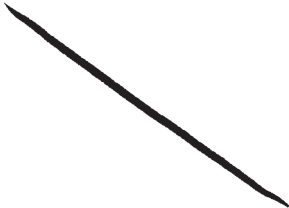


CINEMA THERAPY AND FILMMAKING THERAPY, WAYS TO PREVENT BULLYING AND TO HEAL BULLIED CHILDREN

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Abstract: Given its wide appeal as an entertainment method, cinema can be easily adapted in order to be used as a therapeutic and educational tool. Anxiety, which, in children, is considered to be both an important cause and consequence of bullying, can be healed through cinema, thanks to the experience of the happy end and the theory of identification with the character that help the child reach a state of harmony and contentment at the end of the story. Moreover, as bullying can often cause PTSD, which is a multi-sensory disorder, filmmaking therapy can be especially helpful as it can offer an audiovisual narrative approach to trauma. Also, the creative processes of filmmaking, such as writing, expressing through visuals, sound and music, could help children learn certain therapeutic creative methods that they could then use throughout their lives to express future inner tensions that could appear, contributing to an improved quality of life.

Keywords: cinema therapy, filmmaking therapy, video-based therapy, bullying, PTSD, fairy tales.

How to cite: Tache-Codreanu, A. (2023) "Cinema Therapy and Filmmaking Therapy, Ways to Prevent Bullying and to Heal Bullied Children," *Concept* 1(26), pp. 245-256.

Introduction

Alongside its main use as an entertainment or art product, cinema has been starting to be seen more frequently than before also as a therapeutic tool. Both filmmaking and watching films have been proved to be able to become efficient healing methods. Watching films in which characters encounter similar problems with the ones of the viewers, helping them surpass difficult situations has been known as cinema therapy (Hankir et al., 2015), and the process of making a film on a therapeutic purpose as filmmaking therapy or video-based therapy, although this field is still in the first stages of its development and it still lacks a precise definition and theory (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2018). Through the nature of making a film one needs to associate multiple types of arts, respectively multiple types of creative therapies in the case of a therapeutic approach, which makes the process even more effective, as when various forms of creative therapies are combined the result is even more compelling (Hu et al., 2021).

As also the separate components of making a film can become therapeutic (Mytnik-Daniluk, 2019), the process of writing a film script has been used as writing therapy (Coleman, 2022), the process of capturing pictures that reflect one's emotional perspective on a certain subject is known as PhotoVoice (Velea & Alexandru, n.d.), creating or listening to music on therapeutic purposes is known as Music Therapy (Wong, 2023), and the use of theater processes to achieve psychological change has been known as Drama Therapy (Emunah, 2020). Filmmaking includes all of these

creative processes, not to mention the postproduction phase of editing, which requires creativity and making sense out of the material that was shot (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2018), a process that can become therapeutic by the possibility of selecting and making one's own significance out of the juxtaposition of the chosen shots.

Teaching Cinema in Schools

Therefore, teaching cinema in schools is not solely an efficient way of learning about culture, but it can also help students in expressing and understanding themselves in many different ways. Moreover, as teenage years can become a difficult period in the life of an individual, having a way in which one could express himself freely could be very helpful in understanding one's self emotions. Watching certain films is known to develop emotional intelligence (Núñez, 2022), which is considered a very important point in one's success in life (Goleman, 2003). Therefore, introducing cinema classes in schools alongside the already established subjects of mathematics, chemistry or literature could have a positive impact on students' lives on the long term.

Mental health among children is a major concern, as the United States have reported in 2021 that an estimate of 49.5% of adolescents based in the US has had some kind of mental health disorder during their lives (*Mental Health for Adolescents*, 2021). In Romania, students have almost no type of psychological support throughout their school years, the only help being that each school has assigned one psychologist that needs to take care of and guide at least 600 students (Redacția, 2020). Therefore, a way in which students could be helped on a large scale and in a cost-efficient way could be cinema, as it has the great advantage of already being viewed as an accessible entertainment method, which if used and understood properly, could help improve the mental health and well-being of children.

Cinema Therapy

Cinema therapy is a process in which the psychotherapist assigns to the client a certain film to watch, based on the client's identified needs. The process of watching the film may have a direct healing effect on the patient or could become a starting point for further therapeutic interventions (Berg-Cross et al., 1990). When dealing in particular with severe mental conditions such as schizophrenia, cinema therapy has been proved only as a way for the therapy session to become more efficient thanks to the relaxation induced to the patient by a certain film, but the sole watching experience was not proved to be enough for the patient to improve (Sacilotto et al., 2022).

On the contrary, researchers working with children suffering from atopic dermatitis, a condition that is stress-related, found that by only screening humorous films to the patients reduced in their saliva the presence of ghrelin, which is a hormone responsible of the regulation of appetite, anxiety, night-time wakening and stress (Kimata, 2007). The same author proved that this treatment is able to diminish the estradiol level and increase the testosterone level in men that are affected by atopic dermatitis and erectile dysfunction, which has as a common aetiology psychogenic stress (Kimata, 2008). So, if used properly, only the act of watching a film could offer therapeutic improvements for both children and adults.

The current study does not intend to offer a method of healing children with mental health disorders through cinema therapy, as this must be done under the supervision of a professional therapist, that should elaborate a specially designed plan for each individual case. But if cinema would be used in schools as a prophylactic method, based on identifying and projecting films which contain characters with problems similar to the ones that children from a certain age group might encounter, it could help them get a more positive approach on their lives and avoid certain disorders that could appear later. I suggest taking as an example one of the most common problems that are encountered in schools, that is bullying, and analyse how it could be reduced through the use of cinema therapy.

Bullying – A Theoretical Background

In Romania, a study made on 4449 children found out that 82% of the respondents were witnesses of bullying in the schools where they study and 49% of the children were themselves victims of bullying (*Date alarmante privind bullying-ul în școlile din România*, 2022).

Bullying represents a specific type of aggressive behaviour, that involves intentional and repetitive abuse against the victim, with the purpose of causing harm, and being based on an imbalance of power established between the aggressor and the victim. Bullying can happen either on a direct or indirect manner, and through a variety of actions, from physical contact, like hitting or pushing, to verbal abuse, like teasing and name calling, or spreading rumours about the victim and her social exclusion. This type of abuse is encountered throughout the world, involving from young children to adolescents, both boys and girls (Bacchini et al., 2015). Also, scholars proved that being bullied is frequently associated with resulting in severe symptoms of mental health problems such as self-harm, psychotic symptoms, violent behaviour (Arseneault et al., 2010). Moreover, being bullied in childhood affects the future mental health functioning of adults (Rivara

& Menestrel, 2016), causing later disorders such as social anxiety (Boulton, 2013). As bullying is a behaviour that can happen when children are not supervised by their teacher, such as during break times, it is important to find a way in which it could be prevented from happening. Cinema could represent one of these ways.

Scholars proved that both the victims of bullying and bullies suffer from a low self-esteem (Ayoub et al., 2021), aggressors seeking in bullying a method by which they could increase their self-esteem by attacking others. Recent studies proved that by educational cinema, students' self-esteem was increased significantly (Utomo & Sholihah, 2021). This technique is based on the possibility of films to create trends, resulting in a significant influence in learning and therefore can become an important teaching method (Zauderer & Ganzer, 2011). Moreover, the story and characters in a film can become models for students (Utomo & Sholihah, 2021), thanks to the socio-interactionist theory introduced by Vygotsky, which proves that an audience interacts with the characters, and is able to share the emotions and actions that are displayed in an audio-visual language (Arroio, 2007). Another important point is that both victims and perpetrators of bullying suffer of higher-than-normal anxiety levels, that increases the chances of this violent behaviour to happen (Gong et al., 2022). As it will be proved, cinema is able to help also in reducing anxiety, which may also result in a reduction of bullying.

Cinema Therapy as an Educational Method

The method by which screening films could become an educational method and help reduce bullying in schools may be inspired from a cinema therapy group session, as described by Angela Zhe Wu.

This method would be best suitable for students from teenage years and up, as according to Piaget's theory of development, the human brain is yet not completely developed until the individual reaches adolescence. Therefore, individuals might become from a cognitive point of view able of abstract thinking and comprehending the messages in media starting from adolescence. Their way of thinking stops limiting itself to the concrete reality, and in that period they can start having meaningful conversations based on media content that they watched (Wu, 2008, p. 11).

At first, as the children involved will be required to be active both cognitively and emotionally during the process, they must demonstrate that they have a mind that is functioning at least moderately, in order to be able to understand, process and identify themselves with the issues presented and discussed (Wu, 2008, p. 25). That is to say, this type of therapy, or in our case, educational method, would not be suitable for children who suffer from a mental incapacity.

Furthermore, a three-stage guideline is presented: assessment, implementation and lastly debriefing. These three stages are described as follows:

1. Assessment

Assigning a film has to be made after a therapeutic decision taking into consideration the purpose of the intervention, interests, hobbies and problems of the patient (Wu, 2008, p. 25). This first step of cinema therapy could be adapted in an educational manner by the teacher identifying a problem that is found within a certain classroom. As we are discussing about bullying, we will presume that it has been identified as occurring in a certain classroom, and as 82% of the respondents in the earlier presented study stated that they were witnesses of such a behaviour, chances of the existence of at least one bullying victim in a classroom are rather high.

2. Implementation

Once the therapist, or the teacher in our case, has identified an appropriate movie for the children, it can either be assigned as a homework or be screened during a session. The therapist must always watch the film before showing it to the children and present them the reason why it is being shown. Clients of cinema therapy do better if they experience it knowing what they should look for (Wu, 2008, p. 26), and I believe the same would be true when showing it on educational purposes.

3. Debriefing

This final step is used to offer the client a chance of discussing the thoughts and feelings offered by the film, which is also an opportunity to process how the information may be used in the benefit of the client for the future. During this phase the therapist could explore possibilities such as creating a metaphor inspired from the movie, related to the client's life and generate ideas together with the clients on how the information from the film might help them in thinking, feeling or behaving differently in their life (Wu, 2008, p. 27). In an educational context, based on the therapeutic approach of debriefing, the teacher could initiate an open discussion with the students for helping them in processing the information from the film and how they could apply it in a healthier behaviour regarding their attitude towards bullying.

Cinema and Fairy Tales

As it was earlier mentioned, both bullies and victims suffer from higher-than-normal anxiety levels (Gong et al., 2022). Dumitru Carabăţ suggests that there is a strong connection between fairy tales and a film script (Carabăţ, 1998, pp. 183-225), and Armstrong proves in her thesis that fairy tales represent a solid healing

method for children experiencing anxiety, especially thanks to the happy ending that is specific to this literary form. The serenity that is built at the end of the story, given all the tensions that are encountered throughout it, helps in building hope in the case of children with anxiety. Hope is considered as essential for living a peaceful life, and children experiencing anxiety are often in the situation of missing a positive perspective (Armstrong, 2007, p. 38).

If analysing the dramatic structure of a film, as described by John Yorke, one could notice how strongly similar is to the one of fairy tales. In a film, the protagonist always encounters a problem that he or she must solve: Alice needs to escape the fantastic world that she entered, Jack has only 24 hours in order to find his daughter and wife (Yorke, 2014, p. 3). Moreover, according to Jonathan Cohen, when an audience member identifies with a character, he imagines himself as being that character and substitutes his own identity with the identity of the one presented on screen. Audience members are also able to stop being aware of their role of simple consumers and for certain periods of time to adopt the perspective of the character whom they identify with (Cohen, 2009, p. 250). The principle that stays at the base of this process is the one that through identification, the reader of a narrative sees the purpose of the character as being his own, acknowledges the events of the story in accordance with this purpose and has feelings related to this interaction. Therefore, he will be happy when the character reaches his goal and feel anxiety when the success of this goal is threatened (Oatley, 1995, pp. 53-74).

Returning to cinema, the director is the one who initiates the audience identification with the protagonist, through the camera positioning, types of shots, etc (Cohen, 2009, p. 257). Therefore, thanks to the benefits of a happy end, cinema may become a very efficient healing tool for children suffering from anxiety, that may be one of the causes (Gong et al., 2022) and consequences (Swearer et al., 2001) of violent behaviour in schools.

Filmmaking Therapy as a Possible Treatment of Bullying Related PTSD

The literature shows that 50% of the children who were victims of bullying experience post-traumatic stress disorder, more often known as PTSD (Ossa et al., 2019). PTSD represents a psychiatric disorder that can be found among people who experienced or were witnesses of a traumatic event. Examples of such events include serious accidents, natural disasters, terrorist acts, war, rape and bullying. PTSD may affect the individual's social, physical, mental and spiritual well-being (Monica Taylor-Desir, 2022). As PTSD is considered to be a multisensory disorder, all the memories of the traumatic events are visual and auditory, often being impossible to be expressed in words. In a healing process, by offering the

patient a multisensory way of creating the narrative, the usual verbal therapy approach could be enhanced (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2018).

Inspired from art therapy, filmmaking therapy could be one of the solutions for the recovery of children experiencing PTSD from bullying. A reference endeavour on which this process would be based is the “I was There” (IWT) Film Program, a project in which soldiers experiencing combat-related PTSD were invited to a video-based intervention in order to express their feelings and traumas through filmmaking. In the first day of the program, the participants learned the basic skills of filmmaking from film professionals, in the second one they were separated in groups based on their common shared ideas and issues, and each group started writing, acting and directing a short film during a day and a half. After this, a day was dedicated for the postproduction part, and in the end the films were screened in front of an audience that the participants could choose and invite. The results of the project included recovering a sense of control, affiliation and the ability to process the trauma (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2018).

As observed by the authors of the mentioned study, thanks to its characteristics, this method is particularly suitable for younger individuals. This is the reason why, among the advantages observed in the above cited paper, as cinema is viewed as an entertainment product, the process of making films might be perceived especially by children as a friendly and non-intrusive kind of therapeutic intervention.

A possible limitation of this method could come from the fact that filmmaking is an expensive and rather complex process. Compared to only watching and discussing films in a cinema therapy session, the therapeutic filmmaking method would demand employing filmmaking teachers, film and postproduction equipment and also much more time to be dedicated from the part of the participants. But as nowadays video making is becoming more and more accessible, making it possible to obtain fast and decent results only with shooting on a mobile phone and also editing on it, children could also use this approach in making their videos. Moreover, as self-expression is much more important in art therapy than the mastery and control of the art itself (Kuppers, 2019), using in the process the latest technical equipment in filmmaking would certainly not be necessary, therefore helping for it to become much more approachable.

On the other hand, as already mentioned in the beginning of this essay, separate creative processes that are parts of the filmmaking process may be as well effective. For example, by developing a habit of writing a short film script or story based on something that happened (Coleman, 2022), or by encouraging children to simply express in a series of photos how they feel about a certain subject (Velea & Alexandru, n.d.), could help them become more emotionally stable throughout

their life, by learning how to manage and express their emotions through creative and accessible manners. Therefore, as the process of filmmaking involves the use of multiple forms of arts, children could develop through it certain creative habits that might help them on the long term after the video-based therapy is over.

Conclusions

Cinema is able to transform itself easily from an entertainment method to a truly therapeutic one. Through the similarities between films and fairy tales, children with anxiety could be healed, thanks to the benefits of the happy ending and of the identification between audience and protagonist, contributing to a reduction of the causes (Gong et al., 2022) and consequences (Swearer et al., 2001) of violence in schools. Guiding children towards therapeutic filmmaking could support them in healing PTSD caused by bullying, and also help in learning creative skills such as expressing themselves through writing, visual means or music, that they could afterwards use in a healing way throughout their life in order to express their feelings.

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