



THE ANALYSIS OF DETECTIVE GENRE IN MEDIA STUDIES IN THE STUDENT AUDIENCE

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

Key words: Media education, media literacy, media competence, media text, analysis, universities, students, media studies, film, thriller, detective story.

Introduction

The development of skills of critical analysis of media texts is an important task of media education. Thereupon I wrote more than once that this process shouldn't be started with difficult art house works. However media educational practice shows that even when analyzing/discussing entertaining genres of media texts, at first senior pupils or students can encounter difficulties in understanding and interpretation of the author's ideas, plot and genre peculiarities.

Collaboration with Chris M. Worsnop, one of the most well-known Canadian media educators, brought me the idea of the comparative analysis of typology of perception of works of these genres in Russian and Canadian student audience.

Comparative analysis of typology of perception of works of these genres in Russian and Canadian student audience

Our joint Russian-Canadian experiment was based on the following methods [Worsnop, 2000]:

- the collective view of Roman Polanski's detective/thriller film "Frantic" by 16-17 year old students;
- subsequent discussion and interview with the students, consisting of three parts (20 minutes each):
 - 1) unstructured, spontaneous interviews with the use of general questions (such as: What can you say about this film? Who else wants to say something?);
 - 2) interview with leading questions (such as: Which episode in your opinion was the main, the key one? Why? What did the filmmakers want to tell the audience?);
 - 3) purposeful interview (for example, with the use of specific questions such as: Can you describe the relationship between the two main characters? What light effect was uses in a certain episode and why? etc.).The interviews in Russia and Canada were filmed and then were thoroughly analyzed.

Table 1 was used for assessment of media competence of the students:

Table 1. The levels of critical analysis of media texts (as a part of students' media competence)

The levels of the analysis of	Plot analysis	The analysis of characters	The analysis of author's attitude	The synthesis
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media texts				
High level	Perception and analysis of the plot as a component of the authors' work (script writers, director, actors, cameraman, composer, etc.). The ability to put a particular plot in the context of other works of these or other authors, in genre and / or thematic, socio-cultural, political context.	Comprehensive understanding of psychological characteristics of characters. The ability to explain its relation to other components of the media text. The ability to compare the character of a particular character with the characters from works with similar plot schemes, genre and / or thematic spectrum.	Identifying, understanding the author's point of view on a media text. The ability to analyze such components of audiovisual media text as script, composition, editing, lighting, sound design, image, etc. The ability to compare the author's concept of a particular media text with the concepts of works with similar plot schemes, genre and / or thematic spectrum.	The ability to analyze media texts in the complex of all its constituents. The ability to compare the given media text with other media texts and the real socio-cultural, political context. The ability to make well-grounded conclusions and generalizations.
Average level	Perception and analysis of the plot (the main chain of events in the story) and some of its components.	Identification with the character of a media text, with his psychological feelings, motives of his actions. The ability to analyze the behavior of the characters in terms of their compliance with moral norms.	Understanding of some of the components of a media text, simplified interpretation of the author's position.	A media text is analyzed mainly in terms of actions of the characters within the superficial understanding of the plot.
Low level	Perception of the plot of a media text in the context of its naïve identification with reality. Inability to analyze the plot structure (replacement of the analysis with the simple retelling of the plot of a media text)	Identification with the characters of a media text followed by a primitive interpretation of their actions and characters.	Rather trivial understanding of the components of a media text, absence of well-grounded interpretation of the author's position.	A media text isn't analyzed, although some primitive comparisons and assumptions can be made.

Our analysis showed that even regarding detective and thriller genres which are popular with the young audiences, only a small minority of the students (from 1% to 2% both in Russia and Canada) were able to make a high level analysis. Most of the students (from 67% to 73%) made a low level analysis of media texts, and 26% - 31% made an average level analysis.

Moreover, it turned out that the results of students' analysis of media texts is directly dependent on the types of questions asked by media educators. If the unstructured questions were asked (like "What can you tell about this?") students tended to show weak analytical results compared with those obtained after suggestive, targeted questions.

Thus we concluded that our scale of the levels of critical analysis (as a part of media competence) of students was effective for the tasks of the experiment.

As a result I came to the conclusion that it is necessary to work out a special method of the analysis of detective genre in media studies in the student audience. The following tasks were the initial ones:

- to introduce the detective and thriller genres to the audience;
- to outline the basic plot schemes of the classical detective story;
- to introduce to the audience the postmodern interpretations and synthesis of the detective and thriller genres in modern media texts.

I will try to illustrate this with concrete examples ready for use in media studies with the student audience.

Difference between detective and thriller

So what is the difference between a detective and a thriller? Of course there are many different nuances. But the main thing is that at the basis of a detective story lies the plot of *investigating of a crime* whereas a thriller is based on *pursuit* (of a criminal or a victim). Furthermore “no thriller can be represented in the form of reminiscence: there’s no point when the narrator covers all the past events, we even don’t know if he reaches the end of the story alive” [Todorov, 1977, p. 47].

However this does not prevent the appearance of synthetic genres which to the lesser or greater extent combine the elements of the detective story and thriller.

Having analyzed dozens of Arthur Conan Doyle’s short stories about Sherlock Holmes (1859-1930), B.V. Shklovsky described the structural scheme of the classical detective story as follows:

- I. Waiting, talking about the previous cases, the analysis.
- II. The appearance of the client. The business part of the story.
- III. The evidence given in the story. The secondary information is the most important, but it is given so that the reader doesn’t notice them. The material for false explanation is provided immediately.
- IV Watson misinterprets the evidence.
- V. Checking the crime scene, often the crime is not committed yet, thus the effectiveness of the narration is achieved, as well as the introduction of a novel with the criminals into the novel with the detective. The evidence at the crime scene.
- VI. An official detective gives a false clue. If the detective is not present then the false clue is provided by the newspaper, the victim or by Sherlock Holmes himself.
- VII. The interval is filled with Watson’s thoughts, he is clueless. Sherlock Holmes smokes or practices music. Sometimes he joins the facts into groups without giving the final conclusion.
- VIII. The denouement is mostly unexpected. Very often an attempted crime is used for the denouement.
- IX. Sherlock Holmes makes an analysis of the facts. [Shklovsky, 1929, p.142].

Despite the variety of plot lines, this plot scheme still persists in many detective stories – in literature, on the stage, on the screen.

Another master of the classical detective, Agatha Christie (1890–1976) has advanced much further than her predecessor in the sense of plot diversity. Here D.L. Bykov distinguishes not one (as V.B. Shklovsky did with respect to A. Conan Doyle) but ten key plot schemes [Bykov, 2010]:

- 1) the traditional scheme of a “fireplace detective”: the killer is someone from a closed circle of suspects;
- 2) “the gardener is the killer”, when there was somebody unaccounted in the circle of suspects;
- 3) “everybody killed”. An overturn in the genre – usually you have to choose one in a dozen, but here everybody is guilty;
- 4) it is unknown whether the murder took place or not. Everybody is searching for the culprit but the victim is alive;

- 5) the victim is the killer, i.e. he was alive at the moment but played dead so that nobody would think that was him;
- 6) committed suicide and shifted the blame on others;
- 7) was killed due to circumstances or some natural phenomenon but everybody is searching for the guilty one;
- 8) the killer is the one who accuses, gossips and demands the investigation louder than the others;
- 9) the investigator is the killer;
- 10) the author is the killer.

However we can easily notice the difference in the structural approaches of V.B. Shklovsky and D.L. Bykov. The first one reveals the construction of the detective plot with respect to the detective, and the second one – with respect to the criminal. Naturally if we judge A. Conan Doyle's detective stories from the point of view of the typology of crimes, it won't come to just one plot scheme.

On the other hand if we try to approach Agatha Christie's detective novels about Hercule Poirot we shall get something like this:

- 1) By invitation or accidentally detective Hercule Poirot appears at the crime scene, the crime is often not committed yet. In most cases it is a place isolated from random characters (a mansion, an island, a train, etc.) The clues are at the scene. The most important minor information is given so that the reader doesn't notice them. Immediately the material for false explanation is given to the reader.
- 2) the false explanation is given by one of those present, or the reader is supposed to give it himself;
- 3) the interval of action up to its finale is filled with Hercule Poirot's thoughts (unknown to the reader for the time being), his questioning of witnesses; often new crimes are committed on the way;
- 4) the denouement, mainly unexpected, often combined with Poirot's public analytical conclusions.

At the same time "the situations investigated by Hercule Poirot often contain a certain artificiality to force up the tension to the limit. By the character of Agatha Christie's narration for example it is necessary that the mysterious murder took place not just in the train which goes across Europe from Istanbul to Calais, but necessarily in the very moment when the train stops because of the snow drifts, cut off from the world, thereby any external interference in the events are excluded. The manor where the murder described in "The Endhouse Mystery" must be necessarily located at the outskirts, forming a sort of a self-contained little world. Other Christie's detective are like this, including "Ten Little Niggers", where the events are taking place in a luxurious mansion on an island separated from the mainland by a wide strait, and on top of that a storm breaks out so that the characters were totally isolated." [Zverev, 1991].

I must also note that the elements of thriller with its usual psychological suspense and sense of pursuit are often present in A. Conan Doyle's and A. Christie's detectives.

Another recognized master of detective and thriller, not in literature but in cinematography, was Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980), who for the most part didn't need a professional detective like Holmes or Poirot. One of Hitchcock's favorite plot schemes is as follows: an ordinary person (sometimes an American in a foreign country) who is far from the criminal world, by force of circumstance is dragged in a dangerous affair concerning crimes and/or espionage. Moreover, he himself has to fight the criminals and/or prove his innocence at his own risk: *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, 1935, *Saboteur*, 1942, *North by Northwest*, 1959.

It is interesting to see the further transformations of classical traditions of detectives and thrillers in cinematography of late XX – early XXI century. Let's try to do this by the example of three films: *Frantic*, 1987 by Roman Polanski, *Taken*, 2008, by Pierre Morel and Luc Besson, and *Unknown*, 2011, by Jaume Collet-Serra.

In the postmodern era many filmmakers began to make more and more films designed for multi-layer perception. The proofs of this are such works of Roman Polanski as *Pirates* (1986) and *Frantic* (1987).

Both are well-designed post-modern films, which hide “underwater reefs” of quotations, parallels, parodies under the mask of spectacular genres. For some viewers *Pirates* is an exciting thriller in the spirit of *Treasure Island* or *The Odyssey of Captain Blood and Thief of Bagdad*. For others it is the source of pleasure from playing with rethought motifs of adventure classics.

For instance the scheme of the construction of the classical detective developed by a well-known culture theorist T. Todorov which is very controversial in my opinion is absolutely not applicable to the products of postmodernism. The scheme is as follows:

1. There must be one detective, one criminal and at least one victim (dead body) in a detective.
2. The accused must not be a professional criminal or detective, he must kill for personal reasons.
3. There’s no place for love in the detective.
4. The accused must have a certain status:
 - a) he must not be a lackey or a maid in life,
 - b) he must be among the main characters in the book.
5. Everything must be explained rationally, without any fiction.
6. There’s no place for descriptions and psychological analyses.
7. A certain homology of storytelling should be kept: “author: reader = criminal: detective”.
8. Banal situations and solutions should be avoided [Todorov, 1977, p.49].

Post-modern detectives and thrillers tend to violate nearly all the “rules” of T. Todorov’s scheme.

Frantic (1987) may well be perceived as an ordinary thriller about the disappearance of the wife of an American scientist (Harrison Ford), who arrived at the international congress in Paris. But it also may be perceived as a kind of mischievous “digest” of the rich tradition of detective stories, thrillers and gangster sagas from Hitchcock to the present day. From this, for example, comes the provoking frankness of justification of English-speaking of *all* the characters in *Frantic*, including the French policemen who are intentionally speaking English so that Harrison Ford’s character hiding nearby and all the English-speaking viewers did not feel themselves in linguistic vacuum. “Hitchcock’s ingredients - MacGuffin, a false secret, in this case - a kind of a nuclear device which is meant only to be the cause for the chase; fear of heights (the motif of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* – A.F.) and the associated significance of roofs; misanthropic humor; formal but necessary romantic line – are arranged by Polanski with his somewhat ostentatious elegance. But the main thing is not the ingredients, it is the heart of the formula: a sense of powerlessness which seizes a lone man in the face of total conspiracy” [Brashinsky, 2001].

Indeed, “the image of a stranger in a strange environment created by Harrison Ford resembles Cary Grant’s, James Stewart’s and other actors’ characters from “the old Hitch’s” detectives and thrillers about innocent characters who often become secret agents against their will” [Kudryavtsev, 1989]. However R. Polanski treats the plot as a kind of allegorical autobiography as well – from this is the scenes with the policemen and the staff of the American Embassy who in fact are mocking at Harrison Ford’s character.

One might think that the genre and the entangled plot, and Harrison Ford’s name had to guarantee *Frantic*’s box-office success. But for the audience (especially the American) Roman Polanski’s film apparently seemed to be insufficiently exciting: with the budget of \$20 million it managed to earn only \$17,6 million, and eventually covered its cost only by European distribution.

In Pierre Morel’s detective/thriller *Taken*, 2008, which title was inaccurately translated into Russian as *Hostage*, the main character that also flew from America to Paris is searching for his kidnapped 17 year old daughter and releases her from the clutches of Albanian criminals. The plot scheme is very similar to that of *Frantic*, the only difference is that the main character is not a humble doctor but a former secret agent. But here *Taken* resembles M. Lester’s *Commando* (1985), where a former

American commando (A. Schwarzenegger) with “fire and sword” releases his daughter kidnapped by a criminal gang.

“Just imagine what kind of a predictable boredom it could have become if it had been filmed by some big studio with bloated staff and considered marketing on the other of the Atlantic Ocean. Here (thanks to the French producer and scriptwriter Luc Besson – A.F.) every three minute the screen is adorned with some inexcusable and virtuosic violence, crunching neck bones, screeching brakes, rumbling gunfire and joyful lack of political correctness. ... Food for thought was not forgotten as well: the character is searching for the Albanian villains with the use of deduction, clinging at the thread jammed in the broken mirror like Sherlock Holmes” [Kulikov, 2008]. At the same time the main character is not a bodybuilder like Schwarzenegger but again a 50 year old intelligent person similar to Hitchcock’s C. Grant, J. Stewart or H. Ford from *Frantic*. This time in an effective performance of sad Liam Neeson (*Schindler’s List*).

The budget of *Taken* (\$25 million) slightly exceeded the cost of *Frantic*, however, thanks to a much greater dynamics of action and lesser “cineaste”, the film of Pierre Morel and Luc Besson managed to get \$145 million bucks in the U.S. And that’s not counting the European box-office!

Considering such an impressive box-office there’s no surprise that the Spaniard J. Collet-Serra invited Liam Neeson for the lead role in his detective/thriller *Unknown*, 2011.

The beginnings of *Unknown* and *Frantic* are as like as two peas: a British biologist and his wife arrive in Berlin for the congress. Like in *Frantic* troubles with the suitcase begin. And...

Then the plot makes a sharp turn in the direction of an old film of Julien Duvivier *Diabolically Yours* (1967) with an unforgettable Alain Delon and its remake *Shattered* (1991) by Wolfgang Petersen.

Having got into a car accident the biologist partially loses his memory and suddenly discovers that nobody can (or wants to) recognize him, even his wife.

Then we can also see the motifs of classic films of Alfred Hitchcock coupled with Roman Polanski’s *Frantic*: desperate to get help of the authorities and the police, the main character tries to prove his case and find identity on his own (also relying on the former special agent of East Germany). An illegal female emigrant from Bosnia willy-nilly helps him too.

However, in the finale it turns out that the authors of the film cleverly played on the perception of the audience familiar with plot schemes of classical and post-modern detectives and thrillers, and prepared an unexpected ending in the spirit of the famous *Angel Heart* (1987) by Alan Parker.

Nevertheless it turned out that *Unknown* managed to touch not only the viewers experienced in detective genre, but also the mass audience: at the cost price of \$30 million the film of J. Collet-Serra managed to get \$43 million in the USA during the first week. And it seems that its worldwide box-office will be no less than that of *Taken*...

Thus *Unknown* proved once again that in the detective and thriller the plot scheme is not as important as its thorough arrangement based on knowledge of the laws and the classics of the genre.

Thereupon let me express a seditious thought: it is possible that *Frantic* with its cinematic stylishness went ahead of its time for about twenty years. If it was released nowadays it could have got its hundred million bucks...

Plot and structural analysis of the films of R. Polanski, P. Morel/L. Besson and J. Collet-Sera allows us to make the following table (Table 2):

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the structure of modern detectives/thrillers

The title of the detective/thriller	Plot scheme	Scene of action and its depiction	Type on the main character	Analogies
<i>Frantic</i> ,	1. A doctor and his wife arrive to an international	The country (France) and the	An ordinary man, an American, about	Films by A.

<p>1987</p>	<p>conference. 2. Suddenly the wife disappears. 3. Desperate to get help of the authorities and the police, the main character tries to find his wife on his own. A young Parisian woman willy-nilly helps him. 4. Having gone through a chain of dangerous adventures (investigation, pursuit/chase), the main character returns his wife, although at the cost of the young French woman's life.</p>	<p>city (Paris) alien for the main character. Entourage – gloomy night nooks and underground garages, shady nightclubs and gloomy atmosphere.</p>	<p>50 years old, who is far from the criminal world, by force of circumstance is dragged in a dangerous affair concerning crimes and/or espionage.</p>	<p>Hitchcock <i>The 39 Steps</i> (1935), <i>Saboteur</i> (1942), <i>North by Northwest</i> (1959).</p>
<p>Taken, 2008</p>	<p>1. A former secret agent flies across the ocean to find his 17 year old daughter who suddenly disappeared in Paris. 3. Desperate to get help of the authorities and the police, the main character tries to find his wife on his own. A young woman willy-nilly helps him. 4. Having gone through a chain of dangerous adventures (investigation, pursuit/chase), the main character returns his daughter.</p>	<p>The country (France) and the city (Paris) alien for the main character. Entourage – gloomy night streets, dens, gloomy atmosphere.</p>	<p>An American, about 50 years old, who used to be rather close to the world of criminals and spies, by force of circumstance is dragged in a dangerous affair concerning crimes of mafia.</p>	<p>Besides A. Hitchcock's films <i>Commando</i> (1985) by M. Lester and <i>Frantic</i> (1987) by R. Polanski.</p>
<p>Unknown, 2011</p>	<p>1. A biologist and his young wife arrive to an international conference. 2. Having got into a car accident the biologist partially loses his memory and suddenly discovers that nobody can (or wants to) recognize him, even his wife. 3. Desperate to get help of the authorities and the police, the main character tries to prove his case and find identity on his own (also relying on the former special agent of East Germany). An illegal female emigrant from Bosnia willy-nilly helps him</p>	<p>The country (Germany) and the city (Berlin) alien for the main character. Entourage – gloomy night streets, poor homes, gloomy atmosphere.</p>	<p>Seemingly an ordinary man, an American, about 50 years old, who is far from the criminal world, by force of circumstance is dragged in a dangerous affair concerning crimes and/or espionage.</p>	<p>Besides A. Hitchcock's films <i>Diabolically Yours</i> (1967) By J. Duvivier <i>Frantic</i> (1987) by R. Polansky; <i>Angel Heart</i> (1987) by A. Parker; <i>Shattered</i> (1991) by W. Pertersen.</p>

	too. 4. Having gone through a chain of dangerous adventures (investigation, pursuit/chase), the main character "finds himself".			
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Conclusion

Our experience showed that this kind of plot and structural analysis of the detectives, albeit rather schematic, allows to significantly improve students' media competence in terms of skills of the analysis of media texts, by means of co-work and discussions.

Nevertheless in this case remains a wide field for further research: To what degree can the questions and structural schemes proposed by media educators help students to develop their analytical skills with respect to media texts? How do the first experiences in analysis of media texts help students in their future analytical exercises? What do they rely on in the first place: on leading questions of educators or on the opinions of their coevals which they hear during collective discussions? Do leading students significantly influence others during collective discussions? Do they suppress opinions of more timid, shy students? How much do students' levels of critical analysis of media texts depend on their social background, their families?

Filmography

Frantic. USA-France, 1987.

Director: Roman Polanski. Scriptwriters: Roman Polanski, Gerard Brach. Cast: Harrison Ford, Emmanuelle Seigner, Betty Buckley and others.

Taken. France-USA-Great Britain, 2008.

Director: Pierre Morel. Scriptwriters: Luc Besson, Robert Mark Kamen. Cast: Liam Neeson, Maggi Grace, Famke Janssen and others.

Unknown. Great Britain-Germany-France-Canada-Japan-USA, 2011.

Director: Jaume Collet-Serra. Scriptwriters: Oliver Butcher, Stephen Cornwell. Cast: Liam Neeson, Diane Kruger, January Jones, Bruno Ganz, Frank Langella and others.

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