MEDIA EDUCATION AND MENTAL HEALTH CONTEXTS IN THE SUBJECT OF HISTORY

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes specific characteristics of the feature film in relation to the recipient - a pupil at the 2nd. level of the elementary school. The field of interest is specified as the relation of a feature film to the subject of history. The risk factor the author will further discuss here is presented by the genre of historical war films, whose integral part is depicting violence. The problems associated with this factor are considered in relation to concrete cases and in the context of Media education.*

Key words: *teaching of history, media education, mental health, feature film*

Historical summary and definition of subject

Violence and terror, cannibalism, racial hatred or celebration of war. The warning index finger embodying the aforementioned words referring to mass media and pointing at the young generation has not always been here. We have been increasingly aware of the warning since roughly the 1980s and have been observing uncoordinated activities of critics in this area until today. An interesting angle of view is offered by its perception inspired by the Environmental education, where we can compare increase in violence portrayed in the media to the increasing environmental pollution. The key role in dealing with the problems in question naturally belongs to examining the media influence on the personality of an adolescent individual. That is, whether and how it affects the recipient's behaviour. Extensive sociological researches, however, confirmed the effect of the media on socialization of a child a long time ago, mainly because its life views are not yet complete. Another question worth considering is the contribution of the new mass media (film, television, computer games or the Internet) to this effect, just because of their uncontrollable availability.

If in the beginning the problems were discussed by teachers, psychologists, media experts or people only partially concerned with youth education, mostly in specialist magazines, gradually they started to increasingly appear in the daily press. The reader was faced, however, with unbalanced views, exaggerating or emotionally coloured or, to the contrary, trivializing articles on the effect of media violence.

Violent images in feature films

In cinematography, we meet with largely varying forms of violence, whose frequent use can be mainly explained by their emotional effects. Although attention in this paper is limited to implementation of the media production that can be used in teaching history, the applied findings do not rule out development of the general media literacy of pupils.

The film making is based on appealing to emotions and through its immediacy it easily manages to involve viewers. Recipients manipulated in this way are terrified and mesmerized at the same time mainly by brutality and violence. Particularly gripping are instances where violence is directed at an individual with whom spectators started to sympathize during the story. The common denominator of film violence can be basically divided into two categories. We differentiate between physical and psychological violence and can give countless examples to illustrate the use of both variants in cinematography. Let us consider first the less conspicuous, though none the less efficient psychological violence in films.

As opposed to physical violence, psychological violence is largely omitted from discussions about film, despite the fact that it is inflicted in a far more malicious and crafty way than direct physical assault. Film makers have a wide range of kinds of psychological violence to choose from. This includes loneliness, loss of love, fear of darkness, threatening or fear of failure, and especially the latter may be a frightening experience for a child or teenage spectator. In the language of film, situations like these are rendered with takes of wide open eyes, sounds creating tension, music, crying, weeping and wailing. Physical violence can be divided into the technical and physical forms. During large-scale action scenes in classical war films spectators watch weapons and processes launched, such as bombing which through a single action brings about deaths of thousands. Violence in the physical form is depicted by means of detail takes of soldiers, trying to kill each other or dead.

Believing that spectators must be offered ´something of substance´, only few filmmakers decide against using violent scenes and all different kinds of violence depictions appear to be a must in all genres across show business. As for the aforementioned historical war films, under the pretext of necessary realistic depiction of history they represent in detail scenes of war violence inflicted on the civil population or actions taken within the mass extermination of the same. Such approach is not at all alien to other film sub-genres depicting historical themes, even to animated films or comedies, under the pretext of dramatic/thrilling rendering of a (wartime) story.

The quality of depiction of violence in feature films and particularly those portraying past events widely varies. By any means it is not always the same and in some cases it would surely deserve to be discussed by professionals. Not only violence, but conflicts of all kinds in general are an ever-present part of each film. Characters in a story are usually confronted with different tasks. What adds a problematic element to them, however, is when only a violent solution seems to be possible, which is very frequently the case of a war film. In this way it is indirectly suggested to a spectator still at a pupil's age that problems need to be solved using violence. Also risk-involving is showing violence on the screen, if its effects for the victim are omitted. A characteristic

and classical example in relation to children of very young and young school ages is the brutal chaffing between the animated heroes Tom and Jerry, typically presented as ´harmless´ violence. The following being merely an academic remark, still it would be desirable, from the mental health perspective, to show the effects of violent behaviour in the film. Then the young spectator could see acts like these in their full scope and consider them in the context of everyday life. There are telling examples ´provided by´ disabilities resulting from war events or imprisonment in concentration camps. It is just the historical films that very clearly show the problem discussed here, as spectators see the violence depicted in them with such ease as a legitimate and well-grounded portrayal of the time concerned. Historical and war films also seem to delight in scenes where characters "take justice in their own hands". Controversial about these films is the subsequent celebrating and glorifying of the originators of violent acts as heroes, though e.g. in cases of reprisals. Annihilation of the enemy is one-sidedly celebrated as a positive act, without psychologically and socially significant completing of the effects of the victory on the defeated. It is needless to remind there is a ´permanent absence´ of any media discussion on this subject in the Czech Republic.

Depicting of violence provokes, among other things, a delicate question as to whether a pupil-spectator identifies with the victim rather than the attacker. Even in absolutely unambiguous instances such as feature films depicting the theme of holocaust, it is very difficult to actually rule out that a pupil-spectator may end up sympathizing with the aggressor and annihilator. Another warning instance of the neglected media violence is presented by some older Hollywood westerns or war films characterized by their machinelike massacring of the opponent. Brutality is enveloped in the impressive, innocent and seemingly "pain-free" violence, where either Indians or enemy troops simply just fall down in tens before the camera.

Though having no personal experience of a war conflict, pupils do have their experience of violent images on TV, the Internet, in the newspapers and suchlike. Their task is to relate the problem of violence used between the opposing parties to the present experience and look for motives behind such conflicts. A similar kind of experience is simulated for them by the news brought from war regions, in this way creating a link to the historical content of a topic in a history class or a theme of a historical film. This may lead to a history-related problem becoming an actual problem, as it creates an emotional link to the discussed and visualized topic and incites interest in it. An illustrative example can be applied to some other film contents and along with that will be used to create historical awareness.

A kind of a challenge for the modern teaching of history, interested in period culture characteristics and consistent with the tasks in connection with a profile topic of Media Education, could be the depicting of violence without a historical background in feature films. A typical ambition of a feature film based on a historical theme is to suggestively create a false impression of an artistically rendered documentary. Nonetheless when watching media depicted violence (besides the above described patterns), this time with a historical background, we will realize its highly manipulative character. The media create it by means of accomplished images inviting spectators to take an offered attitude. Recently we were furnished with similar guidance in a Czech-Austrian-Ger-

man film Habermann's Mill[1]. It is by far not the only instance of its kind, though.[2] The author depicts a theme which in Czech environment is taboo to a great degree, namely the ethically controversial resettlement of Germans after WWII and the violent events accompanying it. The basic manipulative element here, though, is the absence of causality resp. sequence of events.

We witness suggestive images of violence inflicted by one ethnic group on another, namely of Czechs lynching the defenceless Germans, without the necessary context which gave rise to the violence: i.e. the Munich Pact, endeavour to break up Czechoslovakia, general atmosphere of German nationalist fanaticism in Sudeten and German violence committed on Czechs before and during WWII.

Perspective of the child and adolescent spectators; mental health and methodical support issues

If motives of pupils and adolescents are substituted for those driving the film industry, we will find out that one of the reasons why visual violence in films is not rejected is undoubtedly the overall thrill and fun the films provide. Child spectators test their own limits of suspense they expect from films to provide. We cannot rule out that children while watching films in a group mutually test their limits of courage or are influenced by preferences of their parents or elder siblings when it comes to choosing films to see. Of course such attempts are marked by naivety and ignorance regarding the effects the watching of violent scenes may produce. That is why it is important to prepare children for violent film scenes and their effects. There is no point in banning films including violence. This is exactly what the Media Education must help develop: a critical and conscious approach by children - pupils to the media, in our world so powerfully influenced by the media.

To begin with, let us adopt an optimistic assumption that children still do not watch violence in feature films so frequently after all. And that there is community of parents (significant in proportion) who control their children's access to media. Still we cannot delude ourselves when it comes to obstacles to prevent a pupil at the 2nd. level of elementary school from gaining access to horror or violence depicting films. Given the ever increasing number of conventional as well as internet TV channels, attempts to reduce access of children to violence depicted in films may appear rather illusory. What can we actually do in these conditions? If we give up the alternative of banning TV completely for our children, we can set a personal example showing that as adults we are not addicted to watching TV. We can also stay in the room where children watch TV and may provide our viewpoint on unsuitable programmes. If we do so, argue persuasively. Up to a certain age, do not leave children in front of TV without supervision. And adults may also ´unnoticeably´ guide their children by their own quality selection of films to watch and explaining their choice.

[1] HERZ, J. (direction): Habermann's Mill. Czech Republic/Germany/Austria 2010.
[2] Similar topics including violent scenes in the historical context are also depicted in Czech cinematography by e.g. KÖRNER, V. (director): Krev zmizelého - "Blood of the missing person" (TV series) Czech Republic, 2006. Here the director went so far as to leave out WWII completely and confronted spectators straight out with Czechs shooting at Germans and the raping of German women.

Unlike family support, the media education at school can be conducted systematically. After seeing a selected demonstration sequence together with his/her pupils, the teacher familiarizes them with the aspects of production of films like that (commercial purposes etc.) and also explains the effects of violent scenes. At the 2nd. level of ES it is desirable to involve children in a creative rather than analytical manner, as it is better suited for their age – they will try and write a script by themselves following a (commercial) pattern, for them to better realize what means the film makers use to reach intended effects. In reference to violent scenes they may be asked to create a film scene that will reach a similar effect without the use of violence. The teacher can also influence children by inspiring them to watch suitable programmes. In this way he can reduce the mental strain undoubtedly produced in children by watching unsuitable programmes. Essential is, though, a conducted discussion during classes using the following questions and tasks:

Please describe your feelings, how did the violence in a specific film affect you?
Was the violence depicted in a credible way?
Do you think there was any purpose the violence in this film was to meet?
Could the film makers do without violence depiction?
Can you describe differences in violence depiction in different films?
Does the film describe the causes of violence depicted? Please describe them.
Is it possible to verify the credibility of violence depicted? Please specify possibilities and resources.

In the case we emphasize analysis and development of pupils' history awareness when working with film contents, it is very useful to employ a proven method of problem-based learning. Just for the sake of completeness let us remember the key element of the method – stimulating pupils to formulate hypotheses. A feature film should always be, however, just one element of a multi-perspective depiction of history. The following discussion involving the whole class represents the goal of the multi-perspective portrayal of history and in this way an objective reflection on the acquired knowledge and findings can be conducted. The development of a competence (ability) to change a perspective when analyzing a problem through a pupil involvement is not only relevant to the subject of history, but is of general importance within the ongoing education reform.

In conclusion

The analytical outline of consumption and reception of media violence examined the didactic aspects of this phenomenon with regard to the Media education being implemented within the education reform in the Czech Republic. With regard to a possible alternative considering introduction of the Media education to teaching of history, the text discusses, as a suitable example of a medium depicting violence, the feature film and war films as its genre. Possible effects of this consumption indicate a media modification potential in relation to pupils or adolescents. Their ability to shape a hierarchy of

themes and values. It is therefore desirable to create a mental-health counterbalance not only within families, but, in particular, through interaction guided by a qualified educator. His role gains in importance even more when dealing with cases of media violence of manipulative character, pretending to present lessons learnt from history.

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KONTEXTY MEDIÁLNÍ VÝCHOVY A DUŠEVNÍ HYGIENY VE ŠKOLNÍM DĚJEPISU

Abstrakt: Text příspěvku analyzuje specifika hraného filmu ve vztahu k recipientovi - žákovi 2. Stupně základní školy. Předmět zájmu je konkretizován vazbou hraného filmu k vyučovacímu předmětu dějepis. Rizikový faktor, na nějž se posléze zaměřuje pozornost autora, představuje historický válečný film, jehož nedílnou součástí je zobrazování násilí. Problematika tohoto faktoru je nahlížena na konkrétních příkladech i jejich reflexi z pohledu Mediální výchovy.

Klíčová slova: výuka dějepisu; mediální výchova; duševní hygiena; hraný film