



Young Children in the Semiotic Space of Modern Cinematography: Implications for Coherent Development

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Abstract

The research deals with the study into psychological aspects of early development of modern preschoolers who are born into the digital world and grow up surrounded by all kinds of media and gadgets. Cartoons as a genre of cinematographic art are an inseparable part of kids' lives and it would be a big mistake to ignore their educational potential. In this respect, the authors define the term "semiotic space of cinematography" which is filled with values, images, signs and symbols of culture which children acquire while watching. Like letters in an alphabet make it possible to understand words and their sense, these signs enable children to decode the deeper meaning of values hidden in them. The modern world that offers children a great variety of cartoons and animated fairy-tales is the certain semiotic media-sphere. Immersion into this sphere definitely shapes child's world outlook, enriching it with different connections between magical and real, space and time, causes and consequences. Fantastic heroes acquire features of the ideal, become models to follow in imaginary and real situations. The focus of the research is on the age-related phenomenological build-ups of four, five and six-year-olds and the impact that cartoons have on their cognitive, communicative and creative skills. One more aspect of the research is connected with cultural role of cartoons. Cinematography teaches kids the core values, both national and universal ones. In this respect, the paper touches upon traditional Russian fairy-tales, as well as eastern and western plots and their implications for the development of the coherent world outlook, devoid of national prejudice and filled with respect towards cultural diversity. Understanding the language of signs from fairy tales feeds imagination, reveals connections existing in the Universe and the unity of values (beauty, love, the good, knowledge). This kind of development is of special importance in the modern world where eternal values get gradually lost.

Keywords: pre-schoolers, cartoons, values education, semiotic space.

1. Introduction

Modern children live in the enormous space of signs. Since birth, they plunge into the information flow filled with various tokens and symbols. Since childhood, the so-called "digital natives" [1] perceive the world around by various means (multimedia toys, smartphones, tablets, animated films) which create semiotic perception of the reality. Experiencing the world around, a modern child gets a wide range of impressions as a result of perceiving reality at a high speed and in bright images, but with unexpected foreshortenings. Opportunities offered today by cinema, on the one hand, cause many-sided, comprehensive cognition of objects and phenomena of the world around. On the other hand, this perception of reality is frequently superficial. This contradiction prompted us to give a brief outline to the significance of cartoons as the tools of values education and creative and critical thinking development.

2. Theoretical Background

Cinematic art is the first form of art that a child comes across. Artistic signs and symbols of cartoons have a huge influence on the evolution of kids' world outlook. The huge world of art for children represents a semiosphere which, according to Yu.M. Lotman, is characterized by semiotic homogeneity and individuality at the same time [2]. The child is capable to communicate with the world and to understand it since he uses the language constituted by semiotic signs. The world "speaks" to a kid by means of signs and symbols of the lullabies, surrounding natural phenomena, real-life objects, and seasons shown in familiar animated stories. The complex unity of images, values, behavior patterns implies connection with the real life of a child. If any components are lost or interpreted in a superficial way, the ideas about interrelations which exist in reality and, therefore, integrity of the world

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view may get impaired. Children respond with dreams, fantasies and crafts (e.g. drawings, hand-made crafts, stories). The semiotic space of cinematic art includes signs and symbols of various areas of life - nature, society, culture, history. Making children familiar with the plots opens the whole world of profound ideas to them. Integrity of the world view is provided with studying of all kinds of connections, such as cause and effect, time and space, quality and quantity.

Being a part of semiosphere, a fairytale is the ultimate source of wisdom and moral values. In this respect, it can serve as an excellent tool for teaching young children about values. Values education, as defined by Dr. William Robb, refers to an activity aimed at making values explicit for long-term well-being of self and others. Values education is about changing kids' behavior for the better. [3] Psychological researches have come to the following conclusion: preschool children beyond all exceptions believe in what they see in fairy tales. None of them asks whether the story is true or not. Kids might ask if the character is kind or evil, mean or generous. This feature of perception contributes to the development of moral aspects. Children find out what is good and evil in life and accurately define their attitudes, thus, moral aspect of the world outlook being shaped. Moral dilemmas from cartoons remain relevant later in life.

3. Significance of Cartoons for Age-related Build-ups

As our previous research show, at preschool age, a child possesses spontaneously developed mythopoetic world-image which is represented by various frequently fantastic interrelations between a human and the world [4]. The understanding of the world around by a child till the age of 4 is based on the logic of a myth and a discovery [5]. As for the world-image of a child aged 5 and 6, its development is underpinned by high development of all mental processes, in particular, thinking and imagination. L.S. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of imagination in enrichment of child's experience and claimed it to be the vital function of consciousness, considering four basic forms of connection between imagination and reality [4]. Artistic images of cinematic art turn into semantic units of the worldview, which is a phenomenon of consciousness.

Starting from the age of three, preschoolers develop gender identity and values of gender-related behavior. Thanks to artistic images of fairy tales and bright plots, cartoons contribute to formation of the physio-philosophical worldview since they include certain female and male archetypes. A character from classical Russian cartoon "baba-yaga" appears to be a wise old woman, the hostess of the wood who helps a "kind good fellow". Boys identify themselves with the images of courageous heroes that facilitate courage, masculinity and decisiveness. Female characters shape feminine archetype, being kind, gentle and caring.

Preschoolers' consciousness undergoes a certain phenomenological row of stages which have semiotic essence. At the early age, kids get aware of the following phenomena: "self"; elements of the world (Earth, Fire, Water, Earth); objects associated with daily culture (a plate, a spoon, a napkin, etc.) and cultural communication norms (greetings and farewells), determining interaction with the society.

Cartoons also foster what researchers refer to as visual literacy [6]. Bright emotionality of cartoons corresponds to the features of children perception, causing formation of the mythopoetic worldview which is characterized by the unity of real and virtual objects. Signs and symbols of animated stories represent the unity of logical and illogical, sensual and rational, an image and an idea, unclear and well-understood. Reflection on the world begins with the feeling of surprise that so many cartoons arouse in kids. Cartoons amaze children, induce them to reflect, establish cause and effect dependences. One more aspect of cartoons, connected with age-related build-ups, refer to teaching preschoolers about the way to express their emotions in the appropriate way, to learn about body language.

Phenomenological ideas of five and six-year-olds are expanded by such phenomena, as "I am a personality" which means that I have the rights, obligations; I act as the citizen of my country. Fantastic heroes, their gestures and actions become role models in the imagined and real situations, fostering creativity and promoting critical thinking. By the sixth year of life, cultural signs and symbols which act as behavioral standards, become part of consciousness. Images, signs and symbols tend to complement each other as every sign has an "aura" of figurative context. The child of this age comes to realize that the motion picture has one feature: it is always not all reality, but only one fragment which is cut out and appears on the screen. This fragment gains certain independence, therefore leading to a possibility of diverse combinations which are not always possible in the real world. Each animated film reveals one side of the world to a child, but does it in a full and many-sided manner.

4. Cultural Implications of Modern Cartoons

Modern kids have access to cartoons that come from all over the world. These pieces of cinematic art cannot help transmitting cultural values [7]. Eastern culture, unlike western, is still guided by integrity and harmony of the world. According to its world-view, an individual is primarily connected with the nature. Understanding the unity of the universe and inner space of every human is peculiar for eastern cartoons. Western cartoons are traditionally concerned with individual identity and moral values. Via animated films based on the Russian national fairy tales, children get acquainted with folklore images which are the richest source of knowledge about national history. Fairy tales, ceremonial songs, plots undoubtedly contain echoes of the national ancient myths and preserve mythological oppositions of its semantics: light – darkness, kind – evil. Fairy tales keep some topics and plots from pagan myths: totemic animals, spirits, gods, the elements of the universe. New knowledge about another culture, symbols, images don't assume rejection of the known ones. They supplement, enrich each other. The same plot in animated cartoons from different countries (for example, "Little Mermaid" by the scriptwriter A.Galich, "Little Mermaid" by Disney; "The Princess of underwater kingdom" from Japan) reveals various aspects of a familiar story. This way, cinematography teaches kids the core values, both national and universal, devoid of national prejudice and filled with respect towards cultural diversity.

5. Conclusions

The semiotics space of cinematic art includes the main signs and symbols of the nature, culture, social relations. It stimulates development of imagination, speech and creativity. Understanding the meaning of signs and symbols of the world around opens vast horizons to children. They begin to feel like successors of the past eras. There is a spiritual bond between generations supporting the child in his knowledge of the complete world view and creating fully-fledged personality of a growing person. In our opinion, this kind of development is of special importance in the modern world where eternal values get gradually lost. Cartoons, if shown at the right amount and in the right order, provide overall development of cognitive, creative and moral aspects of developing personalities. They enable to provide integrity of the real and figurative, build the right hierarchy of objects, phenomena of reality and system of cultural values, teaches children about natural connections existing in our life, encourage skills of independent search and critical thinking.

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