

Life As a Value in Mass Cinema

By

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Abstract

The article raises the problem of the aggressive cinematography influence as a bright communicative tool on the audience's perception of the world. The analysis of two rating films of 2019 "Alita: Battle Angel" and "Joker" is given. Both films diminish the value of human life. The development of the storyline, images, values, actions of the main characters - all this is a way to convey one general idea of an light attitude to human life. The analysis is based on the idea of P. Berger's media narrative. Understanding of the narrative, its interpretation depends on the personal attributes, psycho-emotional characteristics of the audience. Therefore, the main characters often evoke sympathy and empathy. Thus, to understand the character, including the motives of his murders, becomes one of the tasks of the viewer. The main character is presented rather as a victim of circumstances, and this is what justifies the murders he commits, he has nothing left to do but kill. The murders committed by the protagonists are presented to the audience as a kind of norm within the framework of this storyline. The social side of this issue relates to the problem of immunity to crimes committed in real life. Cinema, as a means of mass communication, quickly conveys this idea to the viewer, first of all, to the youth. There is a kind of habituation to the cruelty of the modern world.

Keywords: Communication, mass cinema, violence, life scenario, life as a value, media narrative.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, the idea of human life devaluation is aggressively introduced into the public consciousness. Statistics inexorably records high rates of homicide and suicide in almost all countries of the world. Our country in 2020 took the second place in the world in the number of suicides per 100 thousand people (<https://gidnenuzen.ru>). The main reasons for these phenomena lie in the spiritual and moral sphere of an individual and society. In his time, E. Durkheim noted that the way of thinking, spiritual traditions significantly affect suicidal behavior (Durkheim, 1951).

Around the clock television shows scenes of violence, footage of the mass losses of people in various disasters and wars. People of all ages play computer murder games. The exhibition of dead human bodies and organs, which aims, according to the organizers, "to show the human body from the inside" has traveled around the whole world. In March 2021, it worked at VDNKh (Exhibition of Economic Achievements) in Moscow. Children over 12 years of age were admitted to the exhibition as well. The stores sell children's toys, in which you can play "the Barbie funeral", see, take out or touch the inward parts of the body of humans and animals. The other side of the life value transformation is the creation of the body immortality illusion: unsophisticated information technologies create virtual human doubles, photographs of the deceased "come to life". Transplantation has become widespread: for the sake of the lives of some people, other people donate their body parts; artificial organs are introduced into the human body. Death and loss of people are no longer frightening; they have become a familiar background in everyday life.

Mass cinema, which is of public nature, has a huge impact on the mentality of people, their perception of the world and valuable meanings. The aim of this work is to clarify the significance of life as a value in modern mass cinema.

2. Methods

When analyzing and selecting films, we used the A. Berger's constructivist ideas about the peculiarities of narratives in mass culture. He views media creations as a narrative placed in a large-scale context. The film is also a text addressed to the audience (Berger, 1977).

A. Berger identifies five key points that must be taken into account when analyzing a film: (1) the text itself, (2) the society in which the film was created, (3) the medium (meaning the peculiarities of the text rendering), (4) the creator, (5) the audience. All these points are interconnected, converge as in the center in the medium.

A narrative is an account of events, a story that has already happened or may happen, a story in which anyone can be a participant: people, animals, aliens, etc. It can be presented in different ways, depending on who is telling it. There is nothing accidental in the presentation of the narrative; any detail carries this or that thought or emotion, creating a unique outline. People love different stories, they get immersed in them from childhood through fairy tales, poems, fables, films, etc. The narrations transmit the life experience of entire generations, as well as of the fiction author's life, which can be useful in modern conditions.

Narrative simultaneously acts as a way of demonstrating and affirming something. It

approves or condemns people's actions and thoughts; it evaluates social phenomena of the present or past; it creates an image of the future society, etc. Artistic narrative uses metaphor, analogy, association. It is aimed at a specific audience, taking into account its age characteristics, level of knowledge and information. Narrative cannot exist without the viewer, the reader. We should bear in mind that each person perceives the story in his own way, sees a different meaning in it, complements its content with the help of his imagination. A. Berger believes that the perception of a narrative depends on gender, age, psycho-emotional state, but does not depend on socio-economic factors (Berger, 1977; Jonah, Egbe, & Richard, 2021; Joof & Ceesay, 2021).

The study involved the films that made large box office receipts in cinemas in 2019 and had a high rating of viewing on the Internet. The year of 2019 is a "pre-pandemic" year when people were free to visit cinemas, and the box office may well serve as an indicator of the popularity of films. Two films were selected: "Joker" and "Alita: Battle Angel". Joker won Grand Prize at the 76th Venice Film Festival in 2019, was nominated for an Academy Award and won Best Actor and Best Film Music. "Alita: Battle Angel" was nominated for an Academy Award long-list for Best Visual Effects. At the end of 2019, some publications included "Alita" in their lists of the best science fiction films of the year, in particular, Forbes (<https://www.forbes.com>), Collider (<https://collider.com>), "The World of Fantasy" (<https://www.mirf.ru>), and visitors to the "Laboratory of Fantasy" website chose "Alita" best film of the year (<https://fantlab.ru>).

To achieve the study aim it is necessary to understand the significance of life as a value in mass cinema. In the course of analysis, attention was paid to the storyline of the film and specific cinematic methods of presenting the value of human life.

3. Results and Discussion

Values as significant meanings of consciousness and behavior are assimilated without visible external compulsion. If a person has accepted the content of a particular value, it becomes a part of his inner world, takes part in the formation of a personal life scenario. Therefore, the impact on the value-semantic sphere is carried out subtly and gradually. Cinema has great opportunities for this, affecting both the cognitive and emotional spheres. Film is both a story and a spectacle. Visual images, sounds, various special effects, alternating at high speed, do not allow the viewer to focus on any particular image; the information received is not subjected to critical comprehension, but is taken for granted. The film, like a dream, is accompanied by a process of regression. The viewer often loses a sense of reality, accepting what is happening on the screen as true reality (Skripkar, 2009).

In the 30s-60s of the XX century, there was the so-called "Hayes Code" in Hollywood: - a set of rules that determined what was acceptable and what was unacceptable in films made for the common public. It proclaimed that films should not undermine the moral principles of the audience; audience sympathy should never be on the side of the crime; only the right habits of living can be subject to presentation; it is unacceptable to question natural and human laws. However, gradually, under pressure from distributors, a deviation from the rules of this code came under way and in 1968, it was replaced by the rating system of films classification. This system, in principle, does not prohibit anything, but only warns the audience for what age category this or that show is designed (<https://www.film.ru>).

The age restrictions are due to the fact that according to the theory of social learning, children learn not only on the basis of their own experience, but also by observing the lives of

others, copying someone else's behavior. In addition, films have a strong influence on the psycho-emotional sphere. The sight of scenes of violence, cruelty, death causes strong negative emotions in children, can cause aggression, fear and anger. Research by psychologists suggests that children who observe aggressive behavior on the screen then repeat exactly the same pattern of behavior in their lives (Dovnar, 2013).

The events of the film "Alita: Battle Angel" take place on Earth, which survived the war with Mars. After this war, life is almost destroyed, the planet is devastated. The elite lives in the Zalem orbital station, and directly on Earth, in the "lower world", the city of Iron City, live those who serve this city. The heavenly city is ruled by the evil and unjust ruler Nova. Poverty reigns in the lower world, there is a lot of evil, violence, cruelty, there is a fierce struggle for the right to get to the heavenly city of Zalem. It is in this world that the cyborg girl Alita lives.

Her "birth" is very unusual in human terms. It was put together by Dr. Dyson Ido, who found her head in a junkyard, connected it to someone else's body, and thereby gave a new life.

Cyborgs are half-humans, half-robots. They have physical needs, they are conscious, and have emotions. They are mortal and immortal at the same time. Alita's head lay about in the landfill for three hundred years, but her consciousness was alive. The body of a cyborg consists of organs that can be replaced, but at the same time, this body can be destroyed. Thus, the difference between physical life and death is eliminated; death exists as if "for fun." This "disappearance of death" fully justifies the disdain for the life of cyborgs, whose bodies can be replaced, repaired, again and again returning them to physical life.

The main character (Alita) is completely drawn in computer graphics. She is a touching and sweet girl with disproportionately large eyes. She behaves like a teenager, touching, romantic, full of youthful maximalism, although, in fact, is the perfect weapon for murder. Alita and other positive characters of the film are kind, brave, disinterested, benevolent, but at the same time they are ready to kill enemies left and right and the cruelty is justified by their motives. Killing bad guys for good purposes is good.

The "open" sense of the film is that even if you are a perfect killing machine, you can be a good person (cyborg), if you choose the right goals and fight for good against evil. The main character evokes the viewer's sympathy and compassion - everyone loves cute touching teenage girls who, moreover, are practically orphans, also with amnesia. She fights against tyranny, helps loved ones and avenges them.

A common thread throughout the film is the idea of justifying murder in defense of justice. However, it is not clear what the highest justice for the sake of which there are so many deaths. The film is full of cruelty and violence, full of special effects: the main character, all the cyborgs, prostheses, robots, landscapes, shooting, chases, explosions, fights. Special effects are used to create a cyberpunk atmosphere designed to reflect the decline of human culture against the backdrop of technological advances in the computer age. Color grading enhances neon colors, especially in contrast to the dark landscapes of the night city; purple color associated with the main character is prevailing. In general, the film, in our opinion, makes a painful impression.

The film "Joker" is the life story of Arthur Fleck, a mentally ill person. He works as a clown animator at the agency from where he is kicked out. He dreams of becoming a comedian, writes jokes, wants to become famous. However, no one understands him, does not take him

seriously. Even the psychological assistance program that he uses and where he receives medications is closed. Society rejects him, frames him, laughs at him. The storyline unfolds in such a way as if society pushes him to murder. In addition, it turns out that the mother is not his birth mother. There is deception, lies, dirt all around. As a result, the main character finally loses his mind and becomes the most unpredictable and insane maniac in the “DC” comics universe, Batman's worst enemy.

Madness emanates from the “Joker”. At the same time, looking at the world through the eyes of a madman makes it possible to see people's indifference to each other, their insincerity, self-interest, social injustice. The film is depressive, carries the emotions of hopelessness, doom, joylessness, longing, despair. The people in this film are presented as deceitful and selfish, and the main character looks like a victim of modern society, which puts too much pressure on a mentally ill person. Unwittingly, the viewer, sympathizing with Arthur, begins to understand, and thereby, justify his actions when in despair he kills his mother, his comrade, a TV presenter, then the rich, who mock him in the subway. His actions inspire residents to revolt, and Arthur himself becomes a symbol of the rebellion.

The film has a social focus. It consists in showing how a naive depressive clown who wants to bring joy and make people laugh, being in a vicious, rotten society, becomes a killer. However, this is not his fault, but the fault of society. Arthur's life naivety, helplessness in the face of life's circumstances, the inability to cope with his own psychological problems are not subject to moral assessment. The viewer is faced with an internal choice: which is more significant? Is it Arthur's sickness or other people's lives?

The sympathies of the filmmakers are on the side of the main character. The life of other people loses its significance against the background of the internal psychological problems of the madman, who finally finds his calling. From a small, worthless clown, Arthur becomes the Joker, a mysterious and significant card in the deck.

4. Summary

The main characters of the films analyzed are killers who neglect the lives of others in order to achieve their own goals. The films tell the dramatic stories of their lives, the events of which make them murderers. Moreover, it is precisely in the murders that their predestination lies. Alita was already created as a warrior. Before she fought against earthlings on the side of the Martians, now after the "resurrection" she again kills the inhabitants of the Earth. However, according to the authors of the film, she is not a vicious killer, but a fighting angel who punishes evil. Arthur from a simple psychopath-jester turns into a symbol of the struggle against injustice in society. It is noteworthy that comic book characters became the prototypes of Alita and Arthur. This means that the models of their behavior have already been created and replicated and now they are promoted through the cinema.

In the narrative about Alita's life, the content of such acts of human life as birth, life and death is blurred. Various physical versions of Alita exist throughout the film, which creates the illusion of physical immortality. It would seem that this is quite understandable, because according to the plot, she is a cyborg. Nevertheless, the filmmakers actually identify her with a person. However, not every viewer, especially a young one, can understand the difference between the acts of birth, life and death in a cyborg and a person. The special effects in the film are abundant; the color tones are dark, which greatly affects the emotional side of perception, making rational perception difficult. This will undoubtedly affect young viewers, as the film is intended for children from 12 years of age.

The story of Arthur Fleck is not just the life of a little man, but also the story of how the personal ego finds expression in destructive behavior. The plot unfolds as if the main character has no choice but to kill those people who did not live up to his expectations. It is no coincidence, in our opinion, that Arthur is mentally unhealthy. This, according to the plot of the film, justifies his actions. If Raskolnikov, being of sound mind and sober memory, planned his actions for a long time, and then after what he had done, he felt grievance and showed repentance, then Fleck does not feel like this. His actions are spontaneous; he is inspired by the fact that they brought him the desired fame. The life of another person is nothing in front of the ambitions of those who are not satisfied with it. Moreover, life itself is shown unattractively. In the film, the characters smoke a lot, swear, and there are many scenes of violence. In the American box office, "Joker" received the index "R", i.e., people over 16 years old are admitted to it. In the Russian box office, an admittance age limit was 18 years.

5. Conclusions

The research shows that both films, "Alita: Battle Angel" and "The Joker", portray life in dark colors. There are no good characters, who live in full accordance with moral laws in these films. There is no life optimism, no joy; they are permeated with aggression, hopelessness, pessimism. This general message is formed by various techniques: deviant behavior of the characters (drinking, smoking, killing, fighting, bullying each other, etc.), rude and obscene speech, special effects, color correction. The meaning of life of the film main characters is to kill others. The killer-characters arrogate to themselves the right to dispose of the lives of others and do not bear any punishment for this, neither from the side of society, nor moral condemnation from other characters of the film. They do not feel pangs of conscience. These kinds of cinematic stories create patterns of social behavior in which taking another person's life is not a pathology, but a socially approved act. In combination with a strong emotional impact, such films can cause rejection of life as such in viewers and lead to a devaluation of the value of life.

Acknowledgements

This paper has been supported by the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program.

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