

The formation of identity through changes of perspective

Movies encourage the critical engagement of young people with themselves and
with the world

Interview with professor Jürgen Grimm, University of Vienna

The protection of youth and minors in the media involves the prediction of media effects, e.g. the question whether filmic representations of violence increase the acceptance of violence in viewers of a certain age. The effects are usually assumed to be negative and "detrimental to development". However, a 2014 study dealing with four films – where the age rating had been controversial – showed that movies enable symbolic processes in young people, providing them with starting points for critical debate and encouraging the development of identity and personality. The project was conducted by the German Self-Regulatory Body of the Film Industry (FSK), in cooperation with the Ministry of Integration, Family, Children, Youth and Women (federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate) and with support from the Central Organization of the Film Industry (SPIO). The scientific management was in the hands of Professor Jürgen Grimm of the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the University of Vienna. *tv diskurs* talked to him.

Note: Apart from Professor Jürgen Grimm (project manager), the Vienna research group consists of Christiane Grill, M.A., (questionnaire development, data management, tabular analysis) and Petra Schwarzweller, M.A., (questionnaire development, sample formation, implementation on site).

You were the scientific manager of the study “Media Competence and the Protection of Minors”. What was the objective of the investigation?

The FSK, as an institution for the protection of minors, focuses on the risk effects of media representations. But just as there are potential risks, movies also have positive effects. This was the point that interested us: What are the communicative benefits provided by movies? What is their role in the formation of identity and the development of personality? In our study we focused on 12- to 16-year-olds since we know from developmental psychology that, in this age group, drastic changes take place as to identity and worldview. At this age, young people move out of the family context, the peer group becomes more important, first sexual contacts take place etc. All this leads to a repositioning in the social environment and a changed view of one's own personality. Therefore the question was: How do movies affect processes of identity formation? From the social science point of view, identity is not limited to gender identity, but includes affiliation with a generation, with local origin, the parents' social class, sympathy for ideologies and political groups, and national affiliation. Here we can already see that identity is not one-dimensionally determined by group membership, but is complex and varied. Furthermore, identity is determined by the difference between the individual and the group (or groups): Am I an opinion maker, do I have a personality with leadership qualities or am I a hanger-on? Am I guided by the opinion of the majority or do I treat myself to extravagant deviations?

What were the criteria for your selection of films for the investigation?

For our investigation, we selected four films concerned with identity issues and with a high degree of popularity among young people. The first film was the science-fiction story *The Hunger Games - Part 1*, in which young people fight for mere survival under a cruel dictatorship while they must demonstrate morality and the courage of personal convictions. The second film *Kriegerin (Combat Girls)* focuses on a young woman who wants to leave the right-wing scene. *Dirty Girl* is about a rebellious girl who is punished by her transfer to a "remedial class" where she gets to know a gay boy. The boy is oppressed by his homophobic father. Together with the "dirty girl" and by coming to grips with his outsider status he succeeds in finding himself. So does she. And finally, *Chronicle* is a kind of superhero story in which three boys discover that they have supernatural powers and have to learn how to deal responsibly with these powers.

Which method did you use in your investigation?

This time, in contrast to earlier media effect studies, our research group used full-length movies instead of individual sequences. In total, more than 600 pupils were involved. In the end we had 517 cases that could be evaluated. The procedure followed the classical pre-post design with two measuring points. In this case, the effect is the difference between the responses *before* and *after* the film screening. The first survey took place at the respective schools where we gathered information, e.g., as to group membership, national identity and gender roles – in the latter case by asking questions like “Should boys also play with dolls?”

Is it appropriate for a girl to take up a technical career?" On the basis of this we constructed an index of gender role conservatism, ranging from old stereotypes to more progressive variants of role flexibility. Not surprisingly, it turned out that gender role flexibility is more pronounced in girls than in boys. After the screening of the films the same questions were asked again. It was very interesting to see how role identities changed by watching movies. In the case of *The Hunger Games*, role attitudes of the boys shifted from a conservative point of view in the direction of a higher role flexibility. For girls, no change was observed. Apparently Katniss Everdeen, the heroine, convinced the male viewers of her morale and leadership qualities, while the girls had already had more progressive views on women's power.

Let us take a closer look at The Hunger Games. What is at stake here?

We are dealing with a dystopia in which an authoritarian dictatorship that has emerged after a disaster in North America forces the citizens to stand their ground and to submit themselves to inhuman rules. This manifests itself in the annual contests, the so-called "Hunger Games". From each of the twelve districts a boy and a girl are chosen. The young persons compete with each other with the aim of killing other participants. In the end, only one can survive. The whole game is observed and manipulated through a most modern technology. Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) is the positive protagonist who participates in the Games, voluntarily taking the place of her little sister who had actually been selected. Now the question was: Are there possibilities of connection as far as the processes of identity formation of young people are concerned?

Do they adopt the pessimism represented, in a world full of violence and controlled by alien forces? Of course, young people know situations of competition. In class, it is a question of who is the best. Associated with it are, ultimately, opportunities for social advancement. In this respect, there are ways to project one's own everyday experiences and draw conclusions from them towards a concept of self and orientation – ultimately sharpening the contours of one's own identity: Am I someone who participates in the competition struggle, regardless of any losses? Or am I someone who reflects on all of this and tries to stay “human” under even the harshest conditions of social interaction?

What role does the protagonist play from whose perspective the story is told? And how does the social reality of young people affect their mental processing of the movie?

Katniss tries to connect the two poles of struggle and social morality, that's why she is so convincing as a model. In our investigation, she scored highest by far in the category "exemplary movie figures" (among female film characters). My explanation is that she indeed performs in a "mature" way: she tries to prevail in a situation of conflict and yet tries to preserve her humanity and ability to cooperate.

In addition, the social context is extremely important for the reception of a movie. This has long been known from research on media reception. I recently had the opportunity, as part of a visiting professorship, to show *The Hunger Games* to Ukrainian students and to discuss the results of our study with them. That was very revealing because the Ukrainians connected the action of the movie to their Maidan movement, by combining the dystopia with the authoritarian system of Yanukovich and Putin.

The students were consistently politicized through their traumatic experience of state violence. Acquaintances had died, many had helped the Maidan fighters. It was evident that the political reality in the background had influenced their reaction to the film. That was different with the German teenagers who associated the *Hunger Games* rather with school competition, with “Deutschland sucht den Superstar” (“Pop Idol”) or with the historical experience at the time of National Socialism.

Thus the possibilities of young people to connect a movie to their own world can be completely different – in the Ukraine against the background of political events and in Germany in a system in which adolescents have to prove themselves with regard to education and a professional future. Nevertheless, they can put themselves symbolically in the film.

I believe that, to a certain degree, fictional films are always digested in a symbolical way against the background of everyday experiences. The viewers are looking for connections to their own reality. Although Ukrainian and German young people live in different worlds, they nevertheless drew very similar conclusions from *The Hunger Games*, namely, the high esteem for morality and decency and the increased importance of solidarity. Which means, the basic conflict is specifically not tied to the political events on the Maidan, but is actually the drama of identity formation of young people around the world. As "transitory beings" in a transitional situation they have to prove themselves in competition and have to struggle for their place in society.

Yet at the same time they may not proceed recklessly but have to find a morally acceptable way – beyond crime, above all – which links assertiveness with respect for others.

Those who fail completely lose their capacity for social bonding – as happens to the boy who loses all control in *Chronicle*.

Back again to The Hunger Games, by far the most successful film among young people in recent years. From a youth protection perspective and with regard to violence, one can view the film very critically. That is the reason why the FSK-rating “12 years and above” was discussed controversially. It was feared that the film demands too much of young viewers since they identify after all with a protagonist who has to kill others in order to survive herself.

We had, of course, checked in advance the impact on anxiety and transfer of aggression. From my dual perspective – doing research on media effects and being active in the protection of minors – I can say that experts in the protection field often overestimate the effects of aggression. With regard to this, not only can one speak of a total all-clear for the present film, the film even reduces aggression. So there is no linear-analogous effect in the sense that the brutal Games provide a model of action which a person would like to “imitate”. Instead viewers positioned themselves in the sense of “I do not want this”. Even the fear that the movie causes remained rather limited. The essential processing level was that of identity formation – this is where the strongest effects were shown. Of the four films under scrutiny, the change in gender role identity was most prominent in *The Hunger Games*. Katniss is a strong woman who proves herself under the most adverse conditions. In addition, there were effects related to the “locus of control expectancy” associated with the worldview shown in the film. We must distinguish between two basic forms of control expectancy.

In the case of the "internal locus of control expectancy", the viewer is convinced of his own power to exert influence – through his own actions – on events in the world. The opposite is the case with the "external locus of control expectancy". Here the viewer sees himself as an insignificant figure and takes the view that he is exposed to the control by external forces. Normally it is considered positive when the "internal locus of control expectancy" increases through a film. However, in the first part of the trilogy *The Hunger Games* which we investigated, it was the "external locus of control expectancy" which increased. This is understandable since the trilogy's positive outcome is not revealed until the third part. It takes the form of a revolution against the dictatorship while the "world" appears more or less immovable in the earlier parts. It is, however, not at all certain that only the "internal locus of control expectancy" can be considered educationally desirable. If, as a teenager, I always identify with super-heroes while I am a "little runt" in the real world, there will be a great discrepancy between my ideal and my real ego, possibly leading to many frustrations as a result of futile attempts at intervention. For a functional view of the world, it is equally important to recognize the limits of my own power and then, in spite of this, to get involved where I have a chance of bringing about change. It is an important task of identity formation to be able to situate oneself realistically in the world with its possibilities and limitations.

In the Shell Study, these young people are referred to as Egotaktiker ("ego tacticians"). Which means that, while they are interested in their own advancement, they try to be so pragmatic in their tactics that they always come to grips with the circumstances.

I would not see it as a specific type of young person. Actually, a key process in the formation of identity in every human being is to find the right balance between the options of intervention and the limits of the capacity to act. This is why I interpret the rise of the "external locus of control expectancy" in young viewers of *The Hunger Games* as a process of maturation rather than an acquired helplessness. It is an expression of intelligent rationality not to enjoy, for once, the "Yes, I can" feeling in the vein of superhero stories and instead to ask oneself "What can I accomplish, as an individual, under dictatorial conditions? And what would I actually do in such an inhuman and cynically violent society?" By the way, not only did the film have an effect on the formation of identity, it also functioned at the level of national identity. Nationalist attitudes, in the sense of a generalized concept of superiority ("we are the greatest") and the construction of a threatening outside world ("the others are enemies"), were reduced and cosmopolitan attitudes were fostered. This could be detected in the reaction to all films under scrutiny – most clearly in the case of *The Hunger Games*. Movies give us the opportunity to widen and flexibilize our points of view which have been narrowed by group pressures.

Just because the movie portrays an extremely brutal social system, our desire for tolerance and democracy is increased?

Correct, it is a dialogical structure. In a certain sense, when I see a movie I enter into a dialogue with the represented reality and try to find answers to it. The film asks questions, but what is at work is ultimately not the movie itself – it is rather my response to it.

And if I react to authoritarian rule by saying “Considering the resulting cruelty, I prefer democratic conditions”, then that's my answer. You can call it "negative learning" – not in the sense that learning is negative but in the sense that you learn something positive on the basis of a negative reality represented.

Have you noticed this effect in the other movies?

"Negative learning" can also be negative when models are presented which are desirable and should be embraced. In this case, we call it "reactance", i.e. resistance to pressure of persuasion. We have found this in *Dirty Girl*. The movie is about tolerance of homosexuality. Tolerance is demonstrated in a positive way and the homophobic behaviour of the father is criticized. However, after watching the film the homophobic prejudices of some youths were reinforced and not reduced. Here also the gender role became more flexible – this was a general tendency. Yet we could not find any increase in tolerance towards homosexuals. In my opinion this was due to the mixing of the two levels of conflict of the protagonists. After all, the marginalization of a young woman as a "bitch" is something quite different from an outing of homosexuality which is irritating to the majority of pubescent young men. While the "dirty girl" acquits herself bravely and is to some extent rehabilitated in the eyes of the boys, the parallel homosexuality theme requires a totally different type of processing which challenges sexual identity in a core area.

How did that work out with the film Kriegerin (Combat Girls)?

First about the movie, briefly. It is about a woman whose boyfriend is active in a right-wing milieu. At some point, she starts having critical thoughts and, step by step, she edges away from the group. There is a second girl in the story that wants to enter the group at all cost; she takes her bearings from the protagonist. Although the Neo-Nazi group is xenophobic and behaves in a nationalistic way, the film has not fostered nationalism, but cosmopolitanism. “Negative learning” again, with a positive result. Ideologically, *Kriegerin* has immunized its young viewers against right-wing ideas.

Although the film was attractive for right-wing radicals?

Ideologically, the film was anti-fascist, yet its effect was ambivalent in certain aspects, especially regarding the increased social identity of groups with the same outlook on life. The film could not bring about a challenge to these groups. This may have been because the exit story was not quite as credible and was contradicted by the parallel story of the girl who aspired to enter the group. The film was probably intended to contribute to political education but could not fully succeed in this. Instead, it partially reinforced a tendency to adapt to group pressures. I suspect we are dealing here with a phenomenon similar to *Dirty Girl*: an unnecessarily complex plot structure which does not allow for the intended learning effect, at least not to the extent desired.

Maybe the directors and screenplay-writers also had the objective to precisely show these ambivalences. The fourth film, Chronicle, was about ambivalences, too. What effect did this film have?

The focus is on three teenagers who suddenly discover that they have supernatural powers. Initially they use these for harmless pranks. Then the situation escalates and the inhibited, introverted Andrew takes revenge for his sufferings which consist in bullying and paternal force. Basically it is a drama of identity formation: if you develop new skills as a teenager you must use them responsibly. One person is more successful in this, another less – with terrible consequences in Andrew’s case when he acts out his destructive power in an increasingly uninhibited way. When watching *Chronicle*, the young viewers showed an increase in “internal control expectancy”, as we know it from action movies. This is consistent with the central theme of the film: the growth of capacities. However, the increase in "internal control expectancy" was rather moderate. At any rate, the movie did not lead to fantasies of omnipotence in the face of death and destruction. It rather contributed to reflections on the increase of power and its responsible use, in a way appropriate for teenagers. This can also be concluded from the fact that in *Chronicle*, too, a cosmopolitan widening of identity could be detected, expressed by changes in perspective and a critical attitude. Not much happened with regard to gender roles; it was an all-boys story, after all. You simply cannot expect the same from every film. But this film was positive and unproblematic within the classical dimensions of the protection of minors. It did not convey aggression nor did it produce excessive anxiety.

If you now look back again on the entire project and see the individual elements in their relationships: In your view, is there a systematics of knowledge? Which aspects of identity formation and which mechanisms of reaction can be applied to other films?

Three things can be deduced from this study. First, as a general principle: the formation of identity plays a much larger role in the reception of movies than we usually expect.

Due to our 'protection-of-minors' perspective and our classical 'research-on-media-effects' angle, we are focused rather on transfer effects with respect to undesirable behaviours and definitions of situations. But quite obviously, a movie not only represents world views or plans of action but is also a starting point for self-reflection. The results of this self-reflection are processes of identity formation. This is generally underestimated. The second point is that, as a general tendency, the reception of a movie leads to a widening of identity options. In a cinema I am offered multiple perspectives on many identities which I can adopt in a playful way. And if I learn something from this, it is the change of perspective itself – something we call a "cosmopolitan widening of identity". The third point which can be generalized refers to the fact that the formation of identity should not narrowly be seen as an increase of strength. Even though young people often find that they are small and powerless pawns in the chess-game of life this does not mean that the formation of identity through film always leads to an increase of the "internal locus of control expectancy", aiming at an individual capacity to act and an increase in power. And that's a good thing. If thus a number of films put in perspective fantasies of omnipotence and strengthen the "external locus of control beliefs", then we should not see it as a school of powerlessness, as was the view in certain parts of psychology in the 1970s and 1980s.

Rather, the insight into the intractable is an essential accomplishment in the shaping of identity, which compensates for the excessive optimism of action to be found in superhero stories and contributes to a realistic view of self and the world.

The interview was conducted by Professor Joachim von Gottberg.