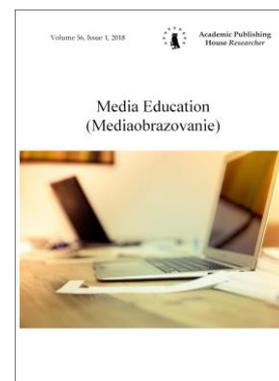


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## Particularities in the Perception of the Characters of 'The Walking Dead' TV Drama by Teenagers

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### Abstract

The popularity of movies of the *Zombie Apocalypse* genre and the inconsistency of judgments about their effects on the audience presented in academic literature determined the importance of the research. Particularities of perception of *The Walking Dead* TV series and its characters by teenagers were revealed. A hypothesis that the existential problematics of the film presented by artistic means comprehensible to the age of adolescence, would contribute to the development of the personality of a moviegoer, was tested. For four months, 48 male adolescents, including 24 deviant ones (10 of those with mild mental retardation), watched the six seasons (82 episodes) of *The Walking Dead*. Using the method of semantic differential and the statistical procedure of factorial analysis, the structure of semantic evaluation of the characters of the film was determined – it was carried out the following considerations of 'usefulness', 'intelligence', 'complexity' and 'realism'. Verifiable differences in group ratings of the film and its characters were identified. It had been determined that the image of Daryl, a character from a socially disadvantaged environment, was characterized by the greatest identification potential for deviant adolescents, while reformatory potential of the series determined constructive transformations of his personality. It was demonstrated that meanings communicated using metaphorical and symbolic means by the film, were more difficult to understand for the adolescents with intellectual incapacity. Teens from the groups of intellectual normalcy, including the deviant ones, showed appropriate understanding of the characters of the film. Using the methodology of psycho-semiotic analysis of free composition written by deviant adolescents at the beginning of watching the series and after its completion, positive trending of indicators of the level of development of their semantic domain was determined. That afforded making conclusion about the reformatory potential of *The Walking Dead*.

**Keywords:** film, series, horror, adolescents, deviant, walking dead, semantic evaluation, meaning.

### Introduction

'Horrors' had firmly taken one of the core places in the modern teen media pantheon. A survey conducted by us among 260 high school students showed that most of them (67 %) included horror movies as their favorites. Schoolchildren's interest towards movies targeted at provoking emotions of fear and horror, on the one hand, 'terrifies' teachers and parents, suggesting that the effect of the negative content would invariably violate psychological safety of the audience,

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on the other, – make it necessary to search for answers to the question about the reasons of popular appeal of horrors and determine the particularities of their effect on adolescents.

The judgment about totally negative effects of 'horrendous' images on the mental state and behavior of media content consumers could be challenged simply because the aesthetics of the horrendous was rooted in classical art to fulfill its productive psychological role, mediating the viewer's personality development via the mechanisms of catharsis. Therefore, psychological science was faced with the question of criteria to determine psychic destructiveness or creativeness of horror movies, clarifying the peculiarities of their perception by the audience, the nature of the effect on adolescents as the group of consumers of media content most susceptible to mental transformations.

Defining the methodological basis of the study, we proceeded from the fundamental premise of the psycho-semiotic paradigm that understanding psychological content of a media text and meanings thus communicated required analyzing of both its substantive, semantic features and formal, syntactic ones. A systematic approach to the analysis of the movie suggested that the nature of its psychological effect is contingent upon the all-inclusive interaction of the intertextual components: narration, images, architectonics, used by the authors of artistic vehicles. Such an analysis was defined as the immanent one – 'not beyond the limits of what was explicitly stated in the text' (Gasparov, 1997: 8). It afforded to fully take the distinctiveness of an artwork into account, mediating the processes of its effect. The basis of the approach implemented was the statement that it was not the genre of the work and not the type of images used (horrendous, for example) that determined the peculiarities of a media text effect on consumers, but the unique combination of all its system components characteristic of an individual text. Based on such a systemic understanding of the processes of mediation, one may assume that the subject of a movie cannot define its psychological potential as either creative or destructive: movies about friendship may prove destructive, while horror movies may be creational, and vice versa.

We examined the perception of *The Walking Dead* TV series by adolescents – the one very popular among both adults and teenagers (Hagman, 2017). The American film audience made more than fifteen million moviegoers (The Walking, 2019). Attendance of the resource where *The Walking Dead* were presented by the Russian users, 'was comparable to the one of top-end media in the days of extraordinary events' (Vzgliad, 2014) It may be assumed that such demand for the movie was associated with its capability to answer questions important for fellow people in the artistic format that was easy to understand for the majority of consumers.

Hypothetical assumptions verified in the process of research were judgments that 1) horror films were attractive to teenagers because of their existential perspective; 2) horror could produce positive effect on the personality of deviant adolescents, if its characters who communicate socially significant values were presented in a discourse of living space congenial to the audience; 3) intellectual inadequacy prevented adolescents from understanding symbolically expressed meanings.

For adolescence, the search for conceptual foundations of life, answers to questions about birth and death, the need for self-determination and freedom of expression, is characteristic. 'The Ultimate Questions' require departure from the ordinary onto the area of the transcendent, which, by virtue of its unapprehensiveness, served as a source of horror (Heidegger, 1997). That would stipulate the appeal of the 'horrendous'. The feeling of fear provoked by horrors may be interpreted as an aesthetic experience targeted at overcoming the universal fear of death through its naming and localization in a particular character or phenomenon. (Komm, 2012).

The issue of *The Walking Dead* was not connected with the overcoming of death, embodied in the 'horrendous' images of decaying bodies only, but also bodies that were moving and retained their alimentary functioning. The characters of *The Walking Dead* were faced with the need to answer the 'ultimate questions' – about 'what does it mean to be human and what remains of us when everything is lost?' (Hagman, 2017: 45). They faced a moral choice between survival and life. (Martínez-Lucena, 2017: 334). The motif of a 'lifeboat' habitual for the genre of 'zombie apocalypse' (Murphy, 2018), in *The Walking Dead*, it was carried over through the ability of characters to maintain social community, their mutual assistance, sacrifice as a willingness to give up something meaningful for the sake of other people (Kyshtymova, 2016) and consistency of purpose: 'Rick and his gang have a clear goal – to understand why they survived, to contribute to the new life' (Doolittle, 2016: 580).

According to the analysis by G.Hagman, the characters of the TV series were put under the conditions of devaluation of customary constructs of explaining events and their planning, which was the foundation of the integrity of 'Self'. The development of the character of the dramatic persons of the series was associated with overcoming the consequences of traumatic experience (Hagman, 2017). That, according to our hypothesis, was contingent upon the reformatory potential of the series, the possibility of its use for psychological work with deviant adolescents who were developing in a socially disadvantaged environment.

The nature of artistic presentation of the movie's idea determined the peculiarities of the effect on a viewer. The TV series format that assumed long-term involvement of a viewer into the proceedings on screen, was characterized by 'a suggestion that afforded to communicate certain types of recognized behavior, reinforce style, way of living, and influence the cultural identity of a viewer' (Kazyuchits, 2014: 55). That mechanism underlied the 'therapeutic' or 'reformatory' effect of the film in the course of its perception, which was associated with both the viewer's emotional involvement in what was happening on screen and with the capability to analyze the observed' (Coplan, 2006).

The reformatory potential of the movie was carried through indirectly, its mediation by means of cognitive and emotional participation of a viewer in the events occurring on screen determined the naturalness of the process of reformation, which was a very convenient one for working with deviant adolescents who resisted participation in dedicated psychotherapeutic activities.

Adolescent deviance is largely 'determined by the properties of the social system in which it was incorporated' (Zmanovskaya, 2013: 189). The complexity of life circumstances thereunder, the development of the personality of deviant adolescents stipulated low maturity of their semantic system, socially significant values, which, in turn, caused social disadaptation. A personality would develop in the process of understanding and experiencing vitally significant meanings. The process of watching the TV series, at the heart of which there was a person set under extreme conditions, forced to make life-determining decisions, discharged a meaning-making function – identifying a viewer with a character of the films, determined personal progress.

## 2. Materials and methods

To determine the semantics of the film characters, the method of dedicated semantic differential was used, including 22 scales (Appendix 1). To identify the attitude of adolescents to the film, the examinees: 48 persons – carried out its assessment using six preset scales (Appendix 2).

Testing the hypothesis about the potential of the film to produce reformatory effect was carried out using an experiment wherein 24 deviant teenagers participated, those who, for four months, had been watching the 82 episodes of the *The Walking Dead* TV series (2 episodes 2-3 times a week). Determination of the changes in the indicators of the development of personal meaning in adolescents was carried out using the method of psycho-semiotic text analysis. The participants in the experiment, before starting to watch the series and after those ended, were writing a free composition. The time of writing was not limited. Texts were analyzed in accordance with the interpretation algorithm. (Kyshtymova, 2008). Degree of manifestations of the indicators of meaning extension was brought to light: 'Meaning 1', the levels which were differentiated according to their worldview basis: domestic, social, national-cultural and ontological (spiritual) (Feldman, 2005); 'Meaning 2', the levels which were determined by moral reasoning: self-centered, group-centered, humanistic and spiritual (Bratus, 1999). The values of the 'theme' criteria (marking the choice of the subject of composition) and 'time' (marking the ability to comprehend events in their temporal relationship) were also determined.

Mathematical processing of the data was carried out using the IBM SPSS Statistics 23 statistical software. To reduce the size of the data and determine the bases important for the categorization of the movie characters, factorial analysis procedure was employed. Comparison of diagnostic indicators in the groups of examinees was carried out using non-parametric Mann-Whitney and Kraskal-Wallace criteria. Evaluation of the shift in the indicators of semantic development of the participants of the experiment was carried out using the Wilcoxon test.

## 4. Discussion

The interest of the audience towards horror films and *The Walking Dead* TV series in particular brought the problem of psychic effect of the content filled with 'horrendous' images on

its viewers into the foreground. The question of whether films containing 'scary' scenes, 'ugly' images, and patterns of destructive behavior may, nevertheless, produced positive effect on the psyche of the audience, remained a matter of discussion. This issue gained particular poignancy in relation to children and adolescents – consumers of media content most sensitive to communicated meanings.

In academic literature, the answer to the question of the nature of the effect of films with immoral characters, scenes of cruelty, images of the horrendous and ugly on the psyche of viewers, was essentially negative. Furthermore, meaningful content of films, their narrative, presence of characters who demonstrate samples of destructive, from the standpoint of ethical analysis, behavior, were made subject of research analysis. Formal, syntactic features of films: their 'language' and 'poetics' did not become the object of psychological reflection, despite the fact that the communicated meanings were mediated via artistic form. Thus, in academic literature, there was evidence that watching movies with smoking characters increased risk for adolescents to become a chain smoker (Pierce, 2018; Sargent et al., 2007). According to other studies, media content with explicit scenes produced serious effect on sexual activity of adolescents, increasing the risk of their entry into early sexual relations (Brown et al., 2006; Collins, 2017). Researchers rationalized their conclusions about the negative effect of films containing scenes of violence on teenagers (Anderson, 2017; Khurana, 2019; Sargent et al., 2002). Judgments about the efficiency of using films in the process of psychotherapy, that their viewing and discussion produced positive effect on the psyche, were based on an analysis of positive content that did not employ the aesthetics of the ugly (Yazici, 2014).

Much less research was dedicated to the psychological value of the 'horrendous' and 'ugly' than that to the 'beautiful' in the arts. U. Eco explored the semantic versatility of the category of the horrendous in the works of art, indicating that the appeal of the 'horrendous' was associated with 'massive contradictions': horror on screen was valued not only because evil was condemned that way - it aroused interest and pleasure in the audience. The nature of that pleasure is complex, not primitive, and 'one cannot speak only of the' degeneration 'of the mass media' (Eco, 2007: 423).

The rationale of the thesis that the 'horrendous' in art may perform a psychologically creative role required invocation to the provisions of existentialism. Fear, according to S. Kierkegaard, is 'the reality of freedom as an opportunity for opportunity' (Kierkegaard, 1993: 144). The love of children for 'horrendous' content, their 'greedy desire for adventure, for the horrendous, for the mysterious' is attributable to that existential function: 'The less spirit, the less fear' (Kierkegaard, 1993: 144). At the same time, the 'spirit' was the essence of the expression not of a primitive animal, but of the highest degree of human principle, the freedom to overcome the scope of the obvious.

Clarifying the idea of the meaning of fear, M. Heidegger draws a semantic boundary between fear as a reaction to the 'internal world', its available source ('fear before what') and horror as the response of a person to 'being-in-the-world as such', to an uncertain transcendental threat. Horror 'unlocks' the world 'for essentially – spatial being': 'before what horror is terrified is being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1997: 187). Horror brings the experience of existentially significant meanings marking the highest – the spiritual – level of semantic development of a personality into the foreground. Spirituality associated with transcendence, it is going beyond everyday life into the territory of being, from the domain of the ontic to the sphere of ontological, authentic existence.

The category of meaning is a link of the philosophical – existential understanding of 'horror' and its psychological understanding. Meaning is a system-forming property of a personality; it performs a function regulating a person's behavior. Personal meanings have hierarchical structure, and, despite the difference in their components designated in different classifications, the highest level of development of meanings is designated as 'spiritual' – the transcendent (Bratus, 1999; Feldman, 2005). Actualization of the spiritual level of personal meaning is important for the development of personality, and this process is of particular importance for adolescents, since adolescence is sensitive to the development of a system of personal meanings of a person (Leontyev, 1999).

Based on the thesis that not only the theme of the film, but, to a greater extent, its artistic features determined the psychological potential of a film: destructive or constructive – we were faced with the problem of determining that potential in *The Walking Dead* TV series.

A judgment about the dehumanizing role of films that use a 'new type of hero, embodying the various 'modes' of a person could be found in academic literature: 'mutants, cyborgs, alien life

forms, demonic entities' (Kazyuchits, 2014: 55). The long-term (serial) effect of such images, in the author's opinion, planted those into the mass consciousness and elevated to the rank of a standard. Zombies from *The Walking Dead* were considered as a type of a post-apocalyptic persons, in which, 'like in no other anthropomorphic creature', the Christian motif of the resurrection of the dead, distorted by the Masscult, could be seen most vividly (Kazyuchits, 2014: 55). Furthermore, the author ignored the symbolic polysemanticism of the image of the 'walking dead', the meaning of the artistically embodied image of death and decay, the image of evil as a body that has retained a single function – satiation.

The assumption about the negative psychological function of *The Walking Dead* series was also rationalized from the standpoint of the behavior of its characters fighting for their lives: 'The series was clearly fascist in its nature and glorified fascist masculinity as the key to survival in an apocalyptic situation' (Gencarella, 2016: 125). It was difficult to agree with that proposition – analysis of the semantic dominants of the film and the images of its characters afforded us to conclude that the film asserted humanistic values in an artistic form acceptable to the mass consciousness: love and friendship, mutual aid and fearlessness in the struggle against symbolic and substantive evil.

Literature presented an opinion about the destructiveness of films of the 'zombie apocalypse' genre due to the fact that 'zombies actualize fears, people fear zombies' (Pavlov, 2013). However, on the other hand, the ability to actualize fears is the basis for judging psychic efficiency of a horror. So, S. Žižek psychoanalytically interpreted the 'horrendous' images in art as an artistic presentation of unconscious inclinations and fears, which performed the function of their therapeutic 'withdrawal outwards. Artistic images of death and apparitions are the 'symbolic formations that define the structure of what we experience as reality. Spirit (mind, intellect, etc.) does not come without spirits (ghosts, otherworldly beings, living dead), there is no pure, rational, transparent spirituality on its own, without concomitant cloudiness with shadow, ominous, ghostly pseudo-materiality' (Žizek, 2016: 279).

A.G. Nekita endowed films of the 'zombie apocalypse' genre with the function of preserving psychologically creative cultural traditions, believing that they, symbolically expressing the archetypal plot of a sacrificial offering, reproduced archaic spiritual practices targeted at mastering a person's unconscious inclinations in an artistic form (Nekita, 2018).

An artistically-ritual expression of horror, according to S. King, 'seemed to bring us back to a more stable and constructive condition' (King, 2001: 22). Fictional horrors help people cope with the real ones (King, 2001: 23). The monstrosity mediated by the art form of evil is attractive to people and needed by them, because 'they confirm the existence of the order for which we, as human beings, strive every minute ... and it is not physical and mental deviations that terrify us, but the absence of order that they symbolize (King, 2001: 47).

Empirical testing of the hypotheses about the productive psychological potential of *The Walking Dead* series, associated with the peculiarities of the artistic presentation of existential meanings, showed its validity.

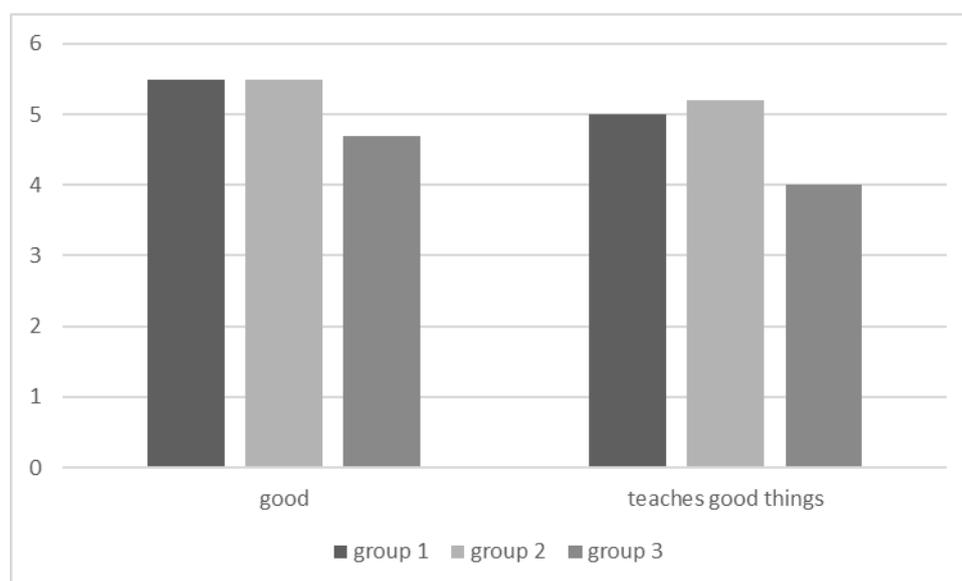
### 3. Results

Notwithstanding the uncomplicated nature of the idea of fighting evil at the bottom of the TV series, comprehensibility of the symbolism used in the film for understanding of an inexperienced viewer, the appeal to common values: loyalty, love and friendship – the completeness of understanding of allegorically expressed meanings by the audience was dissimilar. While testing the hypothesis that the understanding of feature films was mediated by the consanguinity of their discourses to the discourse of the ordinary life of the audience, as well as their intellectual abilities, we compared the perception of *The Walking Dead* movie and its characters by teenagers of three groups: 1) intellectual and behavioral norms (20 high school students in regular schools, according to a survey, who watched the series), 2) deviant adolescents with normal intelligence and 3) deviant adolescents with a mild degree of mental retardation. Deviant adolescents were students of a dedicated (Remedial) school, they watched the series at the time set aside for the experiment.

All deviant adolescents studied in a dedicated school for juvenile delinquents, they have committed crimes of varying severity. Furthermore, they have all grown up in a socially disadvantaged environment, which caused their emotional and social deprivation. The subject of human survival under critical conditions, whereto the film was dedicated, was consanguineous to that group of adolescents, as well as the problem of personality development in the face of mortal

danger raised therein. We assumed that watching the film activated the processes of speciation of the adolescents with the characters in the movie, first of all, their peer Carl, his father Rick – the leader of the people struggling with dangers, and Daryl, going from deviation to heroism – his image should be consanguineous and understandable to deviant teenagers due to the similarity to the living conditions of their own existence. The characters of the film overcame intricate external and internal obstacles to the manifestation of humanity, not only failing to bend under their weight, but becoming better people: stronger and nobler, gaining faith in themselves and in humanity. We believe that teenagers will follow that road together with the characters of the film.

Comparing group movie scores using Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistical significance of differences on the scales of 'good - bad' ( $\chi^2=12,599$ ,  $p=0,002$ ) and 'teaches good things, does not teach good things' ( $\chi^2=10,899$ ,  $p=0,004$ ). Teens of the 'normal' group and deviant adolescents without intellectual disabilities consider the film more 'good' ( $M = 5.5$ ) than those with mental disabilities ( $M = 4.7$ ). Same were the differences of values on the scale of 'teaches good things': ratings from 'normal' ( $M = 5.0$ ) and deviant ones without intellectual disabilities ( $M = 5.2$ ) were significantly higher than those from the adolescents with intellectual disabilities ( $M = 4.0$ ) (Fig. 1)



**Fig. 1.** Evaluation of the *The Walking Dead* film by adolescents on the scales of 'good – bad' and 'teaches good things – teaches evil things'

Note: group 1 – normal adolescents, group 2 – deviant, group 3 – deviant with intellectual deficiency.

The differences in the assessment of the film by a group suggested that morally and mentally productive meanings communicated through allegorical narrative and 'horrendous' images were not fully understood by viewers with intellectual inadequacy – they would not 'retrieve' artistically 'encoded' information. Hence deviation does not produce any significant effect on the evaluation of the analyzed content.

Next, we analyzed the group differences in the semantic evaluation of the film's characters: positive: Rick the policeman, his son, the teenager Carl, Daryl, the former 'troubled teenager', Morgan – a man with a sophisticated inner world who was painfully dealing with a problem of permissibility of violence; and the negative, embodying evil in an externally presentable configuration, the one accommodating to the public – the Governor. Two female figures, Maggie and Carol, were also subjected to semantic evaluation.

The data obtained in the evaluation process of the seven characters by adolescents using twenty-two scales were grouped into a 48 x 7 x 22 matrix and subjected to the procedure of factorial analysis using the method of dominant component analysis using varimax rotation.

On the strength of factorial analysis, four factors have been identified to explain 62.2 per cent of the variables dispersion. The first factor with a high factor loading included the scales of 'good friend – bad friend' (0.91), 'useful for people – harmful' (0.885), 'moral – immoral' (0.883), 'honest – deceitful' (0.872), 'good – bad' (0.872), 'reliable – unreliable' (0.863), 'native – alien'

(0.828), 'I would like to become one – I would not want to be like that' (0.818), 'good – evil' (0.810), 'fair – unfair' (0.765). That factor has been called the 'evaluation factor'.

The second factor - 'intelligence' made up the scales of 'smart – stupid' (0.816) and 'brave – cowardly' (0.656). The third factor included the scales of 'complex – simple' (0.701), 'real – artificial' (0.684), 'sharp – dull' (0.591). It was designated as a 'difficulty factor'. The fourth factor – 'realism' included the scales of 'real – unreal' (0.702) and 'interesting – boring' (0.688). Thus, the categorization of the characters of the film was carried out according to the criteria of their moral evaluation, intelligence, complexity and realism.

The analysis of the perception of the characters of the film by teenagers showed that the image of Daryl was highly appreciated by every group. In the semantic space of the 'assessment' factor, Daryl secured the domain of the highest positive values both in the group of normal adolescents ( $F_1 = 0.59$ ), and in the groups of the deviant ones ( $F_1 = 0.58$ ) and mentally retarded ( $F_1 = 0.7$ ), no statistically significant differences in the group values of the indicator were found:  $\chi^2 = 3.899$  with  $p = 0.142$  (Fig. 2). According to the values obtained by the 'intelligence' factor, Daryl was perceived as the smartest character by intellectually normal adolescents: deviant ( $F_2 = 0.9$ ) and those without behavior disorders ( $F_2 = 1.1$ ). The estimate of mentally retarded teenagers was slightly lower ( $F_2 = 0.4$ ), but group differences do not reach the level of statistical confidence. ( $\chi^2 = 4.442$ ,  $p = 0.108$ ) (Fig. 2).

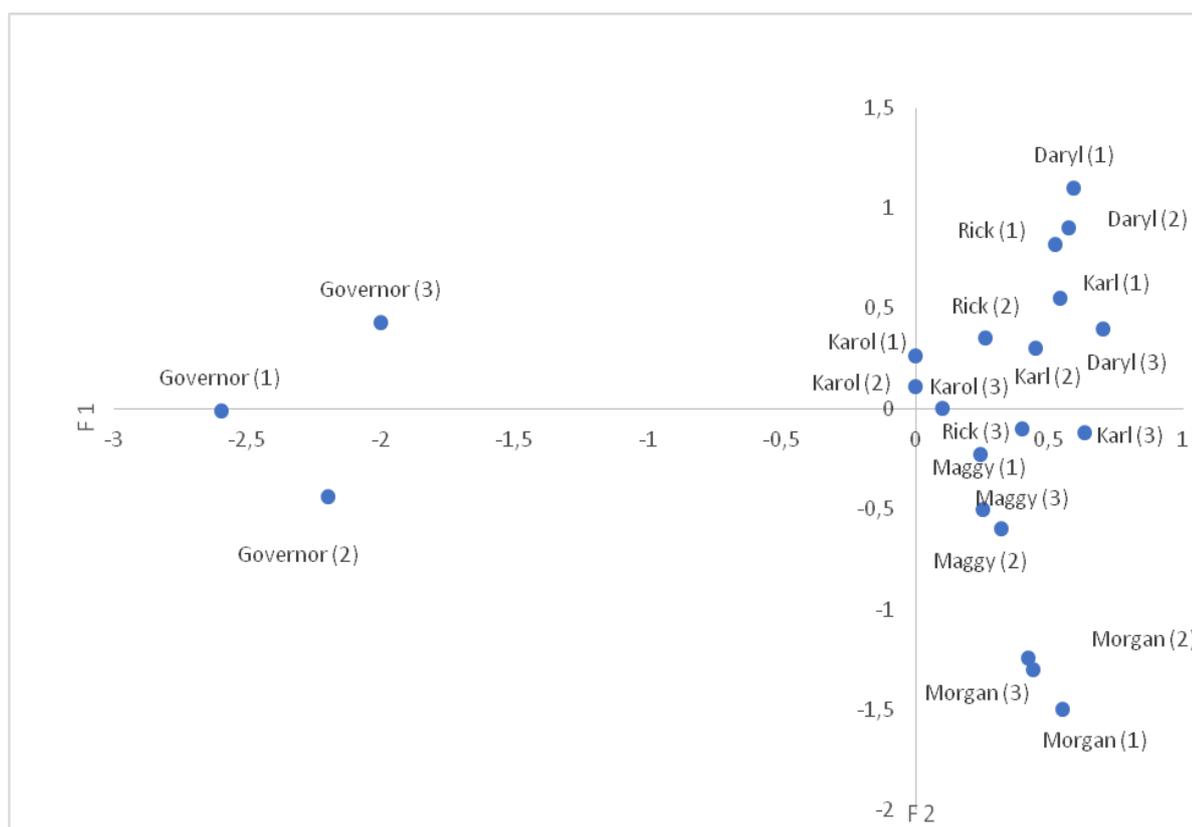
The group differences of semantic evaluation of the image of Daryl by the factor of 'complexity' were also not statistically significant ( $p = 0.163$ ), while the highest values for that indicator was Daryl in the normal groups ( $F_3 = 0.3$ ) and with deviant ( $F_3 = 0.17$ ) adolescents (Fig. 3).

Statistically-significant was the perception of Daryl that differed in the factor of realism only ( $\chi^2 = 14, 432$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). Deviant adolescents with intellectually normal development ( $F_3 = 0.94$ ) considered the character to be the most realistic, and it was more realistic for them than all the other characters of the TV series (Fig. 3). The data testified to the accuracy of the assumption that discursive consanguinity (Daryl, like deviant adolescents, was from a socially disadvantaged environment, whose childhood was full of hardship and cruelty) determined the character's embracement, perception of him as a person close and understandable. The process of moral improvement of Daryl, the path of personal development, which he got through under difficult conditions demanding heroism, may become the one of mediating reformation of the behavior of deviant adolescents in the process of watching TV the series.

Analysis of particularities in the perception of the image of the protagonist of the series - Rick by adolescents indicated that his group estimate varied significantly by the factors of: 'evaluation' ( $\chi^2 = 8.392$ ,  $p=0.015$ ), 'intelligence' ( $\chi^2 = 9.677$ ,  $p=0.008$ ) and 'realism' ( $\chi^2 = 19.614$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). The highest ratings were obtained in the group of adolescents with normal development:  $F_1=0.52$ ,  $F_2=0.82$ ,  $F_4=0.55$  (Fig. 1, 2). Those results did not appear accidental, judging by the conditionality of the perception of discursive consanguinity – Rick was the ideal hero who demonstrated a pattern of socially normal behavior.

Deviant adolescents rated Rick lower ( $F_1 = 0.26$ ) and significantly lower than those in the behavioral norm group – his 'intelligence' ( $F_2 = 0.35$ ). At the same time, they highly appreciated the realism of the character ( $F_4 = 0.95$ ), taking his model of behavior as a possible one under real life circumstances. In the group of adolescents with intellectual disabilities, Rick was perceived as stupid ( $F_2 = -0.1$ ) and unrealistic ( $F_4 = -1.14$ ), his actions beyond the limits of the discourse of their understanding. (Fig. 1, 2).

Perception of the negative character - the Governor, differed in groups of adolescents by factors of 'moral evaluation' ( $\chi^2 = 17.24$ ,  $p=0,000$ ) and 'realism' ( $\chi^2 = 8.018$ ,  $p=0.018$ ). Mentally retarded deviant adolescents gave him the highest rating, the lowest value was given by the group of the 'normal' ones (Fig. 1). Such rating may be explained not so much by the disposition of the mentally retarded deviant adolescents to approve the Governor's behavior destructive for others, but rather by the difficulty of understanding of the nature of the character whose evil is hidden behind the outwardly-looking dispositive appearance. For the mentally retarded, the Governor was realistic ( $M = 0.43$ ), as different for those in the normal group ( $M = -0.01$ ) and with the deviants with normal intelligence ( $M = -0.44$ ).

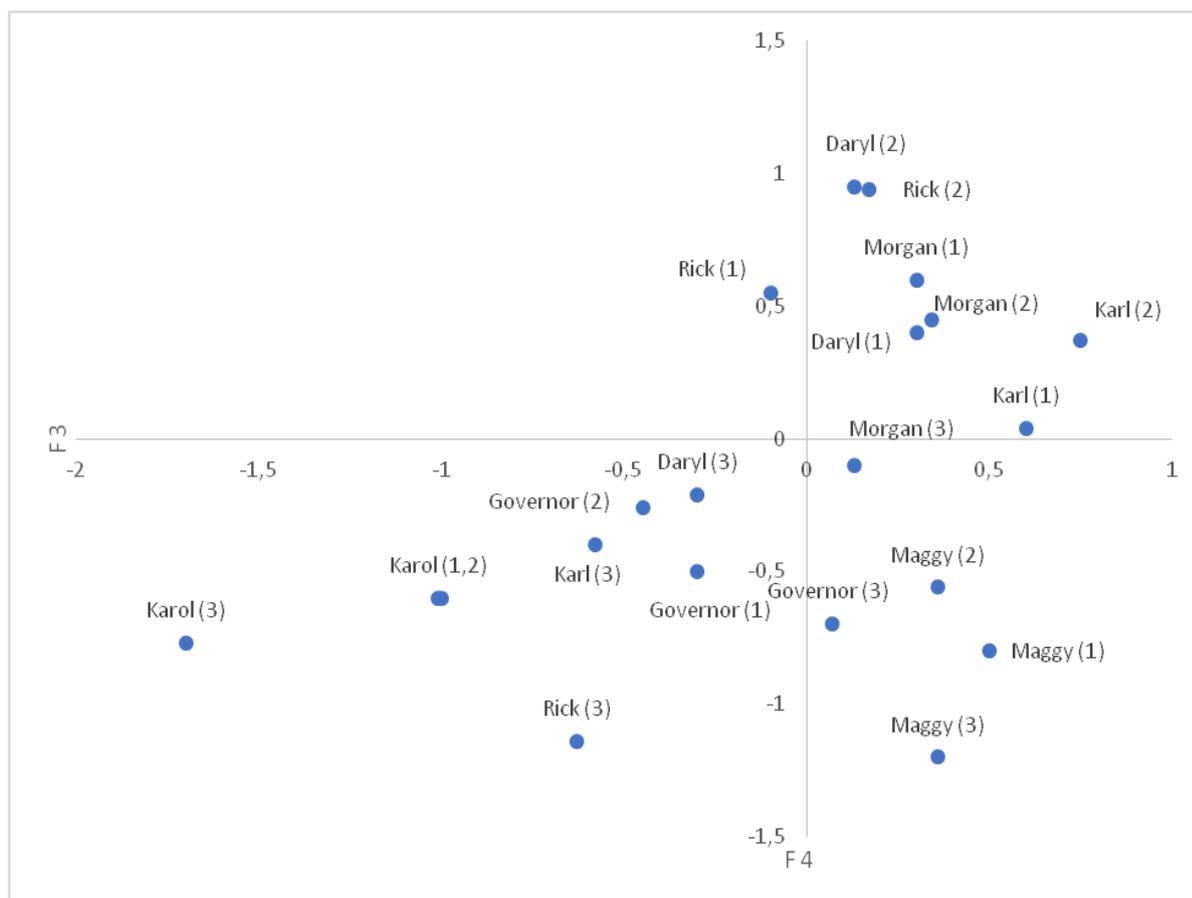


**Fig.2.** Semantic evaluation of the characters of the TV series *The Walking Dead* by adolescents  
 Note: (1) – adolescents of a group of intellectual and behavioral norms; (2) – deviant adolescents with normal intelligence; (3) – deviant adolescents with mild mental retardation

Semantic evaluation of Karl had statistically significant group differences only by the factor of complexity ( $\eta^2 = 13.482$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Moreover, the lowest complexity was granted to this image by adolescents with mental retardation ( $M = -0.58$ ), as different from the normal ( $M = 0.6$ ) and the deviant ones ( $M = 0.75$ ). Our expectations of the most distinct manifestation of the processes of speciation of adolescents with the character of Karl were not justified due to their age-related commonality – based on the factorial values, it was rated less complimentary than those of Daryl and even Rick (Fig. 1, 2), which was probably associated with the difference in the characteristics of the 'living space' of the examinees, their emotional deprivation, and the 'well-being' of Karl, who was accepted and loved by the people around him.

In relation to Morgan, no statistically significant differences between the group values of the factors were identified ( $p \geq 0.05$ ) – all teenagers assessed that character in a similar manner. Interestingly, the assessment of that complex character lurching in his qualification of admissibility of violence, was negative in terms of the 'intelligence' factor (Fig. 1) – in the minds of adolescents, intelligence was associated with confidence rather than doubts.

Both female characters were perceived by adolescents in a non-differentiated manner – without positive differences in group values for all factors ( $p \geq 0.05$ ). The comparison of the factor values of the semantics of the female leads by every adolescent showed statistically significant differences in the factors of 'assessment' ( $Z = -4.778$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), 'mind' ( $Z = -4.653$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and 'complexity' ( $Z = 7.445$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The overall image rating of Maggie ( $F_1 = 0.262$ ) was higher than that of Carol ( $F_1 = 0.042$ ), as the assessment of her complexity ( $F_3 = 0.486$ ) – Carol in the perception of adolescents was simpler and clearer ( $F_3 = -1.159$ ). Furthermore, adolescents rated Carol's 'intelligence' higher ( $F_2 = 0.165$ ), Maggie was much sillier in their perception ( $F_2 = -0.443$ ). Both female images were perceived as unrealistic ( $F_4 = -0.791$  and  $0.630$ , respectively) (Fig. 1, 2). The absence of significant group differences in the assessment of Maggie and Carol, as well as their low scores in terms of the factor of 'realism', because the characters analyzed were not typical for the 'living space' of adolescents.



**Fig. 3.** The perception of the character of *The Walking Dead* TV series by teenagers following the factors of complexity (F3) and 'realism' (F4).

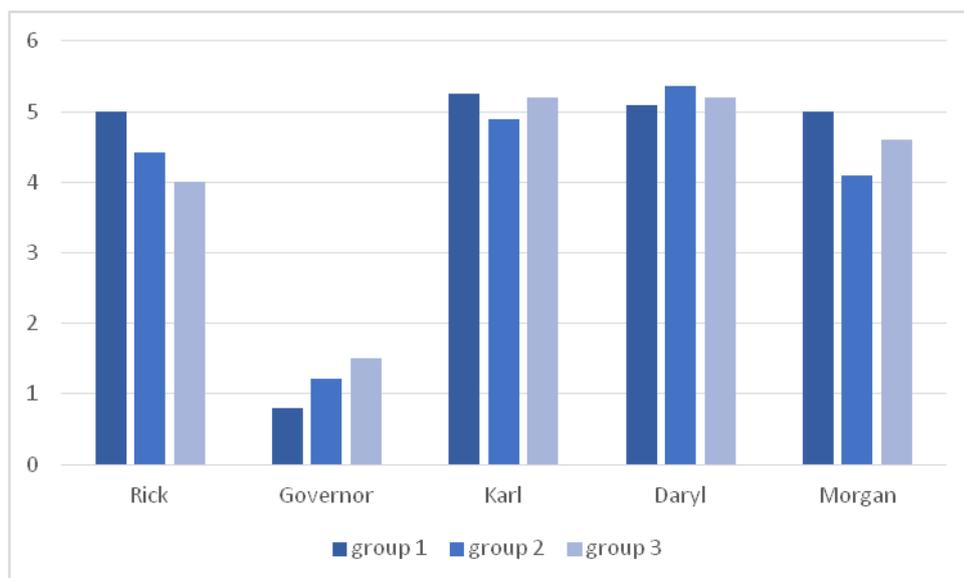
Note: (1) – adolescents of the normal group; (2) – deviant adolescents; (3) – deviant adolescents with mild mental retardation

The semantic space of the characters of *The Walking Dead* characters, shown in Fig. 1, 2, made it possible to understand the semantic priorities of adolescents, the direction of their identification processes and the possible reformatory potential of the film.

To verify the conclusions about the nature of the characters' effect on adolescents, an analysis of the values of the semantic rating of the characters on a scale of 'I would like to become that way - I would not want to be that way', was made. Readiness of adolescents to use the behavioral patterns of the film's characters was shown in Fig. 4. Daryl, as a role model, was rated the highest ( $M=5.1$  in the group of normal adolescents – 5.36 in the group of deviant ones, 5.2 in the group of mentally retarded, while group differences were not statistically significant ( $p=0.503$ ). That served as a foundation to regard our assumption about the potential reformatory facilities of a character discursively congenial to the viewer to be true.

The magnitude of evaluation of the characters as an example to follow by mentally retarded adolescents (Fig. 4) indicated that the reformatory potentialities of the film, the meanings of which were communicated in an artistically mediated form, were not obvious to that group of viewers: the principal positive character Rick was perceived by them as an example to follow to a lesser extent than by the groups of adolescents with normal intelligence, and the negative dramatic person (Governor) – to a greater one (Fig. 4).

An important part of the study was the identification of changes that occurred in deviant adolescents in the course of their viewing of *The Walking Dead* TV series. The experiment was attended by 24 deviant teenagers aged 15-17 ( $M = 15.6$ ), all male. Of those, 10 persons were with mild mental retardation (F-70 according to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10)) and 14 persons with behavioral disorders (F-91).



**Fig. 4.** Group differences in the perception of images of *The Walking Dead* series as examples to follow by adolescents

Note: 1 group – adolescents of the normal group, 2 group – deviant adolescents, 3 group – deviant adolescents with intellectual deficiencies

Using the method of psychosemiotic analysis of compositions, we determined the change in the semantic attitudes of the personality of adolescents. At the beginning of the experiment and at the end of it, participants were asked to write a free composition. The texts were analyzed in accordance with the interpretational algorithm, which involved identifying the level of distinct manifestation of the development indicators of the semantic domain: ‘theme’, ‘meaning’, ‘time’ and ‘needs’ (Kyshtymova, 2008).

The analysis of shifts in the values of the distinct manifestation indicators of evaluation criteria in the group of deviant adolescents of the intellectual norm testified that the changes that occurred in adolescents in the process of watching the series were statistically significant by three indicators: ‘meaning’ ( $Z = -2.496$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ), ‘time’ ( $Z = -2.876$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), ‘needs’ ( $Z = -4.211$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). The indicator of comprehension of the events stated in the compositions had increased: from predominantly ‘household’ level to the ‘social’ one ( $M = 1.14 - 1.21$ ), i.e. in the minds of adolescents, the problems of social significance of life events happening to them, the social consequences of their behavior, were brought into the foreground. The increase in the values of the ‘time’ indicator ( $M = 1.86 - 2.86$ ) testified to the development of the ability to comprehend events in their temporal relationship, to understand the present as a result of actions committed before and a condition for the future. The change in the values of the ‘needs’ indicator ( $M = 2.64 - 2.86$ ) marked an increase in the status of needs actual for adolescents: from predominantly the need for security and emotional acceptance towards respect and social acknowledgment.

The group of mentally retarded adolescents revealed significant changes in all measurable indicators: ‘theme’ ( $Z = -2.333$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ), ‘meaning 1’ ( $Z = -2.828$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), ‘meaning 2’ ( $Z = -2.449$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ), ‘time’ ( $Z = -3.033$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), ‘needs’ ( $Z = -2.993$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). Among the topics chosen by the subjects for writing compositions, the number of ‘social’ ( $M = 1.10 - 1.20$ ) increased, the understanding of the events account shifted from ‘egocentric’ towards ‘group-centered’ ( $M = 1 - 1.4$ ), from ‘everyday’ to the ‘social’ ( $M = 1 - 1.2$ ), an increase in the ability to think about what was happening in its temporal relationship ( $M = 2.5 - 3.1$ ) and an increase in the level of needs ( $2.1 - 2.35$ ).

The findings suggested that the hypothetical assumption that *The Walking Dead* may produce reformatory effect on deviant adolescents. At the same time, the judgment that such effect cannot be exerted on adolescents with a mild degree of mental retardation proved incorrect. The simplicity of artistic means used in the film, as well as the consanguinity of its discourse to the discourse of the living space of deviant adolescents, determined its positive effect on the personality of both groups of subjects.

## 5. Conclusion

Analysis of academic perception about the role of 'horrendous' in culture, about the functions of its presentation in art, about the psychological mechanisms of experiencing 'horrendous' afforded us to formulate the hypothesis that horror films, appealing to existentially significant problems, may produce positive psychological effect on the audience, bringing the aesthetic experience – catharsis – into the foreground. We also assumed that *The Walking Dead* TV series could have a meaning-making, reformative function on deviant adolescents due to consanguinity of its discourse to the discourse of the living space of those viewers.

Analysis of the perception of the film and its characters by adolescents showed that the characteristics of discourse determined the intensity of identification processes indeed: thus, the character from a socially disadvantaged environment – Daryl – was the closest and most understandable to the deviant examinees.

The analysis of shifts in the level of development of the semantic domain of deviant adolescents during their viewing of *The Walking Dead* series revealed positive dynamics of indicators of the development of personal meaning both in a group of deviant adolescents with normal intelligence, and in a group of adolescents with mild mental retardation.

The resulting data suggested that the theme of a feature film should not determine the judgment of its psychological destructiveness or creativity – those be determined by an array of circumstances: psychological, aesthetic, artistic, defined in relation to a particular media product and a group of its consumers.

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**Attachment 1.**

Please rate a character from *The Walking Dead* movie on a 7-point scale: for example, if it is 'very brave', mark on the left (3), if 'brave' – (2), if 'somewhat brave' – (1); if not brave and not cowardly – (0); if 'a bit cowardly', mark on the right – (1); 'cowardly' – (2); if 'very cowardly' – (3).

Brave									cowardly
Handsome									ugly
kind									evil
useful									harmful
Equitable									inequitable
Akin									alien
Honest									deceitful
I would like to be that way									I would not like to be that way
Trustworthy									Untrustworthy
Authentic									Artificial
Acute									Dull
Interesting									Tedious
Formidable									Unformidable
Real									Unreal
Good person									Bad person
Ethical									Unethical
Good friend									Bad friend
Happy									Unhappy
Lonely									Not lonely
Complex									Simple
good to people									Bad to people
Clever									Stupid

**Attachment 2**

Please rate the movie using predefined scales:

Good									Bad
Interesting									Uninteresting
Useful									Harmful
Teaches good									Teaches bad
Formidable									Unformidable
Understandable									Ununderstandable