

"Sparta" as a digest of school life problems, represented in the movie world

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Abstract

By means of the hermeneutic analysis of the audiovisual media text, the author of the article draws the following conclusions:

- the story of the TV-series *Sparta* is universal and could occur in any world country, hence the virtual space of the game without rules is rhymed with the social, cultural, political and ideological context devoid of norms and humanistic morals. This correlation is emphasized by a sound and visual imagery, creating a disturbing and gloomy atmosphere;

- *Sparta* is real digest of the problems of school life, featured in films on the international scale; the terrain for its creation had been prepared by dozens of films, touching upon the most painful aspects of school and, consequently, of a person's life;

- the author's concept of *Sparta* is much broader than a clichéd statement of the harmful impact of domestic violence, bullying and violent computer games on school students: in the center of the plot is a kind of neo-Nazi character who imagines himself a superhuman having the right to extinguish the weak and create an elite of merciless individuals to rule the world; he is backed up by the powerful, who will do anything for profit and more power.

Keywords: TV-series, film, *Sparta*, school topic, student, media text, video game, cinema.

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1. Introduction

In this article, we apply the hermeneutic analysis of the television series *Sparta* (Russia, 2015), treating it as a sort of digest of the problems of school life represented in Russia and world cinema. As in our previous works (Fedorov, 2017, Fedorov & Huston, 2017, Fedorov & Levitskaya, 2017, 2018, Fedorov, Levitskaya et al., 2017, 2018), we rely on the technologies developed by C. Bazalgette (1995), A. Silverblatt (Silverblatt, 2001), W.J. Potter (2001) and U. Eco (Eco, 1998, 2005).

2. Materials and Methods

The research material is an audiovisual media text on the school theme – the series *Sparta* (2015); The main method is the hermeneutic analysis, including ideological, identification, iconographic, plot, character analysis, etc. (Bazalgette, 1995; Silverblatt, 2001: 80-81; Potter, 2001; Eco, 2005); We have also analyzed media critics' articles related to this film (Ivanov, 2018, Ilchenko, 2018, Karpova, 2018, Kuzmina, 2018, Mitrofanov, 2018; Narushevich, 2018; Nikitin, 2018; Parfenenkov, 2018; Sychev, 2018; Tokmashova, 2018, etc.).

3. Discussion

The plot of the series *Sparta*, alas, "has many painful contacts with reality. Remember scandals with pedophilia in a prestigious Moscow school, with the beating of teachers in a Siberian school? And, of course, an extremely dangerous phenomenon – the power of gadgets and computer games over schoolchildren, which leads to painful dependence and even to the incidents when children-game addicted killed their parents who tried to take away the smartphone?" (Nikitin, 2018). That said, by no means these problems are exclusively the Russian

ones, on the contrary, they are quite typical situations worldwide (Arriaga, 2011; Bartholow et al., 2006; Carnagey et al., 2007; Freedman 2002; Keegan 2002).

The series *Sparta* were finished at the end of 2015, however, for unknown reasons, they were only released on Channel One in July 2018, scheduled around midnight and R-rated, and here, probably, B. Nikitin is right, arguing that this is not the best way to reach the target audience, after all, "*Sparta* is about school, and it is the case when the series should primarily be watched by high school students. A strange policy: some nasty vulgarity is sometimes programmed at prime time, however something worth seeing is timidly postponed till midnight" (Nikitin, 2018). Of course, the puritans can immediately reproach B. Nikitin that in his judgment he took off table the scenes of violence and sex shown in the series, and to be fair, it should be noted that the late broadcast of *Sparta* on television was immediately leveled by its universal Internet availability.

Curiously, the leading Russian film critics, who usually willingly respond to any more or less noticeable premiere broadcasts, this time almost ignored *Sparta*, leaving room for young, not so eminent journalists to write about it. And the latter, being experts in modern virtual reality, immediately found fault with technological backwardness of the series, built on the junction of the detective investigation into the death of a schoolteacher and episodes of a violent computer game, which high school students are passionate about:

Sparta has disgusting cheap graphics, there neither a plot, nor purpose and logic, there is no novelty, no high-tech, GameDevs in the series are portrayed as 30-40-year-old businessmen in suits, and the authors are not at all familiar with the term "game-service", which the project, in fact, claims" (Parfenenkov, 2018).

"The computer game, which is the final part of each series devoted to, looks so far the weakest link in this generally interesting series. Its graphics is outspokenly far from the high level, lagging behind the well-known high-budget movies of this type and real video games" (Tokmasheva, 2018).

Moreover, some opponents of the series, due to the obsession of teenage characters with a computer game with no rules, have made it, in my opinion, a quite simplified conclusion that *Sparta* is "a vivid example of how its authors tried to go with their conscience, but in the result ceded under the pressure of the television channel's executives and the key audience. The series aims to point out really important and relevant topics, but immediately nullifies all its efforts, choosing an easy path of "bad video games" instead of focusing on real problems of domestic violence and school bullying. And the show does so without any investigation or interest in the subject itself - guided only by the most superficial knowledge and, again, negative public opinion. What they ended up with is the worthless propaganda about the harm of videogames, once again feeding the audience with a false idea of the main entertainment of the 21st century" (Parfenenkov, 2018).

In a certain sense it can be argued that "Yegor Baranov brings charges against the very world of computer entertainment, which has now become a powerful industry and forms a very specific psychological dependence deforming the personality of any gamer – regardless of age, gender, nationality and education. To be honest, it's scary to watch how a whole class of bright personalities turns into a manipulated sect" (Ilchenko, 2018). In addition, following in the footsteps of prominent Soviet and post-Soviet films about school (one of the most striking examples is *Scarecrow* by R. Bykov), *Sparta* tackles the problem of group harassment, which is increasingly accompanied by Internet-bullying: "it all can get started with one comment and then add such details that even an adult person will feel desperate. It is sometimes impossible to stop collective harassment at once, which leads to negative consequences" (Narushevich, 2018).

However, the authors' message seems to be much broader than another statement of the negative influence of bullying and violent computer games on adolescents: in the center of the plot is the modern "Verkhovensky or Raskolnikov, he is a convinced eugenic, social Darwinist: weak and sick must be eliminated, only strong ones have rights, only they are allowed to do whatever. And he infected his classmates with this idea. When the teacher realized that

something terrible is happening with the class, and began to fight, she was harassed and actually killed. The film shows how seemingly good guys imperceptibly turn into sadists. And all because *the Führer* was found, who brought them a new game and fascinated with his "theories" (Nikitin, 2018). This school's "Führer" is backed up by businessmen, who will do anything for profit. In the film, a violent virtual game is built into the school curriculum, and "it is possible that it was integrated in the educational process as part of the IT course in order to control the consciousness of adolescents – cruel, addictive, unpredictable, emotional and willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals" (Ivanov, 2018).

4. Results

Hermeneutic analysis of the media text

Location, historical, cultural, political, and ideological contexts. Features of the historical period of creation of the media text, market conditions that contribute to the idea, and to the process of producing the media text, the degree of influence of events of that time on the media text.

The location of *Sparta* is St. Petersburg of the XXI century and the virtual space of the computer game, the story jumps back and forth between 2015 and 2020. However, the plot of the series is not attached to the Russian realities, and could occur in a different country and a different city. The authors of the film constantly emphasize the rhyme between the virtual space of the game without rules and the social, cultural, political and ideological context devoid of norms and humanistic morals, in which seniors at a high school, their parents, teachers, policemen and the power elite are immersed.

The conditions of the (capitalist) market (the task to create a competitive television product – particularly, for the evening programming, with an export potential, that is, the versatility of the plot), which contributed to the idea and the process of creating the media text, allowed the authors of *Sparta* to use in their work some relatively new for the Russian cinema trends associated with (negative) impact of virtual reality on schoolchildren. The latter was caused, inter alia, by the flow of information about the harmful impact of video games containing scenes of violence (Arriaga, 2011, Bartholow et al., 2006, Carnagey et al., 2007; Freedman, 2002; Keegan, 2002, etc.) and Internet "groups of death" promoting suicides among adolescents (see, for example: Arkhipova et al., 2017, Milkus, 2017; Mursalieva, 2016, etc.).

Contrary to the sarcastic opinions of critics (Mitrofanov, 2018), *Sparta* (2015) is by no means a simple mix of TV series *Ranetki* (2008-2014) and *School* (2010). In fact, *Sparta* is a kind of digest of school life problems, having been portrayed on Russian and international screens for the last sixty years. The roots of *Sparta's* plot in the first place refer us to the Soviet films *The Practical Joke* (with the line of the A-student, the class leader as an antagonist), *Other People's Letters* (where the teacher recklessly brings her pragmatic student too close to her), *Scarecrow* and *Temptation* (brutal bullying of school girls), *Plumbum, or the Dangerous Game* (where a high-school graduate assumes the right to punish "wrong" people), *Dear Elena Sergeevna* (school students blackmail and harass their naive female teacher (2008). And the influence of modern Russian films *School* (2010) by V. Gai-Germanika, *Correction Class* (2014) by I. Tverdovsky and frivolous school context series *Barvikha* (2009), *Golden* (2011), *Physics or Chemistry* (2011) is only secondary.

Obviously, the censorship restrictions of the Soviet period did not allow the authors of the films about school to get involved in graphic or erotic scenes, and obscene language, but Russian filmmakers quickly caught up with Western colleagues, for whom such episodes had long ago become the norm (*The Blackboard Jungle*, USA, 1955; *High School Confidential*, USA, 1958; *Up the Down Staircase*, USA, 1967; *Horror High*, USA, 1974; *Carrie*, USA, 1976; *Massacre at Central High*, USA, 1976; *La professoressa di scienze naturali*, Italy, 1976; *La liceale seduce i professori*, Italy, 1979; *Class of 1984*, Canada, 1982; *Hell High*, USA, 1989; *Class of 1999*, USA, 1990; *Kids*, USA, 1995; *Física o química*, Spain, 2008-2011; *One Eight Seven*, USA, 1997; *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* USA, 1999; *Evil / Ondskan*, Denmark-Sweden, 2003;

Evilenko, Italy, 2004; *Élève libre*, Belgium-France, 2008; *Tormented*, United Kingdom, 2009; *Bad Teacher*, United States, 2011; *Hello Herman*, USA, 2012, etc.).

The line of insidious sexual blackmail of a young English teacher organized by high school students in *Sparta* has become one of the western cinematographic clichés since the 1960s (*Professional Risk / Les risques du metier*, France, 1967; *Private Lessons / Cours prive*, France, 1986; *Gross Misconduct*, Australia, 1993, etc.).

The violent (armed) confrontation between a teacher and a pupil/pupils has been frequently brought to the forefront as well (*One Eight Seven*, USA, 1997, *The Last Lesson / La journée de la jupe*, France – Belgium, 2008, etc). Indeed, not long ago the extreme *Last Lesson* was echoed in a lighter Russian kind of a remake – *Schoolmarm/Uchilka* (2015).

However, in my opinion, the concept of *Sparta* is the closest to the drama *Wave/Die Welle* (Germany, 2008), where the school history teacher offers high-school students a cruel experiment – to live several days in a totalitarian society based on the complete submission of the crowd to the ideology leader. Five years later, the American lighter version of this scenario was also produced (*The Philosophers*, USA-Indonesia, 2013), where in the situation of an imaginary worldwide nuclear disaster students had to decide which of them is worthy of surviving in an underground bunker ...

One can agree that *Sparta* "is addressed to the society as a whole – complex, contradictory, confused. In order to, perhaps, understand the main thing. There is no such thing as a white lie: often, hatred and humiliation that a person had experienced in childhood or in adolescence determines his entire later life" (Kuzmina, 2018), especially if someone uses this pain, who imagines himself not a "trembling creature" but a superhuman capable of building a "new order" ...

Structure and narrative techniques in the media text:

- *location and time of the media text, environment, household items*: Russia, 2015-2020. The main locations are school classes, a gym, corridors, a school principal's office, apartments, offices, streets, yards; cars, abandoned factory premises, virtual space of computer games;

- *(stereotypical) techniques of depicting reality*: lighting and sound for the most part emphasize an alarming and gloomy atmosphere, the set design of the school building itself, and camera angles that make spacious light corridors with large arch windows look oppressive" (Karpova, 2018), so it's not surprising that it gradually turns out that the vast majority of the characters are negative.

Genre. A detective with elements of a thriller is a rare genre not only for the Soviet, but also for modern Russian cinema about school, but quite common for the western screen of the last decades.

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

- *the characters' age*: the students are about 17 years old. The age of other characters varies from 17 to 60;

- *the financial situation of the characters*: most of the schoolchildren's families are quite well-to-do, although some of them have financial and domestic difficulties; the policeman heading the investigation, does not care either about money or household routine;

- *the family situation of the characters*: some of the students grow up in single-parent families, some of them have very difficult relationships with their parents; the protagonist-policeman recently lost his wife, who had committed suicide because of his infidelity;

- *appearance, clothing, physique, vocabulary, character traits*. Characters are mostly dressed in the fashion of the end of the second decade of the 21st century, all students in the class are good-looking and fit, their rhetoric rarely contains rude expressions. Teachers (two school principals, teachers) look quite modern, but just like high school students, they are nervous and obviously concealing something.

The narrative centers around two main characters. One of them is the police officer Kryukov, leading the investigation related to the death of the teacher, "it is this gloomy and sarcastic character, whose strength is worn down by the effects of the recent stroke (nevertheless, female characters find him attractive), turns *Sparta* into a neo film noir. ... Kryukov has the most interesting flashbacks – with sex, violence and death. ... Kryukov is at home among strangers – at school, in the morgue, in pubs, in the streets covered with graffiti. He easily moves from one micro-world to another, because he has no attachment to anything. He is so absorbed with the investigation that he sometimes forgets to take off his jacket, let alone to change clothes. This detail is also an allusion to film noir" (Sychev, 2018). The other character is Barkovsky, an admirer of Nietzsche and Nazi ideas, he gradually (particularly using a violent computer game) bends to submission the whole class, replacing their "boring" life interests (getting a good education, starting a family, etc.) with the theory of selective superiority, which gives the right to punish and even kill ...

- *a crucial change in characters' lives*

A new student joins the senior class at high school – a smart leader, he quickly wins authority (among other, by means of integrating a new computer game, where anything is possible).

- *arising problem*: within a few months one of the students, her father (school principal), and finally a young teacher, are dead. The detective, who is investigating the last case, immediately suspects something amiss ...

- *solution to the problem*: despite all the obstacles, the detective, like Hercule Poirot in *Murder on the Orient Express*, comes to an irrefutable conclusion that the whole class headed by the leader are guilty, and, ultimately, having lost his belief in justice, the detective kills him.

5. Conclusions

Thus, by means of the hermeneutic analysis of the audiovisual media text, we come to the following conclusions:

- the story of the TV-series *Sparta* is universal and could occur in any country, hence the virtual space of the game without rules is rhymed with the social, cultural, political and ideological context devoid of norms and humanistic morals. This correlation is emphasized by a sound and visual imagery, creating a disturbing and gloomy atmosphere;

- *Sparta* presents a kind of digest of school life problems, which have been featured in cinema worldwide over the last sixty years; the terrain for its creation had been prepared by dozens of films, touching upon the most painful aspects of school and, consequently, of a person's life;

- the authors' message is much broader than a clichéd statement against the negative impact of domestic violence, bullying and violent computer games on school students. In the center of the plot is a kind of neo-Nazi character imagining himself a superhuman who has the right to eliminate the weak and create an elite of ruthless individuals to rule the world; he is backed up by the powerful elite, who will do anything for profit and gaining more power.

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Sparta. Russia, 2015. Directed by Egor Baranov. Script writer Ilya Tilkin. Cast: Alexander Petrov, Artem Tkachenko, Alisa Lozovskaya, Olga Sutulova and others.

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