a rare talent was turned into... c) ... in the postmodern style it combines elite and mass. d) Beineix puts the story of a sublime, ideal, almost divine love for music in the real context of a suspicious, frightening, risky, night, underground, sometimes literally underground (...) almost hellish existence.
// Every detail becomes an art object // (1). // The director managed to make something really very beautiful (scenery) from ordinary things // (2), to build a plot on the contrasts of beautiful love for music and the criminal world // (3).	A unique sense of style, which becomes for the director of the Diva a kind of expression of the philosophy of life, // allows to transform on the screen the usual, familiar, banal // (2), // make every detail an act of art // (1). // Beineix puts the story of a sublime, ideal, almost divine love for music in the real context of a suspicious, frightening, risky, night, underground, sometimes literally underground (...) almost hellish existence // (3).

Some respondents used the offered text of review in their reflections:

a) P.S. The review did not help!

b) It is not for broad masses, but for true connoisseurs of art film, who are looking for philosophical overtones in a tedious scenario. For broad mass of people – look at the night, so it is nice to fall asleep with the thoughts that you are a connoisseur of art and art direction!

According to the results of the second stage of the experiment, in the group of respondents who got acquainted with the review before reviewing the film, there were more positive responses about the film – 57 %, while in the group of respondents who did not read a review, only 21 % of the responses were unanimously positive. In the second group, responses were unambiguously negative – 50 %, while in the first group there were 22 % of negative responses. It should be noted

that a significant part of the respondents of the first group (previously acquainted with the review) divided their personal impressions and contextual evaluation of the film in their both negative and positive responses – 64 %. In the second group, this trend was not observed, which can be explained by the restrained tone of the Deshin's review, who does not abuse direct estimates of the film and director's work.

The argumentation of respondents who were not acquainted with the review in the majority of written answers is based on the plot, which is given various subjective evaluation characteristics ("*incomprehensible*," "*tedious*," "*not enough action*," "*the plot of the film is not for me*," "*strange*," "*instructive*" , "*understatement*," "*there is no original plot and special effects*"); on acting ("*The actor who played the lead character, incredibly accurately conveyed emotions*," "*the only advantage, perhaps, is acting, it seems to me that actors managed to do what the director wanted from them*," "*I liked the actors, but not their roles*"); on discomfort during the film ("*fierce psychedel*", "*heavy art house*", "*after watching the movie, there is the feeling that all emotions have been sucked out of you*," "*frightens*", "*presses on the public*").

At the same time, in most reviews (both positive and negative), there is a category of "incomprehensibility" (57 %): "*Maybe I do not understand something?*"; "*I did not understand the reason for his vacation, and in general, where did it come from?*"; "*The meaning of the film wasn't clear, it's idea id too strange and uncomprehensible*"; "*I did not like that film is a little incomprehensible*"; "*There are a lot of moments in the film, where I didn't see any meaning, I think they might be cut out, without any consequence for viewers' understanding*"; "*May be there is some understatement and moment, difficult to understand, but there is no lies*", "*The moment with the war China/USA – uncomprehensible, psychopathic*"; "*The plot is difficult to understand*", "*I was furiously trying to understand it*".

In the responses of the first group, "incomprehensibility" occurs only once: "There is some meaning, of course, but I have not understood it".

Students who were not acquainted with the review in their in their responses often tried to complete the destabilized code of the film in accordance with the usual narrative of mass cinema. In the responses of trained students (who had read the review), this trend was not observed. We can assume that their perception was determined by the model proposed in the review by S. Deshin:

*Although "Permanent Vocation" is a debut, it is the most concise and abstract work.*

*It most accurately and characteristically expresses all the Jarmusch's work ... The film is mostly static, the plot goes slowly, smoothly, in a state of half-sleep. Especially noticeable in the debut is the so called Jarmush style, which he calls himself "not to explain anything" (Deshin, 2010).*

In some questionnaires of untrained students from the second group, it was noted: "*complicated music*"; "*translation*"; "*the idea of freedom*"; "*pleasure from the picture*"; "*I prefer films of other genres*".

In 40 % of the responses of students, who got acquainted with the review, the music-and-sound accompaniment was commented the next way: "*I liked the musical accompaniment, because it suits the subject of the film*"; "*music in the background helps to feel the mood of the hero better, even without words*"; "*Psychedelic music on the background*"; "*Unusual music accompaniment*"; "*complicated*", and sometimes even *fake sounds made me fall into the atmosphere of the whole film*".

It is important to emphasize that attention in the S. Deshin's review is accented precisely on musical and sound accompaniment: "Sound accompaniment, perhaps, is one of the most original and main components of the mood and atmosphere of the film. Together with the saxophonist John Lury, Jarmusch managed to create an emotional background, the inner world of the film, which conveys the state of the hero" (Deshin, 2010).

In two responses, students compare the proposed picture with the films of other directors: "the film resembles the works of A. Tarkovsky (*Stalker*, *Solaris*)"; "Like Tarantino's films, the accent is made on small details, on meaningless, at first glance, dialogues".

S. Deshin also uses comparison in his review, comparing the plot of the film with the plot and the mood of the novel by J. D. Salinger *The Catcher in the Rye*.

In the responses of trained students, there is a greater variety of characteristics of the film and their metalinguistic diversity. Comparative content analysis showed that in a number of cases



the respondents' argumentation (up to the wording) is determined by the text of the proposed review: "keynote is loneliness", "auteur film", "unusual manner of shooting", "artistic component (visual)", "stylish scenery and costumes", "deep philosophical meaning", "acting", "angles create a sense of freedom in the frame", "Long pauses between actions create a sense of awkwardness", "actions are not interrelated," "there is no storyline," "film atmosphere," "gloomy colors," "unusual composition".

## 5. Conclusion

The experiment showed that acquaintance with media texts about cinema largely determines the film's evaluation the recipient, expands the argumentation, enriches the audience's metadiscursive thesaurus.

In turn, the level of argumentation and possession of the metadiscourse thesaurus can be regarded as indicators of the media competence development, the formation of which is the common goal of media education, media enlightenment and media criticism. This allows us to speak about the implementation of the possibilities of film criticism, which contribute to the development of the media competence of the audience, which corresponds to its most pressing media outreach tasks, reflecting its media-education potential.

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