

Children and Cinema: Moving Images of Childhood

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Abstract

The idea of childhood has been part of the moving images experience since the appearance of cinema. Through the lenses of cinema, childhood is deconstructed as presenting branching pathways, underlining its complexity and the mysteriousness of it. The ongoing experience of childhood on screen serves as a tool to reflect on the anatomy and contour of cinema, as well as its understanding. On the other hand, cinema has been used as a tool to reflect on the notion of childhood and as an apparatus that challenges the power relations that exist between adults and children. The aim of this paper is to present an overview of how the institution of cinema contributes or opposes the notion of naturalness of childhood imposed by adults or the normative perception of what a child should be. In a lot of movies the child is "othered" leaving as a result an ambiguous space between the child and cinema, where childhood is not anymore strictly defined.

Keywords: childhood, cinema, power relations, otherness, normativity

Introduction

In the recent decades there is an immense interest in the field of childhood studies and media anthropology in deconstructing the ideology that stands behind the notion of *childhood* and its representations. Childhood constitutes an important structural component of our society. According to Ariès (1962), childhood is a socially constructed concept and it is relatively modern. Cinema, as well as childhood, can be considered as an institution of the

modern culture that uses the image of the child, and therefore represents the social construction of childhood.

The mechanisms of cinema have been able to somehow challenge the representations and visions of childhood through fluctuating in time, space and narrative. The figure of the child has been used everywhere on our screens and therefore turning cinema "into a valuable

– in fact, potentially overwhelming - resource for reflecting on the cultural histories of childhood in the twentieth century" (Lebeau, 2008:12). Throughout the 19th century, the child was watched, written about and wanted. Animated versions of "Ginx Baby" and "Child Pictures" were one of the first confrontation between childhood and cinema (Lebeau, 2005:10). In the early 1900s, the figure of the child and infant was proliferated in moving pictures such as "Child life", one of the first genres of Victorian film and one of the first contributions of the ongoing project of visualizing childhood, of giving image to the child (Lebeau, 2005:8). The myth of childhood shapes our epoch and ways of thinking on many levels. Cinema itself transfers and brings into life the dimensions of the myth, and our modern commitments to the idea of the child are indivisible from its representation or portrayal in visual form. (Lebeau, 2005:10)

The social construction of naturalness of childhood in cinema

Cinema has put the child in the landscape of vision and it can be a powerful instrument to reflect and know the child. From its early encounters with cinema many of the common tropes of childhood are children who need to be protected, who are innocent, immature etc. Many of these characteristics given by adult pre-conceptions about what childhood is or should be construct the notion of "normative childhood". Baudrillard (1994) talks about the notion of *simulacra* which refers to a world of images and signs that refer to other images and signs which have no reference in the real world. Many notions related to childhood are therefore constructed through images and signs. Cinema is also part of it. For example, childhood has often been depicted, even in cinema, as presenting a futuristic adult project or in a state of becoming, rather than being. Olson & Scahill (2012: 9) note that the images of "normative childhood" creates a tale that is often characterised or haunted by the spectre of its own failure.

Lee (2001:9) illustrates that “adulthood, with all its connotations of stability and completeness, has operated as a kind of standard model of a person, which stands ready to be used to measure children’s incompleteness.” This process enables the ability of adults to inflict power on children and determine “the naturalness of childhood”. As a result, children who don’t fit to the normative perception of childhood are automatically considered as the “deviant other”, who don’t fit to the norms prescribed from the adult perception. Many adult constructions such as the question of innocence of childhood, who appears as a predominant fantasy, it is in part responsible for the state of given disempowerment of the child, the child appears as lost and lacks control (Wilson, 2005:331). As a result of the argument of innocence, the distance and dichotomy between adults and children is seen as inevitable and stronger. The two worlds of adulthood and childhood appear as two separate entities not sharing any “spaces”.

Pictures and images of childhood in cinema have been constructed by the adult perception, who has in part in a way monopolized the ability to define childhood. The “powerful adult” has delineated the behaviours which are appropriate for children according to the age and development. Visual representations such as cinema, videos, TV programs and other media are deeply affected from values and by the discourses and pedagogies of home and school (Luke, 1994:289). All these conceptualizations and discourses contribute to the construction of cultural and social meanings to ideas such as “childhood”, “family”, “parenting” etc.

Foucault (1972) explains the way how the common sense and familiar ideas are constructed historically in a defined context through discourses. Many of the cultural meanings and ideas on childhood are being transferred through the social interactions and the denomination of image. Foucault (1972/1981) also mentions that the discourse itself is a way of transmitting and producing power relations. The idea of childhood and also other ideas for example motherhood or being a woman are constructed through these discourses produced from the power and dominance of disciplinary fields such as sociology, psychology, philosophy etc. According to feminist theories such as de Beauvoir (1953), many of these discourses have been produced historically from patriarchal dominant structures. These power relations define and put childhood as a state of inferiority, immaturity, innocence etc.

always in need to be defined from the adult. “The questioning of what the figure of the child means to adult, has been an interrogation of, and distancing from, questions of childhood innocence: innocence emerges as the dominant fantasy in whose terms children have been variously represented, protected and desired.”(Wilson, 2005:331) Such discourses circulate everywhere in a given society and cinema is also part of it, as an institution where social interactions take place or are created. According to Olson & Scahill (2012: 10) the idea of the innocent or lost child appears in many movies such as *Alice in Wonderland* (1931), *Wizard of Oz* (1939), etc.

The trope of the innocent child comforts the idea that children cannot be naturally evil, which goes back to the theory of Rousseau (1948). The idea of innocence in cinema is also many times accompanied from a *naïveté* that sets often the child in a position of always requiring the adult supervision or assistance. Many times children appear as misunderstanding the obvious or having to learn how to be empathetic or not to self-centred and obedient. On the opposite, we find other conceptions of childhood such as the evil or creepy child which usually evokes fears and anxieties. The devil or creepy children might not be dangerous but the fact that they are not conform the presumed naturalness of childhood, evokes feelings of rejection. Children are patented as being deficient and deviant “as an affront to how ‘decent’ and ‘normal’ children ought to behave. This points the bipolar manner in which we perceive of childhood: a period of innocence but also a period of possible immorality”. (Jones, Holmes & Powell, 2005: 155) In opposition, movies such as *“Raise Ravens”* (1976), or *“Tideland”* (2005) challenge cultural notions and explore the dark side and creativity of childhood.



Fig.1. "Raise Ravens" (1976)

Luke (1994:291) also explains how the construction of naturalness of childhood in many movies serves as a tool to produce consumer goods. Usually the jump from narrative to commodities such as buying character toys from the movies or other sorts of material goods, as Luke (1994) explains, is constructed in a way to seem natural. After watching a Disney movie, buying into the system "means buying into a particular ideological narratives of social structure, gender roles, power relations and into a social construction of reality" (pp. 291) Moreover Disney, although marked as not representing the reality, indirectly it rises the curiosity of the spectator to search for the Disney features in real life or connections with reality in Disney movies.

The "othered" child in moving images and screens

In cinema images of childhood who are not strictly obeying to the natural constructed image of childhood often fall under the notion of "otherness" or identified as "other". "The Othered child has occupied the interstice within an identity that is constructed for them via adults, and when such children strain against adult constructions, they become marginalized, outside the idealized notions of what children should be." (Olson & Scahill, 2012: 10) According to the authors the 'othered' child in cinema "protests" against deeply held principles of naturalness of childhood designated such as being "dependent", "innocent" etc. Figures of 'othered' childhoods are troublesome and especially they are troublesome to the boundaries of childhood itself (Olson & Scahill, 2012: 11). Lebeau (2008) places "*The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*" (1974) alongside Francois Truffaut's classic "*The Wild Child*" (1970), through exploring the work of *infants* across the field of vision, its elusive ties to an *otherness* within central to modern constructions of children and childhoods.



Fig. 2. "The wild Child" (1970)

In cinema the figure of the "othered" child is omnipresent. For example, in the movie "*Birds*" (1963) by A. Hitchcock, children are represented in a state of innocence that was never there. The constructed myth of the Child is symbolized by carrying the blindfold. "When Cathy puts on the blindfold she becomes like the adults who do not see, do not perceive the real state of the children or the birds" (Olson & Scahill, 2012: 298). The scene where the birds attack a "blind" child is a visible representation of the need to "remove-attack-the blindness that expectations of the Child myth and its accompanying innocence create" (Olson & Scahill, 2012: 298). Similar, could be noted also the film "*Fanny and Alexander*" (1982) or "*The White Ribbon*" (2009). Haneke depicts in "*The White Ribbon*" (2009) for example the space between

childhood and adulthood, and specifically the “otherness” that characterizes the children of the village, but also the myth of the innocence. The film “extends the acts of disobedience by those disturbed children like Georg who, with their occasionally monstrous behaviour, are struggling to find a voice with which to refuse the warped moral system into which they have been born”. (Williams, 2010:55)



Fig.3 Rituals of obedience and shame. “The White Ribbon” (2009)

Bühler-Niederberger & van Kriken (2008) note that the concept of childhood can be seen as a social structural character similar to class, race or gender. This social order organizes the world of children in a systematic way as Alanen (1994:37) would put it. The concept of generational order demonstrates that ‘otherness’ or “other-ing” of children is part of the social order and describes the hierarchy between adults and children, as a form of social arrangement between the two identities (see Bühler-Niederberger 2005). For example, in the movie “East is East” (1999), the relationship of the children with their father is constructed in

a strange way and positioned as a “dual identity struggle”. In this movie the notions of “othering”, gender roles and social order are central. The father is designed as applying his patriarchal powers but at the same time he is “disempowered by his minoritized racial status” (Jones, Holmes & Powell, 2005: 158). Many stereotypes are used to construct the idea of “the other”. The same idea of constructing the other is also applied in “Johnny Mad Dog” (2008) but this time way stronger. The depiction of children “is guilty of the stereotypical Western portrayal of African child soldiers as the brutalized and unemotional Other”. (Olson & Scahill, 2012: 156).

A very interesting case of “otherness” is the depicted childhood in “Gummo” (1997) that confounds and also scatters the adult construction of childhood. The children in the movie represent “poor white trash” and they do not fit the utopian concept of childhood innocence. The films transgresses boundaries between “purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt” and also “non-normative genders, sexualities, classes and races are written onto the body of the child and threaten the myth of childhood” (Olson & Scahill, 2012:113/114). The identities of children are trapped in a liminal space of in-betweenness. In critical whiteness studies the questioning of dominant power structures is central. Whiteness, as a constructed cultural construction is also related to constructions of class, sexuality and gender and as well connected to the concept of childhood as it appears in the film “Gummo” (1997).

Conclusion

The two institutions of modern culture childhood and cinema are deeply connected and co-construct one another. Children are usually portrayed as a category or social structure being in significant contrast with the adult world. This occurs in the world of cinema too. Many images of childhood still reflect and continue to support a normative childhood image according to a very westernized model. Adults continue to see children as being “other” from being an adult which leads to strict and difficult to escape categories of childhood. These social categories, constructed also from the notion of generational order, construct a generalised perception of childhood.

Recently starting the 21st century, through the increased appearance of the notion of children’s rights in many social contexts, childhood has been to focus to a much greater extent than before. This has brought reflection on the power relation

between children and adults and how this is reflected in cinema. The process of decortication of power structures that reside between children and adults appears of relevant importance in reconstructing otherness and finding solutions that increase the representation, participation and agency of children in cinema, but also in real life.

Although many moving images tend to represent known and commercial models of childhood there are many directors who play with such representations by trying to deteriorate images of normative childhood through showing different perceptions about childhood. Wilson (2005:331) argues that contemporary filmmakers have tried to undermine and somehow distort through cinema the power relations existing between adults and children. "Countering the tradition identified by Holland, contemporary films seek to open up the representations of children, strategically denying the distinct division between adults and children, provoking a seizure of emotive response, where adults suddenly feel like children" (Wilson, 2005: 331) The author also offers two examples of movies who try to offer new representations of child identities. (Wilson, 2005: 332)

Lukas Moodysson and Sandrine Veysset. *Lilya 4-ever* (2003) and *Martha ... Martha* (2001) are representative of a current trend in European cinema, but beyond this Moodysson and Veysset are not connected.¹⁵ Their films coincide, however, in their attempts to offer new representations of a child's subjectivity, new filmic apprehensions, or imprints, of child identities. In their move to mould the medium to child perceptions, they each independently make use of certain tropes and devices which can be isolated and latterly associated with child subjectivity, and they each in turn attempt to shock the (adult) viewer emotively, to break down the division between the viewer and the children viewed, to bring the viewer up close to the image, disallowing distance. Both directors, avoiding the pictorialization of the child, make use of cinema's potential to evoke touch, the tactile, the haptic, drawing attention thus to space, its navigation and inhabitation, kinesthesia and containment, cocooning.

Fig. 4. "Lilya 4-ever" (2003) and "Martha...Martha" (2001) (Wilson, 2005: 331)

Issues connected to the notion of childhood such as gender, human & social rights, intelligence, ethnicity etc. are being represented and challenged in cinema. Many directors also use childhood as a way to reflect on such notions. Therefore, cinema can be used as a tool to reflect and promote the social agency of children and increase the active position of children in society by challenging pre-constructed ideas of what does it mean to be a child and act as a child or even an adult. Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001) argue that "there is no natural or evolutionary child, only the historically produced discourses and power relations that constitute the child as an object and subject of knowledge, practice and political intervention". (pp.2)

Cinema plays a unique role in deconstructing the visible and the presence of life. Children have been part of cinema since its early stages, but the reality is that they are infrequently part of the theoretical scenery of film study. Therefore, the need to explore the children's own cultural lives appears as necessary. Increasing children's agency in their own representation and construction of what childhood means to the adult and to cinema in general is central. Rethinking the social construction and images of normative childhood in cinema is necessary, in order to remediate the shoring up of divisions and power relations between adults and children and in order to open up to new ways of exploring cinematic tools that challenge social representations.

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Figures

Fig 1. "*Raise Ravens*" (1976). Retrieved from <https://www.slantmagazine.com/house/article/the-criterion-collection-403-carlos-sauras-cra-cuervos>

Fig. 2. "*The wild Child*" (1970). Screenshot from the movie.

Fig.3 Rituals of obedience and shame. "*The White Ribbon*" (2009). Retrieved from <http://www.derekwinnert.com/the-white-ribbon-michael-haneke-2009-classic-film-review-781/>

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