AREAS ENABLING SELF-IDENTIFICATION WITH FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

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Abstract: *Identification with fictional character and its situation is a vital part of self-reflection as it comes out of a comparison being made between self and fictional character and, quite importantly, from an earlier and somehow similar experiences that can be transformed into a number of contexts. While conducting a survey based on the use of an on-line questionnaire, we have tried to describe the specifics of audiovisual fiction identification with contemporary Czech young people. The research sample is made up from 2,169 respondents who participated at the data collection within a one-week period in September 2008. The identification with audiovisual culture characters in the case of present viewers is manifested in different areas of real life.*

Keywords: self-reflection, identification, fictional character, questionnaire, research

This study attempts to describe the areas that provide space for self-identification of a young viewer with a fictional character of the audiovisual culture, i.e. what the viewer learns during the process of self-identification. By means of the stories of fictional characters the viewer gains experience with various topics. This experiential learning is based on the process of self-identification with the character that is part of the process of self-reflection (Pardeck, 1994; Sullivan – Strang, 2003; Hesley, 2001). In the today's (foreign) pedagogy, the new areas of the experiential learning rank among the quite developing areas that are – in their beginnings – based on Dewey, Piaget and Lewin, whereas the Czech pedagogy focuses above all on traditional Kolb, 1984) experiential pedagogy in its natural environment. The experiences that serve as sources of development of a personality, social and emotional learning, however also occur under the influence of experience as mediated by the fictional character and his or her story.

The objective of fiction is not to be considered real but – on the contrary – to create a world that can exists by itself and that we believe to be true despite the fact it has features that vary from our own world (Jost, 2006, pg 47). Thanks to those principles of existence of the fictional world, the viewer can easily identify himself with the fictional character. This identification is usually understood as finding similarities of oneself with the respective fictional character and at the same time the desire to resemble the charac-

ter. The concept of self-identification is complex and may be defined in various manners despite the self-identification is often considered a pure desire to resemble somebody or be someone else (Rydin, 2003, pg 91).

The identification with a fictional character and his or her situation is part of the process of self-reflection. It is based on comparison of the character with oneself as well as on a previous similar experience that might be transferred into various contexts. In the identification process we naturally and very often quite deeply analyze our own situation and valuate our qualities and decisions in the light of qualities and decisions of the fictional characters in similar situations. The reflection of actions and/or situations of a fictional character of an audiovisual work is further broadened by concurrent comparisons of oneself, i.e. the reflection of the characters changes into self-reflection.

The deep comparison of a fictional character and his or her situation with oneself acts as the key part of the social and emotional learning. This learning leads to strengthening of competences demonstrated namely in the social and emotional sphere. The experience obtained by means of this form of experiential learning becomes new part of the constantly shaping personality of the viewer. The final stage that may follow with a longer lapse of time and under the influence of other reflections is the application when we strive to use the experience obtained in the course of the self-identified reflection, self-reflection and possible following discussions to solve our own problems in ordinary life. Usually, we cannot simply imitate the behaviour of the character, but the personal development occurs already by means of the reflective questions.

For the purposes of this study, the identification is understood as captivation by the story when the recipient pouts himself in place of the hero, identifies himself with an individual or a group of people who either resemble him or who he would like to resemble. He puts himself in their time and in the settings (compare Rydin, 2003; Pardeck, 1994; Sullivan – Strang, 2003; Hesley, 2001; Vášová, 1995). He projects his desires into the fantasy world, achieves various accomplishments there that would be much harder for him to achieve in the real world. It is the moment when the recipients identify the similarities among themselves and the characters of the story. The choice of an object is utterly unique as the recipient who chooses it despite the fact certain similarities are found among the identified characters.

We shall not however confuse them with admired characters and situations that fascinate people but do not resemble them nor want to resemble them. We can for instance admire brilliantly played blockbuster villains but we usually do not with them who get regularly defeated. In the sense of this study the identification means: characters that have something in common with the viewers (regardless whether they are satisfied with the identified qualities); and characters they would like to be (having usually more impressive qualities). Those two aspects usually mingle.

The objective of the research was to find the areas where the viewer's self-identification with a character manifests most as the key part of the experiential learning, and what the viewer most often learns during the reflective process. The responses of respondents are divided in several categories that correspond with the areas of their mental and social health.

Study Sample, Method

Primarily we were interested in the specific type of the respondents. The one that could be – according to the arguments of researchers supporting the theory of the direct negative impact of the media (and specifically of the fiction) on the viewers (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002; Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Steward & Follina, 2006) – most affected – young people who are regularly confronted with the fiction and who consider it integral part of their everyday life.

By means of a questionnaire we attempted to find out the specifics of self-identification of today's young people. The objective of the study was to learn how the people approach the self-identification with fictional characters, what they experience and obtain from the process and in what areas their identification manifests. Despite there were over two thousand of young people interested in the audiovisual culture in the Czech and Slovak Republic who provided their answers in our questionnaire, we do not intend to generalize the obtained information to the whole population of young people interested in the audiovisual culture (compare Soukup, Rabušic, 2007). On the other hand it is obvious that more than 120 thousand registered users of the csfd.cz portal (in the time of realization of the research) well represent a major part of young people with a deeper interest in films and TV series in the Czech and Slovak Republic.

The distribution of the questionnaire was provided by means of the most visited domestic website about films www.csfd.cz (in time of collection of responses there were 120,000 registered users), which ensured selection of respondents of various sex, education etc. (we assumed that the users of this portal would be predominantly young people whose reception, identification and communication specifics could be possibly compared with other age categories) from the whole Czech and Slovak Republic. The following characteristics will help to form an idea of a typical respondent from the groups of users of the Czech and Slovak Film Database (www.csfd.cz) whose responses served as the source for our research: the research group has 2,169 respondents who provided their answers in the course of almost two weeks in September 2008. Of this number, 74.2 % were men and 25.8 % were women. From the point of view of age the most represented group was the teenagers and young adults. See
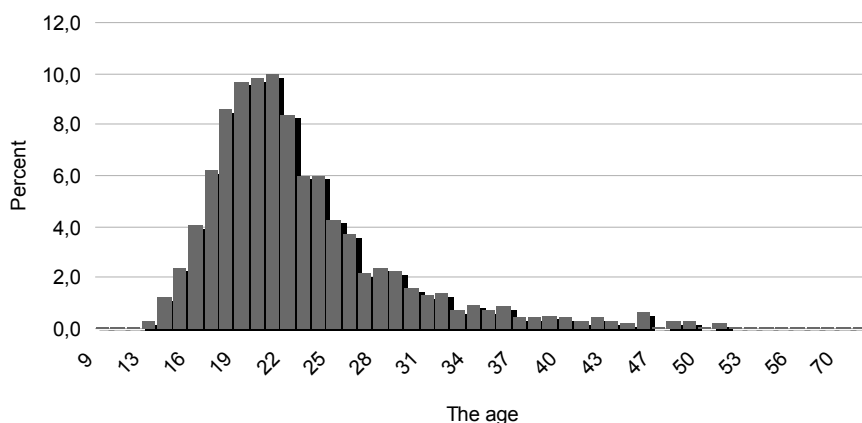
From the point of view of the highest achieved education, a significant group is formed by high-school graduates with graduate certificates (equivalent to A levels) (about 50.3 %). 15.9 % were the university graduates, 2.9 % college graduates and 4.5 % apprentice training school graduates. In time of completion of the questionnaire, 24.8 % had (so far) completed their primary education. 1.7 % of the respondents had not (yet) completed it. Another part of the research group (63.7 %) could be further described according the type of the current education: 25.7 % of the students were during the research attending a high school. Even more students (26.9 %) studied for the bachelor's degree at a university. 10.1 % were the students of master's study programmes and 1.7 % (which is a rather big number) were postgraduates. 2.1 % of the total number of respondents were currently attending a primary school, 1.7 % were attending a college, 1.4 % were attending a post-A-level language school and 0.6 % an apprentice training school. As regards the economic situation of the respondents, our research group consists of 63.7 % of students. 31.9 % of the respondents were already working. Other possibilities were represented only minimally (2.9 % unemployed, 1.1 % housewives / housemen and/or on maternity leave, and 0.4 % retired seniors). Typical marital status of the respondents is single (90.3 %). 8 % of the respondents were married and 1.8 % divorced or widowed. We have also learned that 91.2 % of the respondents were childless. 4.3 % had 1 child, 3.7 % had 2 children and 0.7 % of the respondents had 3 or more children.

Results and Discussions

The self-identification of the monitored viewers with fictional characters is manifested in various levels of their real lives. The most common is the enrichment of our lives in the area of our way of thinking of the world, life etc. (63 % of the respondents). Further, this self-identification with a character is manifested in the form of expressing oneself and communication (57 % of the respondents), in the area of behaviour and actions (53 % of the respondents) and in the view of oneself
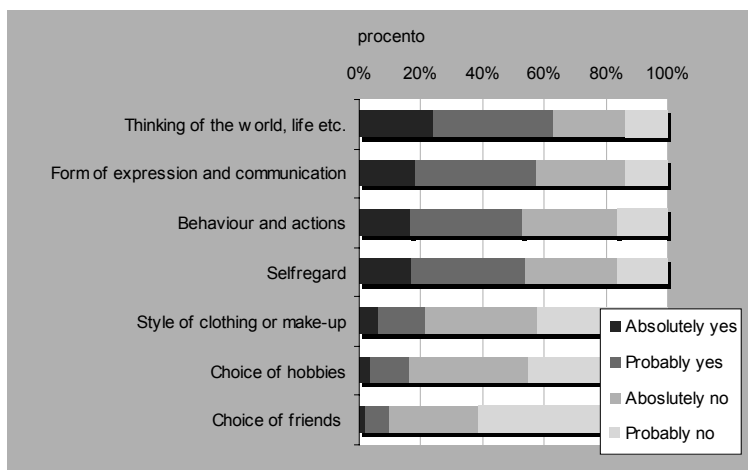
(54 %). Less it is manifested in the area of orienting their style of clothing and make-up (21 % of the respondents), in choice of their hobbies (17 %) and choice of friends (10 % of the respondents).

The respondents could also freely describe other areas where their identification with the respective fictional character manifests. 607 respondents made use of this opportunity and their responses could be divided into three categories (the number of responses is in the parentheses):

1) Opinion of people, world, philosophy of life, sense of hope, interpersonal relations, coping with problems (254)
   This category represents thinking processes that occurred under the influence of identification with a film or TV-series character and his or her story. It includes expressions regarding the opinion on concrete issues as well as general questions of life, as for instance coping with dissimilarities, with a loss of a beloved person, understanding of differences between the good and the bad, belief in hope, joy of life, possibility of coexistence with the nature etc. Often they described a change of opinion on a certain group of people, change o heir relationship to their family, friends or a partner. A sub-category included statements about the change of their sense of humour, efforts to show bigger optimism and generally also higher appreciation of the role of humour in a man's life.

2) Choice of profession, further studies, hobbies, health, nutrition, music etc. (310)
   This category represents the respondents' decision made on grounds of their identification with the respective film or TV-series and their situations. It is obvious that such "decisions" were in fact preceded by "contemplating and forming an opinion on the matter" as described in the previous group of statements. Quite surprising is according to the experts on professional orientation the fact that 68 respondents explicitly stated that on grounds of their identification with a fictional character hey decided for a specific occupation or studies. Another big group of respondents expressed their decision for a specific life style (frequently mentioned was the adjustment of boarding habits), for their future etc. Despite the fact that the choice of hobbies was mentioned in the list of activities in the questionnaire, many respondents mentioned another leisure-time activity that they chose thanks to their favourite fictional character (for instance the frequently mentioned sport, arts, reading, choice of music, author's self-realization). The marginal decisions for the life of respondents who stated that based on their favourite fictional characters they chose a concrete type of a car, hair-do, meal, rink etc., could be considered only rather interesting. What however occurred a few times was the choice of a partner on grounds of his or her similarity with the favourite fictional character.

3) Motivation, personality development, efforts, strength, determination (43)

In this area the respondents usually mentioned encouragement self-respect, self-esteem, and determination to be who they are.

Some respondents (their years of birth are in the parentheses) unknowingly mentioned features typical for reflective course of the process of self-identification with a fictional character as for instance: discovery of common characteristics with the fictional character (1988) – awareness of problems (1989) – self-evaluation (1988) – empathy and experience of the situation together with the character (1979) – an idea of how would I react in the given situation of the main character (1972) – the more films I see, the more experience I get from the life of the others (1990) – films motivate me to be a better person (1988) – self-refection (1981).

Conclusion

The stories provide both the benefit in the cognitive field and they are capable of inducing and "discuss" the affective and social type of information (Fiore, Metcalf and McDaniel, 2007, pg. 41). Generally we may say that sharing the experience with the fictional character creates opportunities for reflections of personal experience, and the identification with the fictional character creates an opportunity for self-reflection. Although the learning environments emerging by our discoveries of relations between the stories and us may seem to be rather chaotic, this process remains irreplaceable and elementary form of lifelong learning.

The areas were the process of identification o the viewer with the fictional character manifests most frequently usually correspond with the areas of social and mental health. Besides that we also see how the viewer is influenced in his or her boarding habits and lifestyle, and some respondents even mentioned that after watching the series they became more interested in the area of "health".

The article contains only selected findings from our research. We are aware of the fact that such partial research findings do not allow us to draw more general conclusions. In our data analysis we did not deal with the statistical significance of hypotheses, which is traditional and very often overestimated in the (Czech) social sciences, not that the above-specified sample would be less interesting but according to objective statistical points of view it is not representative enough. We however do not consider it an essential shortcoming that would exclude the possibility to obtain scientifically relevant information (compare Soukup – Rabušic, 2007).

OBLASTI, V NICHŽ SE PROJEVUJE ZTOTOŽŇOVÁNÍ SE S FIKČNÍMI POSTAVAMI

Abstrakt: Ztotožnění s fikční postavou a její situací je součástí procesu sebereflexe. V identifikačním procesu zcela přirozeně a přitom často do velké hloubky analyzujeme svoji vlastní situaci a hodnotíme své vlastnosti a svá rozhodnutí ve světle vlastností a rozhodnutí fikčních postav v obdobných situacích. Pomocí dotazníkové metody byla zjišťována specifika identifikace u současných mladých lidí. Výzkumný soubor tvoří 2 169 respondentů, kteří odpovídali v průběhu necelých dvou týdnů v září 2008.

Ztotožňování se s postavou audiovizuálního světa se u sledovaných diváků projevuje přesahem v nejrůznějších rovinách reálného života.

Klíčová slova: sebereflexe, identifikace, fikční postava, dotazník, výzkum