

How do films contribute to shaping teenagers' identity?

A CONVERSATION WITH JÜRGEN GRIMM*

Please tell us about your study on "Motion Pictures and Identity Formation".

Grimm: Media institutions from Austria and Germany cooperated on this study.¹ Its aim was to gather data on the effect of motion pictures on adolescents² – but not in regard to the classic dimension of youth protection, but in regard to identity

for it in 4 films: *The Hunger Games*, the German film *Kriegerin (Combat Girls)*, *Chronicle*, and *Dirty Girl*.³

How did you go about the study?

Grimm: We screened the complete films with adolescents and then analysed them in a pre-post design. That means we measured dimensions of

naires once again. We interpret the differences between these two measurements as the effect of the film if they fulfil the criterion of significance. In the end, we had 517 evaluable cases that came from different school types and included adolescents with and without migrant backgrounds in a ratio of circa 3 to 2.

Now, we could examine the films both individually and comparatively by interpreting the differences in the effects between the films as differences in their specific filmic quality. Of course, we had to watch the film closely and analyse it in order to reach a meaningful interpretation of the effect findings against the background of the film's aesthetics and its content.

What exactly do you understand by identity formation and which identity effects have you identified?

Grimm: Our theoretical starting point is Tajfel and Turner's⁴ social identity theory: The two researchers assume that there is a balance between a person's connection to a group or several groups and the difference s/he constructs between oneself as an individual and these groups. This balance is expressed in different degrees of identification. We can apply this to adolescents, enquiring: "How strongly do you identify with the gender group?", "How strongly do you feel connected to your age group?"

The same can be applied to national identity. Our findings here are particu-

formation. Identity formation includes an understanding of gender roles as well as the assignment to social groups or worldview communities. These are all references used by teenagers to build their personality. We developed a design that covers various aspects of identity formation and then looked

identity, such as gender roles and national identity, as well as psychosocial attitudes, such as the expectation of control or authoritarianism, twice: The initial enquiry took place at schools; then there was an appointment where one of these films was shown; after this, the students completed their question-

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larly instructive as no study has been carried out on this so far.

For example, we determined that “patriotism” is somewhat more highly developed among boys than among girls, but that girls achieve higher scores for “gender role flexibilisation”. Girls are better able to imagine taking on the classic roles traditionally allocated to boys, while the boys seem to be much more fixated on a narrow spectrum of behaviours.

However, the most striking result is the variety of group connections. Identity

Grimm: Of course there are films that encourage the critical questioning of identity concepts to a greater or lesser degree. Depending on the dramaturgy and film design, we can also identify various effects that sometimes appear to be ambivalent.

The film *Kriegerin (Combat Girls; Ill. 1)* for example is about the drama of a young woman wanting to leave a radical right-wing group. The heroine is in a romantic relationship with the group’s leader, but increasingly questions the group’s xenophobic practices

it lost its persuasive power. In particular, after viewing the film prejudices against foreigners and authoritarian attitudes – such as the longing for a strong leader or the willingness to subordinate oneself – were accepted less. The film thus clearly encouraged a critical, negative view of right-wing radicalism. Nor did the complex dramaturgy prevent *Kriegerin*, like all other films, from rendering identity concepts more flexible.

What are your results concerning the film that was most successful among teenagers, *The Hunger Games*?

Grimm: Here, a strong woman is at the centre of the story, a protagonist who exhibits comprehensive leadership qualities. Katniss Everdeen is not only able to set the direction in particular critical situations, she also displays moral qualities by risking her own life to stand up for those weaker than herself. Thus she is both caring and a strong leader (Ill. 2).

This really impressed the boys. At the start of the study we had observed lower gender role flexibility among the male adolescents, but this was changed by the film *The Hunger Games*, moving in particular towards a flexibilisation of gender roles and a progressive view of women.

This was not the case to the same extent for girls. They already had a comparatively high level of gender role flexibility, to which the film was unable to contribute anything more – perhaps because for them the attitudes in question were already clear and taken for granted.

A further interesting finding in regard to *The Hunger Games* is that the “expectation of external control” was increased in both boys and girls.

What does that mean exactly?

Grimm: The expectation of external control means the feeling of being controlled by others; external social forces are deemed to be so strong that one is almost completely unable to change

is not one-dimensional; rather, today’s adolescents are embedded in multiple group contexts, and all of these contexts constitute their identity.

Because of this, I would focus less on single dimensions, qualifying these as more or less important, but would rather see an adolescent’s real identity as the highly personal way in which he or she combines and organises his or her group allocations. Connecting different social allocations is then his or her identity.

Which qualities of the films do the evaluated identity effects depend upon?

and finally distances herself from it completely. Then there is the parallel case of a young woman who wants to join the group and shows herself to be completely uncritical.

Now, it is interesting that the teenagers rated the affiliation to ideological groups more highly after having seen the film than beforehand. This could be interpreted as a form of seduction from these groups, unintentionally conveyed by the film through the subplot of the second woman wanting to join the group.

However, the content of the radical right-wing range of views was not rendered more plausible; far from it,

anything. For educators, this usually has a bad reputation as it is associated with “learned helplessness”. The opposite is the “expectation of internal control”, that is, the belief that one is able to shape one’s life autonomously and is not dependent on external forces.

Apparently the film *The Hunger Games*, as a dystopia (that is, a negative utopia),

what possibilities I have to act.” The scope for action is certainly smaller than is the case for teenagers in Germany today. This gives rise to the feeling: “The external forces are strong, it is not possible to influence them easily.” At the same time, higher value is placed upon moral qualities, such as standing up for human rights, breaking down prejudices towards minorities, and so on.

Thus one of your main findings is that what is shown as strong forces in the Hunger Games film has an effect on adolescents?

Grimm: Yes, exactly. Of course it has to be seen against the background of the plot and the story that is being told. You can’t generalise it.

I believe that films are high-quality for children and teenagers when they allow them to perform identity work and make maturation possible. This includes: “What can I do?”, “What is right in ethical and moral terms?”, and “What do I have to reconcile myself with, what parts of reality need to be taken into account?”

High-quality films allow children and teens to perform identity work

Judging the quality of films in regard to the development of children’s or adolescents’ personalities should thus not be reduced to the mediation of confidence and individual strength – and certainly not to catering to fantasies of omnipotence that increase the risk of future frustration. Films such as *The Hunger Games* contribute to adolescents’ developing a realistic view of themselves and of the world, which not least creates a balance to the sometimes excessive optimism concerning actions seen in superhero or action movies.

In hindsight, what is your conclusion in regard to the selection of films? And what kind of films would you like to see more with regard to identity formation?

Grimm: The films in our project were well selected as they all had themes linked to certain developmental themes of teenagers. *The Hunger Games* dealt with a story about being tested, that is, the adolescents have to show solidarity and act accordingly in order to survive. In *Chronicle* (Ill. 3) the protagonists experience an increase in their own

gives the impression of an extremely powerful external reality that it is virtually impossible to change.

Now the question is: how is an increase in expectations of external control following the viewing of a film to be evaluated in educational terms? If we put this finding in context with the other effects of the film – a reduction of prejudice, the more flexible understanding of gender roles, and the cosmopolitan broadening of horizons, then we can formulate a positive answer to this question. For overall, the adolescents adopt a fairly sensible attitude following their cinematic experience: “In a worst kind of Fascist state, of course I can’t start a revolution at once, but first need to find my way under restrictive conditions, under this totalitarianism, and explore

This is precisely where I perceive an optimisation of identity work, including a realistic component of accepting what cannot be changed. Whether teenagers or adults, we all encounter boundaries; there are always forces stronger than ourselves. Recognising this is part of a healthy socialisation process, and then to say, “But I still need to be active and preserve my moral integrity”, that is the real conclusion that I would call maturation or a gain in identity.

Under these conditions, the evaluation of the expectation of external control is no longer negative. It is a constituent part of a comprehensive concept of identity that reconciles morality with the principle of reality and combines options for intervention with an understanding of the limits to action.

freedom of action, which is typical for adolescents as they progress in their teenage years.

Dirty Girl focuses on the exclusion of outsiders: one girl is labelled a “slut” by her class. She joins forces with a gay boy who is also bullied because of his sexual orientation (Ill. 4). For teenagers, the topic of bullying is a burning issue.

Adolescents interpret every film in terms of identity

Not much is needed for the adolescents to project their identity themes onto the films. They interpret every film in terms of identity. In this sense, the range on offer of films that can be used for identity work is definitely substantial.

The flipside of the diverse films for projecting identity is a certain randomness that can make it more difficult to gain orientation: “Today I’m this, tomorrow I’m that, and the day after tomorrow I’m a third creature.”

I see a further deficiency in the fact that political themes are only seldom dealt with in Western and Central Europe.

There are many themes relevant to identity that can be interpreted in a social and partly political manner. But there is little on offer in which political attitudes are explicitly made the main topic, setting political identity work in motion.

Films that set political identity work in motion are missing

Adolescents’ interest in politics is stagnating in line with this lack of offer. Of course, one can say that this is to do with a “democracy of convenience”, for in Austria and Germany at least one is not forced to become active as an adolescent. It is not the same as during Fascism, for instance, where the choice was between the Hitler Youth or the resistance. Now you can wiggle your way through.

Let’s take a look at the current situation: war and peace in Europe – it is by no means certain that the situation we have enjoyed for 60 years will last. Following the financial and economic crisis, the EU is in a crisis threatening its existence.

I can see comparatively little awareness of this among teenagers in this country, and still less political involvement.

Identity work in teens scarcely includes political reflection

Here, identity work seems to be more focused on dealing with everyday life, on forming networks, and on professional careers; it includes scarcely any political reflection. This could develop into a serious problem if political circumstances become more uncomfortable. ■

NOTES

¹ The study was carried out by the Vienna Department of Communication (Jürgen Grimm, project leader, Petra Schwarzweiler, data collection, fieldwork, and Christiane Grill, questionnaire development, data management) in cooperation with the FSK (the organisation in charge of the German motion picture rating system) and the Ministry for Family Affairs in Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany.

² From September 2012 to July 2013, over 600 girls and boys between 12 and 15 (as well as some 16- and 17-year-olds) from all school types from both rural and urban regions in the German federal states of Rheinland-Pfalz, Baden-Württemberg and Hessen were surveyed.

³ The Hunger Games (Lionsgate, 2012), Kriegerin (MA-FILM Martens Film- und Fernsehproduktions GmbH, 2011), Chronicle (Twentieth Century Fox, 2012) and Dirty Girl (Weinstein Company, 2010).

⁴ Cf. e.g. Tajfel, Henri & Turner, John (1986). *The social identity theory of intergroup behavior*. In Worchel, Steven & Austin, William (eds), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7-24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

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