ROZPRAWY I STUDIA

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A social dimension of the activities of selected contemporary animated film characters

Introduction

Watching animated films stimulates imagination, evokes associations and emotions, such as joy, sadness and even fear in a viewer. Therefore, it has long been noticed that the animated image fulfils functions other than just entertainment for children. It was "used in advertising and propaganda because its persuasive capabilities and the ability to briefly convey ideas were noticed early. [...] simple, even naive, stories are able to convey socially important and politically current content" (Puchała 2016: 2014). Considering the early uses of animated films, it is impossible to ignore their social practice. They have become a kind of message in the form of audiovisual communication, addressed at a specific generation, gender or social group.

The main purpose of the article is to reflect on the actions of contemporary characters of animated feature-length social films. There are many valuable animations about various problems that can play an important role in preparing young viewers for life in society. I am particularly interested in whether and how a film work, as a cultural product, can help convey social issues and then be used in a variety of activities. The specificity of the undertaken topic requires drawing from various fields of knowledge, allowing for their mutual permeation and inspiration. Therefore, my considerations concerned primarily the areas such as film studies, social pedagogy and psychology.

The article presents the changes that animated characters have undergone since the beginning of their existence up to modern times. Along with the image change and the personality development of the character, the message of the film work and the ways of its reception have changed as well. Film plots contain numerous values presented by contemporary characters of animated films, for example social values. They have been categorised and then presented against the background of selected social images of animated film content.

Animated film and its characters

An animated film is a unique form of cinematographic work. Its makers do not have to be dependent on actors, weather conditions, lighting, or many other factors,

as is often the case when recording traditional movies. Jan Mikołaj Michalski points out that "animated films are conquering the world today. They are an excellent medium, through which a creator can communicate with the viewer, convey in a very attractive and abstract way what he cannot create with the help of a film because of real limitations" (Michalski 2010: 29). Therefore, you can freely choose the content and express your creative individuality. Originally, paper and pencil, and today also advanced computer technology, allow you to create any fantastic images.

It seems that initially animated films did not have a clearly defined recipient. Therefore, it is impossible to talk about grown-up's cinema or purely children's films. The first steps taken by film animation were devoted to the implementation of jokes and short stories. The birth of this type of art resulted in the adaptation of comics and classic fairy tales. In the 1930s, some animated characters became movie superstars (e.g. Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck). The films became longer and longer, up to the full length. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was the first animated feature film to give new status to animated cinema. The improving animation of the characters enabled a gradual development of their personality.

During the Second World War, animation entered the battlefield. It was used to create training videos for the army, as well as for propaganda purposes. Therefore, it is during this period of cinematographic history that the first recipient of animated films can be determined. The activities in which animation was used clearly indicate an adult viewer. There are clever heroes, e.g. Bugs Bunny – the embodiment of cheekiness and a master of witty retort, as well as his counterpart, Daffy Duck, an eternal loser. The aim of creating such heroes was to relieve the tensions associated with the war and its aftermath. Paweł Sitkiewicz points out that "during World War II, the popularity of both heroes, comparable to the adoration of Hollywood stars, was successfully used in anti-Hitler propaganda. Bugs in particular was great for this role, because he was the quintessence of Americanness, combining the features of a resourceful boy from Brooklyn" (Sitkiewicz 2011: 530). Animated films were characterised by sharp wit and fun. Many new characters personified specific traits. For example, Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote represented innocence prosecuted by fanaticism. Thus, there is no doubt to whom this type of film was originally addressed. It is strange that audio-visual works, full of aggression and sneering joke, changed their recipient.

Film animation continued to develop, but at the end of the 1950s its situation changed. Cinematic works lost their popularity due to the development of television. New creative opportunities were developed while sacrificing artistic qualities. At that time, children were chosen as the main recipients of the animation. Since then, animated films have not been able to get rid of the "childish" label. Despite achieving global character in the sixties and developing independent under-ground animation, they were still considered almost infantile. However, the seventies brought the attention back to the adult audience and created films which are a medium not only for children. During this period, television animations became the victims of attacks by parental groups. They were accused, of course, not without a reason, of being stripped of intelligence, art, value and constructive play.

The late 1980s began to set a new direction in the development of animated films. The era of computer animation technology began. The nineties marked the beginning of the greatest viewership and box office receipts. Animation began to appeal to both children and adults. The first thematic television channels were also created, including the ones showing animated films. The new millennium brought an era of change in the art of animation. There was a new wave of universal acceptance and a new definition of artists' status. Hollywood studios almost completely abandoned the traditional freehand drawing technique in favour of computer animation. The 21st century has also restored and developed a specific type of hybrid movies that combined actors' play with animation. Thanks to computers, there are almost no obstacles to the implementation of the boldest ideas in the art of cinematography. Of course, apart from human imagination, which, as we know, probably knows no boundaries.

A short description of a modern animated film character

Undoubtedly, the overall picture and manner of reception of a contemporary animated film hero are influenced by their "ancestors", i.e. the heroes of earlier animated productions. This pertains mainly to showing, comparing, and evaluating individual characters. The contemporary animated hero is distinguished from his predecessors through the very process of his creation. The use of developed computer animation and taking care of every detail has made it possible to grant a very realistic nature to the appearance and movements of the character. The viewer himself also influences the current image of the animated characters. The contemporary recipient is no longer satisfied with a simple, or even infantile tale. He wants to experience more complex stories, in which the characters experience various adventures, present specific behavioural patterns, and also have a more complex personality.

Fantastic and magical characters from fairy tales can still be found among contemporary animated heroes. However, many of them are a figment of the creators' imagination, having no support in folk tales and beliefs, or fairy tales. The representatives of non-human heroes are characterised by very strong anthropomorphization. These are animals or objects with the ability to speak, living and functioning just like a human. The heroes have human character and personality traits, and experience various emotional states. A lot of contemporary heroes of animated films represent specific actions in a film story. They experience various problems and look for ways to solve them. Most often they search for: happiness, identity, changes in the way they function, ways to achieve their goals and aspirations, ways to overcome barriers or ways to make their dreams come true (Mytnik 2018: 158). Nowadays, you can see a new type of female animated characters, namely heroic princesses. What distinguishes them from their "predecessors" created by the traditional productions of Walt Disney is the fact that they do not present stereotypical premises. Unlike Snow White, Aurora, Ariel, Cinderella and other princesses, they have a strong character, are independent, brave and are not afraid to take risks and face various challenges.

It is worth mentioning that animated films presenting those new categories of heroes do not have a clearly defined general audience in terms of age. Therefore, they are neither directed only at children, nor exclusively at adults. On the contrary, the addressee of an individual film work is determined by a competent institution of a particular country.

Values represented by the characters of animated films

Watching a film work, a viewer focuses mainly on its story, characters and events in which they take part. The stories presented in animated films raise many questions, which are important from the recipients' point of view. First of all, they contain issues and problems close to life experiences, dreams, and fears of viewers of all ages. The film heroes who experience them create the impression of being more real and closer to the image of potential viewers of the film: they reflect their daily problems, concerns and fears. As a result, viewers can get more involved in the film they watch, both at an emotional and intellectual level.

The reality presented in animated films is varied. In this regard, it is possible to find movies presenting an accurate reflection of the real world and a fairy-tale world of magic, as well as a presentation of fantastic alternative reality.

However, regardless of the background of the events, most of the animated characters show certain categories of values. These include:
– moral values;
– cognitive values;
– personal values;
– social values.

Above all, moral values indicate what is good and what is bad. The cognitive values of cartoon films are mainly based on acquiring knowledge, as well as the rational perception of reality. They also include: the hero's inventiveness, his search for the truth, development of his own creativity, responsibility and engagement in various activities. Personal values, for example, focus on pursuing a goal, improving one's skills, good knowledge of one's own abilities, acceptance of one's being, curiosity of the world and many other abilities. Animated films presenting pro-social values focus on promoting the right attitudes towards the society in which one lives. They refer to the principles of harmonious and peaceful coexistence with the members of a given community. Thus, they show the advantages of cooperation, mutual help, fair competition, modesty between people, and the ability to lose.

Animated characters and social problems

While searching for social issues presented in animated films, I focused on full-length works. They interested me mainly due to their extensive form, in which one can notice a deeper message and a well-outlined, often ongoing personality modification of the character. In addition, these types of films are a very attractive form of presenting a short story. They are characterised by a clear message, originality and a higher aesthetic level. Also, it should be noted that catchy and pleasant songs

in animated films often have a deeper meaning. The underlying layer of the story comprises, inter alia, social issues that can be used in a variety of activities.

By focusing on social areas in animated films, one can notice specific issues raised by them. They are primarily:

– social issues (promoted and desirable, as well as rejected). The examples include: patriotism, a professional career, loyalty to principles, compromise and strength solutions, spiritual development;
– stereotypes and social myths (simplified images of social features, as well as colloquial and common interpretations of reality);
– society's needs, social goals and methods of their implementation (e.g. life of the local community, communication and problems related to it, social changes);
– moral issues, such as: spending free time, everyday problems, healthy competition, approach to health, consumption, culture, fashion, etiquette;
– socio-political structure, including, among others: family model, relations at work, power-society relations.

One example that reflects current social values is *The Little Prince* (*Le Petit Prince*, 2015). This film presents a young girl, living in a housing estate of undistinguishable houses. Her mother is an employee of a corporation, who wants to prepare her daughter in advance for becoming a cog of the corporate machine. So, she has a plan for the girl's life, filling every minute of every day. The film outlines a social problem of putting children in the momentum of life, as compared to the functioning of a large group or corporation, and thus, prioritising career as a life goal. In this way, the phenomenon of childhood is forgotten and a young person is deprived of the time to be a child.

Other examples of animated films whose characters personify socially approved values are:

– *Zootopia* (2016) – this film presents, inter alia, the issues of: living in a harmonious society, a career at all costs;
– *Trolls* (2016) – this work presents a picture of social loyalty to principles;
– *Ferdinand* (2017) – the film shows compromises against force solutions;
– *WALL-E* (2008) – the film presents the reaction of society towards ecological destruction.

The majority of older Walt Disney films depicting fairy-tale princesses are examples of animated films whose characters reflect stereotypes and social myths. Here one can find stereotypes regarding the social division of gender roles in such works as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). This film shows a female figure as a servant to male characters – Snow White, after entering the strangers' house, undertakes such activities as cleaning and cooking. In addition, the heroine is presented as a physically weak, timid and extremely sensitive character, who needs help in her actions and is perceived through the prism of her beauty. She is also depicted as a victim suffering cruelty and oppressive treatment. However, there are movies that try to break social stereotypes, e.g.:

– *Princess and the Frog* (2009) – this work shows attempts to break social stereotypes;

- *Brave* (2012) – the film presents, among others, the effects of breaking social rules, as well as effective breaking of stereotypes.

One of the examples reflecting the society's movie needs, social goals and methods of their implementation is the film *Cars* (2006). The main character of this movie, Lightning McQueen, accidentally ends up in a small desert town Radiator Springs, located in a forgotten place just off Highway 66, instead of the race route. Being stranded, Lightning learns from his new friends that there are more important things to life than striving for success at all costs. The film also raises issues of living in a peaceful local community, as well as the benefits of cooperation and mutual assistance. Other films showing this category of social issues include:

- *Rango* (2011) – this work presents the image of society in the face of danger and its survival;
- *Moana* (2016) – the film shows innovative actions in the face of saving society;
- *Happy Feet* (2006) – the film presents, among others, the reaction of society to a mismatch.

An example of an animated film touching upon moral issues is *Sing* (2016). This film shows the problem of social consumerism. The main characters are subjugated to money which dominates the society. Entering the song competition, almost every participant hopes to achieve their dreams and goals by winning.

Other animated films showing moral issues include:

- *Anomalisa* (2015) – the film shows the mundane life of society, social frustration;
- *Coco* (2017) – this work presents the exploration of family tradition, as well as the beliefs of society.

Persepolis (2007) is one of the examples that reflect the socio-political structure in an animated film. The main character of the film, a nine-year-old Marjane, grows up in the house of left-wing intellectuals, she reads comics about dialectical materialism. However, the world she knows soon becomes a thing of the past due to the rise of Islamic regime. She is still a child – no political change can limit the intensity of this period. Although the reality is crushed by fundamentalism and resulting uniformity, the girl discovers her own forbidden world, created by western music, pop-culture gadgets – emblems of the free world. After the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, Marjane is sent to Europe. Other animated films depicting the socio-political structure include:

- *Zootopia* (2016) – this film shows the image of a modern metropolis divided into thematic districts;
- *Frozen* (2013) – the work presents the picture of a state with a monarchical system;
- *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) – the film shows the image of an ancient state.

Examples of social actions of selected characters

After listing examples of animated films and their heroes who represent specific issues related to social life, I would like to present a more detailed analysis of the characters.

A very good example is Hiccup, one of the main characters in the series *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010, 2014, 2019). In the first part, Hiccup cannot fulfil the requirements of the culture in which he grew up, although he dreams of finally gaining the acceptance of his father when he brings him the heart of a defeated dragon, proving in a brutal way his maturity, which is so important for symbolic rites of passage. Clumsy Hiccup discovers in himself an extraordinary strength, which allows him to change the way his father thinks and how the Viking community functions. *How to Train Your Dragon* is, in a way, a typical story about the transformation of a weakling into a superhero, with the decisive difference being that Hiccup's weakness is his superpower, and victory is not about defeating, humiliating or destroying the opponent, but convincing him to newly discovered moral norms. In the first part, Hiccup gained his self-confidence through the rejection of norms imposed by culture, rebellion against the obligatory ritual. In the third part, the ritual is something that the hero needs to symbolically close a certain stage and begin the next one.

Fortunately, filmmakers do not try to convince us that the world can be changed solely with a good heart or the power of friendship. Technology plays a decisive role in this story. Young Viking – first gradually tames the dragon, and then discovers that a wounded animal cannot fly due to a damaged tail, so he decides to create a prosthesis for him. It is amazing that the cinema, being sensitive to racial or gender discrimination, did not give millions of the youngest viewers using prostheses, pacemakers or hearing aids someone they could identify with until 2010.

The Berk settlement where Hiccup lives, is initially a fortified fortress, perfectly prepared for fending off dragon attacks. In the subsequent parts of *How to Train Your Dragon*, it becomes an ideal picture of the coexistence between humans and animals, but it undergoes a serious crisis. There are more and more dragons and they are beginning to destabilise the lives of the inhabitants and start attracting enemies. The key issue here is to notice and take into consideration the inseparable connection between man and nature, which means that by not respecting it, we also destroy ourselves.

I believe that all three parts of *How to Train Your Dragon* wonderfully show various social issues. The principles of functioning of the society, its needs, as well as the requirement to follow moral principles are presented against the background of the socio-political structure of the settlement. Social values promoted by the Berk community and their transformation through the actions of the chief's son, as well as breaking of stereotypes about dragons are shown.

A completely different hero I would like to present is Owen Suskind, the main character of the film *Life, Animated* (2016). This film is a hybrid. It is a document combining a live film set with an animated film. I have decided to present Owen because of his "revival". *Life, Animated* presents the story of a man who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of 3 and did not use speech for years – he loved to sit in front of the TV and repeatedly watch the same stories. Over time, he learned by heart the lines and songs from his beloved movies, transforming them into his own language. With words spoken by the heroes and their helpers, he began to express love, joy or sadness. Thus, he drew the loved ones into his animated world.

The film incorporates animations, especially of Owen, which help viewers understand the way autistic people perceive the world. The film also presents the problems that autistic people face every day. *Life, Animated* is therefore a film fulfilling an important social role. It makes viewers aware of and even educates them about autism, at the same time showing the amazing therapeutic power of films, in particular animated ones.

Ways of using the impact of animated film characters in various types of activities

The mechanisms of impact of film art, and thus the film hero, on the viewer, such as: identification, assimilation, internalisation, insight, imitation or modelling (Mytnik 2018), affect the emotional and cognitive sphere of perception, take part in shaping attitudes, set patterns of behaviour and also affect imagination. In this respect, one should notice the great pedagogical, educational and preventive potential when interacting with animated characters. Therapeutic activities can also be based on the experience of watching animated films. Thus, the characters contribute to the specific applications of audio-visual works in social topics. As Anna Krajewska points out, "television – due to the amount of time spent on watching it and because of its power of influence – plays a significant role in shaping the child's perception of the social world, providing him with knowledge about his relationships, personal patterns, rules of conduct, values. Animated films belong to television programs which are favoured and most watched by children (especially the youngest ones, not yet teenagers)" (Krajewska 2003: 195). This does not change the fact that, considering a more frequent contact of older children and adults with animated films, their impact could be equally useful and effective.

Taking into consideration the impact of animated characters representing social issues, various ways of using them can be distinguished, for example:
– shaping views – pedagogical or educational activities will activate ideas about the social world, acquiring knowledge of appropriate interpersonal relations, personal models approved by and acceptable in the society;
– change in self-perception – the world shown by the characters of animated films can be considered as a reflection and a source of cultural and social changes. They are based on re-evaluation in terms of a lifestyle, life goals and identity. The conducted activities may also concern the change of selfish perception of oneself in a social world, like "I and the rest of the world" into "I, living in a group";
– creating a sense of femininity by breaking stereotypes – the undertaken actions may focus on moving away from the image of the cultural icon of childhood and the symbol of the perfect girl, who in the future is to become the perfect woman, i.e., from the typical, stereotypical "Disney princesses";
– preventing manifestation of aggression and hostility – conducted educational activities can facilitate socially approved relationships between the characters in the film to prevent improper behaviour, manifestation of aggression towards peers, and also to discharge negative emotions;

– supporting therapeutic activities – by using the activities of individual characters of animated films and applying them during film therapeutic activities, it is possible to affect the emotional sphere of the viewer, relieve psycho-physical tensions accumulated in the recipient, as well as perform a controlled participation in a social world in which certain rules exist and specific values are presented.

Of course, the examples presented above do not comprise an exhaustive list of ways to use the impact of animated film characters on the viewer. Every person who conducts various types of classes with other people (teacher, educator, psychologist, therapist or culture animator) can notice a lot more values, and thus, methods of applying the image of social issues in their work. The only restrictions will include: the number of animated films produced and human imagination.

Summary

Characters presented in animated films can be used for setting models of behaviour that can be successfully used in the framework of various activities: pedagogical, educational, preventive or therapeutic. As Arleta Witek suggests, "the media, through animated films, shape children's attitudes and social norms that permeate everyday life and function as permanent patterns of behaviour. [...] By watching selected animated films that touch upon social issues, it is possible to change from the 'I' category of thinking, so popular these days, to 'we'" (Witek 2018: 90). This type of influence may also apply to the attitudes of adults.

Animated film viewers are becoming more and more demanding. They will not identify themselves with heroes if they are infantile and weak. Film producers began to notice this, which resulted in the creation of such characters as the rebellious Merida from *Brave*, and the mentally strong Elsa from *Frozen*. Therefore, can watching the actions of the characters of animated films showing social issues lead to effective changes, for example, in the perception of reality that surrounds us? Can animated characters really "revive us"? Social expectations regarding the animated film, its benefits and threats resulting from it are discussed primarily in the context of participation in cinema screenings and the impact of television on children, which is considered to be an important component of a child's educational environment, capable, just like family and school, to exert both positive and negative effects on young audiences.

I believe that the above-mentioned examples of films presenting various social issues have a great impact on the way we perceive the world in which we live. They are a good reference point for the values one possesses and their confrontation with those generally accepted in a given society. They can also be a driving force that will really "revive" its recipients, stimulate them to live not only in a group, but also with themselves. The characters of animated films form a kind of social group that invites the viewer to their world, shows the reality as it is and the effects of actions taken within it. Therefore, the recipient of an animated film recognises and learns the presented social and moral values, moral issues, and also gets to know himself better.

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Abstract

Animated film characters represent various attitudes, points of view and issues, including social problems. Many of them are shown as carriers of socially approved character traits, who have an important mission or fight for the greater good. It must be emphasised that a film hero, as the key element of the film plot is the centre of attention for a viewer. The holistic reception, including all the values, norms and principles, proves to be an effective tool during educational and therapeutic work. Thanks to considerations into the social dimension of activities, based on the example of particular characters, it is possible to appreciate in animated films the significance of the issues which are still unnoticed and regarded as childish. The development of this topic is the result of the researcher's own research into the social message of animated works.

Społeczny wymiar działań wybranych współczesnych bohaterów filmów animowanych

Streszczenie

Bohaterowie filmów animowanych prezentują różnorodne postawy, poglądy i zagadnienia, w tym problemy o charakterze społecznym. Wielu animowanych bohaterów ukazywanych jest jako nośniki aprobowanych społecznie cech charakteru, posiadających ważną do spełnienia misję bądź walczących o wyższe dobro. Należy podkreślić, że bohater filmowy, jako kluczowy składnik opowiadania filmowego, stanowi centrum kierowania uwagi przez widza. Jego całościowy odbiór wraz z niesionymi przezeń wartościami, normami oraz zasadami okazuje się skutecznym narzędziem pracy podczas prowadzonych czynności edukacyjnych, wychowawczych, a także terapeutycznych. Dzięki podjęciu rozważań dotyczących społecznego wymiaru działań na przykładzie poszczególnych animowanych bohaterów możliwe jest dostrzeżenie powagi ukazywanych zagadnień we wciąż niedocenianych, niesłusznie uznawanych za „dziecinne" filmach animowanych. Rozwinięcie niniejszego tematu jest efektem samodzielnie przeprowadzonych badań nad przesłaniem animowanych dzieł o charakterze społecznym.

Key words: animated film character, animated tale, social issues, education, film therapy

Słowa kluczowe: bohater filmu animowanego, animowana baśń, zagadnienia społeczne, edukacja, filmoterapia

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