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EDUCATIONAL AND THERAPEUTIC IMPACT OF CONTEMPORARY ANIMATED FILM CHARACTERS ON THE VIEWER

Introduction

From the beginning of its existence, films have been evoking interest and giving inspiration. A motion picture has been a tool for many practitioners. Educators, psychologists, therapists, and animators have long appreciated and used film art in their work. Considering the increasing pervasion of the mass media into human life, its presence in many aspects of human functioning, it is necessary to pay close attention to the power of its influence. It is worth noting that the products of popular culture do not only carry risks. Films created for commercial purposes also serve higher purposes, not just entertainment. Being easier in perception for the viewer at any age (through the frequency of contact with this cultural product), it can influence their emotions more strongly, encourage deeper mental work and stimulate reflection. In this article I would like to focus primarily on the possibilities of supporting upbringing and human development, referring to the assumptions of film therapy (Kozubek, 2016). According to Depta, "the starting point of educational work with a film should be the use of such films that are most popular among young viewers while increasing their cognitive horizons" (Depta, 1983, p. 165). The potential of contemporary animated films seems to be indisputable in this respect, as will be demonstrated by the analysis of the main factor of their influence on the viewer, namely film heroes.

The impact of a film protagonist on the viewer as a component of a film story

Generating the reception of a film work and stimulating emotional expression in the viewer is based on the specificity of the film's narrative influence. A protagonist, as a component of a film story and integral element of the structure, is responsible primarily for the coherence of incoming content. It is a factor that organises the course of the film and the events within it. But it cannot be reduced to the function it performs in the story. It is this element that is responsible for engaging the viewer in the whole story, both emotionally and cognitively.

The role of the film character on the viewer concerns the issue of its reception, both emotional and cognitive. Stachówna rightly states that "film heroes are loved by the viewers, because they embody their longings and dreams, give birth to hope, meet expectations, satisfy shortages, give a sense of happiness. Each viewer feels happy to meet them for reasons known only to them. Therefore, they will always be needed and desired" (Stachówna, 2006, p. 15). The desire to experience constant contact with heroes results in the formation of various kinds of bonds. These relations are often based on individual mechanisms related to the reception of a film. The subject literature distinguishes:

- identification according to Morin (1975) – based on identifying oneself with characters on the basis of some physical, age or moral similarities;
- identification according to Smith, which is not "a substitute experience of the characters' emotions or identifying with them, but results from the course of film narration, which activating the rational mechanisms of the viewer's imagination, evokes their interest on three levels (recognition, compassion, attitude) related to separate types of relationships – collectively referred to as identification" (Skowronek, 2007, p. 189);
- assimilation (Carroll, 2004) – involving the recognition of new experiences on the basis of existing knowledge, enabling the individual to act in new situations with the help of hitherto functioning schemes drawn from the hero's ways of acting;
- internalisation (Tyburska, 2002) – in which the content is accepted in relation to the recognition of the objective fairness of the message (in this context in relation to behaviour and actions of

a film protagonist) and the binding of the message with the system of values manifested by the viewer;

- insight (Czernianin, 2005) – which in relation to film art relies on the cognitive processing of the film content and transferring it to one's own life, which results in a sense of lack of isolation in the viewer's own problems.

When discussing the above-mentioned processes, one can notice their partial coincidence with the psychological mechanisms of educational influence (Przetacznik-Gierowska & Włodarski, 1998). Analysing the psychological modes of influence, one should also mention:

- imitation – which is a deliberate process, an activity aimed at obtaining a specific result, i.e. reproducing the behaviour pattern of a film character, and
- modelling – in the case of film art, based on observing the actions of film heroes and their effects. Acquiring a new behaviour pattern by the viewer is dependent on focusing their attention on the character's behaviour, remembering his behaviour and trying it out in his own way.

Considering the fact that the actions shaping attitudes are one of the tasks of art therapy (Gładyszewska-Cylulko, 2011), they should simultaneously refer to the tasks of film therapy. However, determining when and which mechanism is likely to "start" in the viewer depends on many different factors. This is primarily the degree of the recipient's involvement in the film story, their cognitive competencies, and the type of the character they are watching, with whom the viewer enters into the relationship. However, there are concepts that explicitly explain the order in which the mechanisms are generated in the viewer. Wedding and Boyd (1997) suggest that in the first stage of the film reception viewers identify themselves with the fate of the hero through a sense of mutual similarity. Then they enter the stage of catharsis, purification, which is accompanied by various feelings, such as relief, joy, emotion, peace, or hope. The final stage of the film reception is insight. It involves the cognitive processing of the received film content and transferring it to the viewer's own life.

For the character of the film to have a real influence on the way the viewer thinks and perceives them, and thus influence the viewer therapeutically or educationally, there must occur a specific contact for film art. In the case of animated films (Ball, 2004), the heroes exist and are presented only due to

the effects of the work of artists, graphic artists and graphic designers. By means of a line or a pixel, there are created characters with whom the viewer enters into relations, emotionally attaches to them and tries to understand their story and adventures. In order for this contact to happen and for the protagonist to be brought to life and interact through one of the mechanisms of influence, one should pay attention to several issues describing a given character (Żygulski, 1973). They are primarily:

– the degree of humanization – which indicates that the hero of the film does not always have to be human, but should have typically human features resulting from anthropomorphization;

– the degree of reality and credibility – mainly related to the similarity to the way people function, move and behave;

– presented character traits – consisting of a more or less complex character of the protagonist, permanent or subject to change during the film plot. The character traits are responsible for the division of the film characters to purely positive and negative characters;

– type of situation, problem – the film characters experience various life problems, find themselves in difficult choice, romantic, adventure or fantastical situations, enter into various conflicts, break norms or social rules;

– type of relationship with other characters – what amounts to making friendly, hostile or indifferent contacts that have an impact on the future of film characters and their decisions;

– the motive of action – based on personal premises, needs to be dictated by the good of a given community or the defence of justice. They may also be conditioned by the influence of other characters:

– image – often a kind of perception that can be shared or rejected as an unfair view of the hero.

These criteria determine the perception of the animated film character, as well as the type of relationship that can arise between them and the viewer. Thus, the recipient of the film engages not only with the characters being watched but also with the whole film. Affective and cognitive involvement in the interaction with the protagonist is helpful in experiencing and understanding the film story (Ostaszewski, 1999).

The characters presented in animated films serve as patterns of the ways of functioning and setting patterns of behaviour that can be successfully used as part of educational activities. Therapeutic activities can also be based on the

experience of watching films due to certain security features. As Harland and Szymczyk rightly point:

> the film is about the film character, not about us, which gives us the opportunity to create safe references, but also a safe distance. The viewer may, but does not have to, look at their life, not the hero's, from a distance. Thanks to this, they are able to feel difficult emotions that they avoid or deny on a daily basis. (Harland & Szymczyk, 2017, p. 92)

Of course, not all characters of animated films can be indisputable paragons and patterns of behaviour. In the next part of the article, I present the ways of presenting and transforming the protagonists of full-length animated films.

The traditional characters of animated films

The animation is a signal for viewers that they are watching a world in which everything is possible. The rules of physics and logic do not apply to it due to the effects of conventional art forms. The existence of the first characters of animated films is the result of adapting mainly classic fairy tales and fantastic stories. This was mainly due to the Walt Disney studio. Following the success of the filming of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, there was an avalanche of fairy and magical animations.

The characters of animated films are a reflection of the realities of manners and human behaviour. The first Disney films show a utopian vision of the world, in which you can achieve success by following the directions. They teach you to keep your place in a row, work hard, reason, and above all, believe in a happy ending. The world presented is shown in a stereotypical, patriarchal order, in which young women are rather beautiful, naive plot additions, in need of help.

Fairytale princesses: Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, or Jasmina really resemble a beautiful addition to a story rather than the key characters. An additional factor strengthening the impression is the lack of proper presentation and development of heroines in psychological terms. As Przybyła-Dumin (2014) rightly notes in the traditional and folk tales presenting this type of heroine lacks explicitly expressed feelings. There is also no information about their mental characteristics. Both feelings and mental characteristics are only shown indirectly, through actions. Consequently, heroes are abstracted

types, figures, the function of which is limited to the role played in a given role.

Other fantastic characters, such as Pinocchio, Peter Pan, or animals subjected to anthropomorphization, such as Dumbo, Bambi, and Tramp, have a simple, even flat personality structure. The heroes, however, are in some way characteristic and well-remembered. This is due to their manifestation of one main character trait and the lack of personal transformations. The main reason, however, seems to be the supersaturation of the film story with situational comedy that attracts the viewer thanks to its light and pleasant form of reception.

Breakthroughs in presenting animated characters

Looking at the cross-section of all full-length animated films (with the exception of Japanese animation, which should be discussed using completely different criteria), there are three breakthroughs in the ways of illustrating characters. The first of them is the entrance to cinemas of *The Lion King*. Walt Disney's film surprised its viewers with the development of the personality of the main characters. Despite the dramatic shortcuts and simplifications, the characters experience a variety of emotional states, as well as develop and shape their character. *The Lion King* also touched on many difficult issues than before. The subject of betrayal and responsibility for yourself and others was raised. It is also the first film in which the hero's death was shown. This solution resulted in an intensification of the emotional reception of the film's story and causing the viewer to have vivid affective reactions.

The next breakthrough in showing the film character is *Toy Story*. This motion picture is the result of cooperation between the Walt Disney and Pixar studios. Thanks to this combination of forces, the first full-length feature film was made using the computer animation technique. The use of computers helped to give the film characters' movements more realistic character. The classic, but entertaining story about male friendship shown in this way give life to toys, that are the main characters of the film, and gave them expressive personalities. What distinguishes the characters of *Toy Story* is the fact that positive heroes are sometimes endowed with negative traits, such as jealousy or the desire to take revenge. All these make the computer-generated characters gained the most important feature that opens up the possibility of using animated films in therapy, namely: credibility.

The third breakthrough in imaging the characters of animated movies is the launch of *Shrek* in 2001. This film officially and literally broke most of the popular schemes and fairy-tale stereotypes that so far could be found in films. *Shrek* in a perverse way uses the recipient's experiences related to the perception of fairy tales, making their form the basis of a parody. The main characters of the film are well-described, intelligent characters that fight with stereotypes. In spite of their differences, however, they try to prove that only the outer shell differs them from non-magical beings. The inside, that is feelings and emotions, everyone has the same. Thanks to this valuable message and a large number of jokes targeting at the adult viewer, the film has a huge impact on the viewer. It should be added that the reality and credibility of the heroes reached a climax thanks to the development of individual elements of the film's story and the animation technique used.

A contemporary protagonist of animated films

Looking at the animated films created after 2001 (i.e. after the third breakthrough mentioned above), you can see different types of characters that have been grouped into four main categories of heroes. They are:
– fantastic heroes
– heroes strongly anthropomorphized
– pursuing heroes
– heroic princesses

The first of the categories – that is fantastic characters – are a continuation of the tradition of illustrating fairy and magical heroes. What distinguishes them from classical characters is the fact that these characters have no reference to classic fairy tales. Some of them have their genesis in folk messages and beliefs, while others are a fantastic product of human imagination. Often these are also heroes possessing superhuman powers, characters being the product of science, as well as aliens. Examples of films with potential therapeutic values are: *WALL-E* (2008), *The Secret of Kells* (2009), *Song of the Sea* (2014), *Book of Life* (2014), *Inside Out* (2015), or *the Boss Baby* (2017).

The heroes of this category who deserve more attention are the title characters of *Rise of the Guardians* (2012). Jack Frost decides to join the team of the Guardians of Childhood, i.e. Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, Tooth Fairy and Sandman, and helps them protect the world from Pitch Black and to discover the cause of his transformation from an ordinary boy into a person possessing

superhuman powers. The strong point of the film is the fact that it shows the value of our own identity, looking for it, and fighting for the preservation of beliefs that make us happy. Film therapy activities with the use of *Rise of the Guardians* can refer primarily to adolescents who experience problems with determining their own self. A metaphorical reference to children's beliefs in the symbols of the holiday may prove to be helpful in recognizing life's previous experiences as important and thus creating the basis for constructing a mature image of one's self.

The second category of contemporary heroes of animated films concerns heroes strongly anthropomorphized. The most frequently watched heroes are animals or objects with the capability to speak, live and function similarly to humans. The characters also present human personality traits, experience the same emotional states and struggle with the same life problems. Examples of films with potential therapeutic values are: *Cars* (2006), *Ratatouille* (2007), *Rango* (2011), *Zootopia* (2016), *Sing* (2016), and *Ferdinand* (2017).

The Good Dinosaur (2015) is a very good film example fitting this category that can be used in a therapeutic way. The main character is a young dinosaur – Arlo, who is weak, frail and scared of everything. A combination of unfortunate events makes him lose his father and be far from home. In the face of this difficult situation, he finally finds a unique opportunity to overcome his weaknesses.

The strong point of the film is intelligent, warm humour with a perverse idea of making a rough-looking boy the dinosaur's pet and showing the unselfish friendship of these two characters. *The Good Dinosaur* is not necessarily a simple movie, despite its not too complex message for the young viewer. This is due to the general emotional reception of the movie, which often evokes in the viewer sadness and deep reflection. Nevertheless, this work has enormous cognitive value and is an example of an extraordinary computer animation showing beautiful, almost real-looking landscapes, whose view can soothe and calm the viewer.

Pursuing heroes constitute the third of the discussed categories of contemporary characters of animated films. The used term indicates a group of specific activities of the character during the story of the film. The heroes represent problems close to our life's problems and seek ways to solve them. Frequent objects of their pursuit are: happiness, identity, changes in the way they function, ways to achieve their goals and aspirations, ways to overcome barriers or ways to fulfil their dreams. Examples of this category movie with

potential values of educational and therapeutic nature are *Persepolis* (2007), *Up* (2009), *Big Hero 6* (2014), *Le Petit Prince* (2015), *Anomalisa*(2015), *Coco* (2017).

A very good film example showing the aspirations of the main character is *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010). The main hero of this film is a boy named Hiccup, the son of a Viking chief, who from birth is different than everyone else, due to which he disappoints his father and becomes an object of jokes on the part of his peers. He tries unsuccessfully to prove his own value and find his way of life. Through a combination of various events, the boy proved the power of his courage and the power of moral principles he believes in. The friendship that exists between the boy and his dragon is the main value in the film. Gradually getting familiar with each other and gaining mutual trust helped the two protagonists to discover their true face. The film tells you not only about the ability to find what you want most, but also gives support in the face of the disfavour of loved ones and even disabilities.

The last, fourth category characterizing the contemporary protagonists of animated films are the heroic princesses. They are the opposite of their Disney predecessors, deviating from the stereotypes of their naivety, helplessness and inability to manage things. Contemporary princesses have a strong personality, are courageous and often athletic, and are not afraid to take on various challenges. In this category of contemporary animated film characters, one can distinguish exemplary films with educational and potential therapeutic values. They are: *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Frozen* (2013), *Moana* (2016). *Brave* (2012) is also a very good animated motion picture whose protagonist – Merida differs significantly from the previous model of the princess. Already the title of the protagonist itself shows her extraordinary character. From an early age she was adopted by her mother to be calm and well-mannered sovereign, however, the girl prefers to ride a horse, shoot a bow and climb trees. Facing the mother's requirement of imminent marriage, Merida personally takes part in the tournament to fight for her hand, and thus independence and breaking the tradition. The rebellion of the young princess in relation to her mother and the coincidence of various circumstances, including magical ones, became the reason for re-evaluating her convictions and for reaching a compromise between two women. The protagonists have come to joint conclusions regarding the emancipation of women and their obligations to tradition. *Brave* is an important motion picture showing the value of personal aspirations, overcoming obstacles and shaping character.

The story tells us that a sudden spurt of emotions can bring unexpected and difficult consequences.

It is worth mentioning that the presented examples of animated films representing new categories of characters have not been categorised in terms of the age of recipients. Therefore, among the valuable works we may find, for example, *Rise of the Guardians* whose content is best suited to the growing into adolescence young people, or *Anomalisa* addressed only to an adult viewer.

Conclusion

Modern animated films can certainly play a huge role in supporting development. They can also be a great tool for supporting the therapy of both children and adults. These works are a kind of a parable or a fairy tale, containing metaphors and often clear messages and morals. As they are stories about emotions, feelings, life problems and dealing with them, they refer to the viewer's personal experience in an indirect, non-intrusive and sometimes pleasant way. Therefore, it is worth considering them not only in terms of entertainment functions but also as a source of positive experiences and valuable messages worthy applying in the work of an educator, psychologist or therapist.

It should be noted that in this article there have been presented mainly US movies. This is the result of the degree of dissemination of animated motion picture art in Poland, a huge "flood" of Hollywood productions in cinemas and the availability of animated films from other countries on the Polish market. Distribution of valuable, though less popular, titles is very limited. Also, native productions are rarely able to appear among a wider audience outside film festivals. Therefore, the use of useful but non-commercial animated films can be very difficult. Fortunately, a large number of modern commercial works presents various ways of dealing with the everyday life problems of the viewers of animated films.

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Educational and therapeutic impact of contemporary animated film characters on the viewer

Summary: Contemporary heroes of animated films are significantly different from their predecessors in terms of their characteristics and in relation to the manifested attitudes. New types of protagonists, being an important component

of a film story, affect the recipient not only in terms of emotions. The created heroes, complex in terms of character, have a huge potential for cognitive influence. Thanks to the nature of the addressed problems that are close to viewers, it is possible for them to identify themselves with the watched heroes, assimilate with their situation or induce other mechanisms of influence. The characters of contemporary animated films are no longer simple subject entities determined by the main attribute or an allegorical reference. An important aspect is the departure from the presentation of a relatively constant personality in favour of the changes in behaviour and professed values. This fact creates an excellent opportunity to use animated motion picture works as part of educational and therapeutic activities.

Keywords: animated movie, animated film, animated motion picture, perception of film heroes, contemporary types of characters of animated films, educational influence of an animated film character on its viewer, film therapy, movie therapy

Wpływ edukacyjny i terapeutyczny współczesnych postaci filmu animowanego na widzów

Streszczenie: Współcześni bohaterowie filmów animowanych znacznie różnią się od swoich poprzedników pod względem charakteru oraz prezentowanych postaw. Nowe typy bohaterów, będące ważnym składnikiem opowiadania filmowego, oddziałują na odbiorcę nie tylko pod względem emocjonalnym. Wykreowane, złożone pod względem charakterologicznym postaci posiadają ogromny potencjał wpływu poznawczego. Dzięki poruszanym problemom bliskim odbiorcom możliwe jest zidentyfikowanie się z percypowanymi bohaterami, zasymilowanie z ich sytuacją lub uruchomienie innych mechanizmów oddziaływania. Postaci współczesnych filmów animowanych nie są już prostymi podmiotami opisanymi za pomocą głównego przymiotu lub alegorycznego odniesienia. Ważnym aspektem jest odchodzenie od prezentacji względnie stałej osobowości na rzecz przemian zachowania i wyznawanych wartości. Fakt ten stwarza doskonałą okazję do wykorzystania poszczególnych animowanych dzieł filmowych w ramach działań wychowawczych i terapeutycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: film animowany, percepcja bohaterów filmowych, współczesne typy bohaterów filmów animowanych, wychowawcze oddziaływanie bohatera animowanego na widza, filmoterapia