



## Media Culture

### The series *Physics or Chemistry*: hermeneutic analysis of media text \*

**Prof. Dr. Alexander Fedorov**

Rostov State University of Economics,  
B. Sadovaya, 69, Rostov on Don, 347902, Russia  
E-mail: 1954alex@mail.ru

**Elena Huston**

PhD Candidate, MBA, BA(Edu),  
The University of Southern Queensland, Australia  
West Street, Toowoomba, QLD 4350, Australia  
w0066369@umail.usq.edu.au

**Abstract.** Tolerant "European format" of the Russian TV series on the school topic *Physics or Chemistry* (2011) has got into the already prepared ground, and, unlike the harsh films of Valeria Gay Germanika *Everyone dies and I stay* (2008) and *School* (2010), did not become the epicenter of protracted media discussions of professionals. At the same time, this series had clearly and unambiguously pro-Western orientation of approaches to the school theme:

- benevolent attitude to the relaxed behavior and sexual relations (including homosexual) between students of 16-17 years (and even between a teacher and a student);
- indulgence to use by students and teachers of light drugs, dirty slang expressions, etc.;
- the authors' ambivalent attitude to almost all the characters, even to those who, a few years ago, would be considered negative on all media canons;
- the main ideas of the characters about success are their love and other (including professional) self-realization, and characters are rewarded in this world who are not afraid to tell others about their love connections (even if they are the liaisons of the teacher and the seventeen-year-old student), about the non-traditional orientation and addiction to light drugs.

The article concludes that the TV series "Physics or Chemistry" has become a clear evidence of a significant change in social and media concepts about the school, students and teachers that occurred in Russia in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** hermeneutic analysis, media text, TV series, film, school, students, teachers, gender.

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### **Introduction**

Hermeneutic Analysis of Cultural Context – a study of the process of interpreting media texts, cultural, historical factors that influence the view of the agency / author and the viewpoint of the audience. The hermeneutical analysis suggests comprehension of the media text through comparison of the cultural tradition and reality; penetration into the logic of media text; analysis of media text through the juxtaposition of artistic images in the historical and cultural context, when the subject of analysis is the media system and its functioning in society, interaction with the individual, the language of the media and its use. According to U. Eco, "any study of the structures of a work becomes ipso facto the development of certain historical and sociological

hypotheses - even if the researcher himself does not realize or does not want to be aware of it. ... If you understand these basic principles of the research method, then the description of the structure of the work is one of the most advantageous ways to identify the links between the work and its social and historical context” [Eco, 2005, p. 208].

### ***Materials and methods***

As a material for the hermeneutic analysis of media text, we use the Russian TV series *Physics or Chemistry* (2011). Following the methodology developed by U. Eco [Eco, 2005, p. 209] and A. Silverbelt [Silverblatt, 2001, pp. 80-81], we distinguish three "parts" or "systems" that are significant in the work: the author's ideology; market conditions that defined the intention; narrative techniques. This kind of approach, in our opinion, fully correlates with the technology of analysis of media texts [Bazalgette, 1995; Potter, 2016] – based on media education key words such as *media agencies*, *media / media text categories*, *media technologies*, *media languages*, *media representations and media audiences*, since all these concepts are directly related to the ideological, market and structural-content aspects of the analysis of media works.

### ***Discussion and research results***

#### **Ideology of authors in the socio-cultural context**

The main authors of any cinematic text are directors and screenwriters. However, in the case of the Russian series on the school topic *Physics or Chemistry* (2011), they were not independent creators of media texts, since this work was a remake of the same successful Spanish series *Physics or Chemistry (Física o química, 2008-2011)*. The spirit of tolerance and political correctness of the media culture of the European Union of the 21st century, that is, a benevolent attitude toward uninhibited behavior and sexual relations (including homosexual) between schoolchildren of 16-17 years of age, condescension to use by minors, students and teachers of light drugs, etc. A special emphasis was placed on the friendly interpretation of sexual relations between a teacher and a high school student who had reached the age of sexual consent. Let us not forget that as of August 2017 the age of sexual consent in Germany and Italy came from 14 years, in France – from 15 years, in Spain – from 16 years. However, at the time of the release of the Spanish series *Physics or Chemistry / Física o química* (2008-2011), there was still the most liberal approach in Europe to the age of sexual consent – from the age of 13 (in July 2015 it was raised to 16 years) [Age ..., 2017]. In Russia, "the age of sexual consent" comes from age 16 [Age ..., 2017], but apparently wanting to avoid attacks of retrogrades, the creators of the series *Physics or Chemistry* insured: all the roles of high school students were performed by actors who in 2011 were from 21 years to 25 years.

In connection with the armed conflict in Ukraine, which began in 2014, the official Russian ideology of 2014-2017 is in many respects in conflict with the ideological vector of the European Union. However, at the time of filming (2010-2011) and the release of the television version (August-September 2011) of the Russian version of the series *Physics or Chemistry* Russia, in spite of the South Ossetian conflict with Georgia in 2008, could to some extent be considered inertial (especially with regard to the western-oriented education system) within the framework of adherence to "European values".

#### ***Market conditions that contributed to the concept, the process of creating media text***

Since the early 1990s, the Russian media culture has experienced significant influences from Western standards. For example, on TV, formats such as talk shows and sitcoms have become common. A dramatic increase in the number of tangible commercials in the 21st century has caused TV producers to understandably wish to produce remakes, that is, transplant successful Western series on Russian soil, including the Spanish *Physics or Chemistry / Física o química* (2008-2011).

*Structure and methods of narration in the media text*

Schematically structure, plot, representativeness, ethics, features of genre modification, iconography, character characters can be represented as follows:

*Historical period, the scene:* Moscow 2010 - 2011.

*Conditions, household items:* school classes, gymnasium, library, swimming pool, corridors, director's office, city streets, living rooms. The school (and its equipment), the characters' apartments look very modern. All teachers and schoolchildren have mobile phones.

*Methods of depicting the reality:* ambivalent attitude in relation to almost all the characters, without a rigid division into "positive" and "negative." In the series, almost every more or less significant character has his own storyline. The visual and sound series are constructed without any creative frills, which is typical for the vast majority of serials.

*Characters, their values, ideas, clothing, physique, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures:* Characters dressed in 2010-2011 fashion – bright, bold: no school uniforms and strict suits. Teachers can afford deep neckline and free hairstyles. Students – tattoos, active facial expressions, gestures and abusive vocabulary (however, never turning to obscene expressions: the series on the channel STS was in prime time). The head teacher together with another teacher smokes in the toilet. One of the teachers (though outside the school) uses light drugs and is not going to give it up. 10th grade students are also indulging in drugs: “The relations of parents and pupils in the first series are boldly presented: the mother recommends that her son carefully check the pockets of his trousers before washing, so that he does not accidentally wash the dope-grass lying there” [Sputnitskaya, 2016, p. 64]. In the classroom, teachers and schoolchildren willingly discuss topics of sex, same-sex love, pedophilia, drugs, and suicide. One of the characters-schoolchildren constantly allows himself in the classroom dirty jokes and racist remarks about the Chinese classmate. Almost all the characters (adults and schoolchildren) are active users of media technology: “space for mastering the lessons of *Physics or Chemistry* – the Internet, pages in ... social networks, virtual diaries that have become a continuation of the genre of school chronicles, songbooks, exercise books” [Sputnitskaya, 2011]. We remember that in one of the relatively recent French films about the school the main conflict of the plot flared up around the erotic photo of the teacher sent to the director. In the Russian TV series *Physics or Chemistry*, the tenth-graders who mastered the media equipment send photomontages to all their teachers, where they appear in the nude, but this only causes good understanding smiles and comments from the teaching staff and has no influence on the development of the subsequent plot of the series.

*A significant change in the life of the characters:* each of the characters has a key change in his life (among teachers: the difficulties of professional adaptation in school, the betrayal of his wife, the fight, sexual intercourse with a minor, accusation of pedophilia, etc., in the tenth grade: a sexual relationship with the teacher, death of parents, drug overdose, suicide, racist insult, open confession in their unconventional sexual orientation, etc.).

*The problem that arose:* the choice of a strategy for later life, love experiences.

*The search for a solution to the problem:* an attempt to defend your life choices, struggle for your love.

*Solving the problem:* due to the fact that the series was planned to be continued, the plot lines of the characters are not fully completed, although many conflicts are being resolved (in particular, conflicts based on racism, drug addiction, intimate communication between the teacher and the tenth grade student, etc.).

*Historical Context. What media text tells us about the period of its creation?*

*When was the premiere of this media text? How did the events of that time affect the media text?* The premiere of the series *Chemistry or Physics* was held on the channel STS in August-September 2011. The film was shot shortly before the Russian-Western sanctions conflict over Ukraine (which began in 2014), when certain pro-Western tendencies were still felt

at the official level (including the organization of the educational process). The strongest influence on the series *Physics or Chemistry* was the original plot of the Spanish TV series *Física o química* (2008-2011) with the same name [Cappelletto, 2017; Guarinos, 2009].

*How does the media text comment on the events of the day? Does knowledge of historical events help understand the media text? How does understanding these events enrich our understanding of media text?* The series *Physics or Chemistry* (perhaps due to excessive adherence to the Spanish original) is far from commenting on Russia's political and economic problems of the 21st century. There are also many hotly debated school problems here (excessive bureaucratization of the management and reporting apparatus, overload of teachers, corruption, etc.). Focused primarily on the love story lines, the series in the course of the case touches on such acute for the society (including the school) topics like teenage suicide, drug addiction, racism, sexual relations, homosexuality and homophobia.

*Cultural context. How the media text reflects, strengthens, inspires, or shapes cultural attitudes, values, behavior, concerns, myths.* The series *Physics or Chemistry* clearly seeks to reflect, strengthen, form the Western cultural values that are peculiar to the media culture of the countries of the European Union: free, sometimes very free (including sexual) relations between people (including teachers and high school students), tolerance towards people of other races and sexual orientation [Ramírez Alvarado & Cobo Durán, 2013], tolerance towards extravagant behavior.

*World view. What kind of world is depicted in the media text? What is the culture of this world? What do we know about the people of this world? Are the characters represented in a stereotyped manner? What does this representation tell us about the cultural stereotype of this group?* The series *Physics or Chemistry* depicts a world intentionally isolated by the authors from real political and economic life, but completely immersed in the world of love and other interpersonal relations (the themes of racism, suicide, homosexuality are also touched upon). People inhabiting this world are represented in a dualistic manner: in one or another proportion, positive and negative traits are mixed in them. No one character, even the most sneaky at first glance, is not built in a stereotypically negative way, “Nevertheless, the assortment of the stories of the youth series as such have been stabilized for the time being, and the generation of new units is possible within the existing material: each story is also quite original (Has a wide range of variability, gives space for repeated creativity), and is predictable” [Sputnitskaya, 2011].

*What worldview represents this world - optimistic or pessimistic? Are the characters of this media text happy? Do the characters of this media text have a chance to be happy? Are the characters able to control their own destinies?* Despite numerous acute interpersonal conflicts, the world of *Physics or Chemistry* is rather optimistic. Characters want to be (each in their own way) happy, although not all of them are able to control their own destiny.

*What is the hierarchy of values according to this worldview? What values can be found in the media text? What values are embodied in the characters?* The main values of the characters of the film: love, tolerance, friendship. However, each of the characters interprets these values in their own interests. For example, for the tenth grade Igor (partly copied from the main negative character *Dear Elena Sergeevna* by E. Ryazanov), love and friendship are a domination linked with the joint use of drugs, the organization of sexual orgies, etc. By the way, he is also a racist! And all this does not stop the authors from being tolerant to him and from time to time make him a little bit positive.

*What does it mean to have success in this world? How does a person succeed in this world? What behavior is rewarded in this in the world?* In *Physics or Chemistry* we are talking about the values of material (for example, Rita's tenth grade student after the death of her parents gets a rich inheritance), but the main understanding of the characters about success is their love and other (including professional) self-realization. In this world those characters are rewarded who are not afraid to tell others about their love affairs (even if they are the liaisons of a teacher

and a seventeen-year-old student), about non-traditional orientation and commitment to light drugs.

### Conclusions

At one time, the appearance of a very modest sex scene in V. Pichul's youth drama *Little Vera* (1988) caused a storm of indignation from the cinematography and the conservative part of the audience, the film was hotly debated by professional criticism and became a real event of the year. However, in *Physics or Chemistry* (2011) neither the authorities nor the spectators were particularly shocked, although there were more bold scenes (including the orgy of high school students and homosexuality). Professional film criticism on *Physics or Chemistry* reacted sluggishly. In fact, in addition to one review in the magazine *Cinema Art* [Sputnitskaya, 2011], there were no other serious professional debates.

Thus, the tolerant "European format" of the series *Physics or Chemistry* was planted in already prepared soil, and, unlike the harsh films of Valeria Gay Germanika *Everyone Dies and I Stay* and *School* (2010), it did not become the focus of protracted media discussions. At the same time, the TV series *Physics or Chemistry* clearly and unequivocally marked the pro-Western orientation of approaches to the school theme:

- a benevolent attitude towards the relaxed behavior and sexual relations (including homosexual) between schoolchildren aged 16-17 (and even between the teacher and the student);
- leniency towards consumption by under-age students and teachers of light drugs, etc .;
- the authors' ambivalent attitude to almost all the characters, even to those who, a few years ago, would be considered negative in all canons;
- the main perceptions of the characters about success are their love and other (including professional) self-realization, and characters are rewarded in this world who are not afraid to tell others about their love relationships (even if they are the affairs of the teacher and the seventeen-year-old student), non-traditional orientation and addiction to light drugs.

In general, the series *Physics or Chemistry* became a vivid evidence of significant changes in social and media ideas about the school, schoolchildren and teachers that occurred in Russia in the 21st century.

### Filmography

**Physics or chemistry. Russia, 2011.** Director Ramil Sabitov. Script writer Vasily Pavlov. Actors: Lyubov Germanova, Alexander Smirnov, Victoria Poltorak, Maria Viktorova, Anna Nevskaya and others.

**Physics or Chemistry / Física o química. Spain, 2008-2011.** Directed by: Javier Quintas, Juan Manuel Rodríguez Pachón, Carlos Navarro Ballesteros. Writers: Carlos Montero, Jaime Vaca, Carlos Ruano, Félix Jiménez Velando, Alberto Manzano. Actors: Nuria González, Ana Milán, Gonzalo Ramos, Andrea Duro and others.

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