Adults’ Concepts of Childhood As Seen Through Modern Cinema: Portrayals of Childhood Innocence in Stephen Spielberg’s A.I and Mark Herman’s The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

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Film has long been used as a method of expression which reflects the societal views and culture of those who produce it. This article examines the adult concept of childhood innocence and how innocence is portrayed in two pieces of modern cinema, Stephen Spielberg’s ‘A.I: Artificial Intelligence’ (2001-2002) and Mark Herman’s ‘The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas’ (2008). Both films are centred on a young boy and follow him on his journey. I will first examine the history of innocence and how it is portrayed in society leading to the way it is presented in each film and how the filmmakers appear to expect the audience to react. This exploration suggests that childhood and adulthood are seen as two different, separate worlds and the possible repercussions of this division are discussed. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of recognising how adults’ concepts of childhood affect how children are represented and treated in popular media and society.

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Since the creation of moving pictures, cinema and film have been a prominent method of cultural expression. However this expression is primarily of those who have produced the film and therefore have creative control, such as the director, producer, film Company and others who have a stake in the film. The view shown to an audience can also be further managed by the use of camera angles and the shots used in the final cut of the film (Barker 2012).

Cinema is simultaneously designed to represent the wishes of the film makers and what they believe an audience wants and/or needs to see. Similarly a film may be made because it is believed to be a story that needs to be heard or resonates with the intended audience. In all cases the filmmaker’s aim is to make a connection with the audience either through showing them something they feel they agree with or enjoy or something they disagree with which upsets them. When the film is in cinema, the filmmakers are ‘not so much concerned with what a film means but what it does’ (Mallan 2011, p158), how it makes the audience feel and how they react in that moment. Throughout this paper I will be referring to an audience’s initial reaction to a film which commonly occurs in a cinema, a cinema environment that ensures that the audience’s full attention is focussed on the film allowing them to become more engaged with the characters and plot.

Through the filmmaker’s wish to manipulate the audience themes, actions are exaggerated in order for them to be noticed, thus making it easier to interpret the intended meaning. Barker (2012) pointed out that a good or great film is judged by how much it has enriched the lives of the audience. This suggests that for a film to be considered great it has to have a substantial effect on the audience. Furthermore it is always best to consider that ‘films mean different things to different people’ (Christie 2012 p.231) and will therefore have a different effect on each person.

Throughout this essay I will be referring to the audience as one being, a common practice in film studies (Barker 2012) and so it will be continued here. However it must be recognised that an audience is comprised of individuals, each with their own past experiences, opinions and reasons for watching the film. Referring to the audience as one being may therefore only reflect the most popular, more prominent or more obvious views of the time, possibly leaving out the finer detail of the responses of a considerable number of people who viewed the film.

Because the world of cinema is a vast one, this essay will focus on two particular films. the first of which is A.I. Artificial Intelligence, a 2001- 2002 science fiction drama
directed by Steven Spielberg, who also wrote the screenplay. The film follows the story of a newly invented robot child that can love and his quest to become a ‘real boy’ just like Pinocchio did. This need to become real is driven by the need David (the child robot) has to please and be loved by his adopted mother; the quest itself is as a result of her abandoning David in the woods because she cannot face having him deactivated and destroyed.

The second film is the 2008 World War 2 drama, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas directed by Mark Herman. At the centre of this story is Bruno, a young German boy who unknowingly moves with his family to the edge of the concentration camp which his father runs. Not knowing the purpose of the camp Bruno makes friends with a similarly aged little boy from across the fence, who he believes is wearing pyjamas. Due to Bruno’s lack of knowledge the story concludes with him entering the camp to help his friend, when, being mistaken for another prisoner, he is pushed into a gas chamber with his friend and killed before his parents know what has happened.

One of the key themes throughout both of these emotional films is childhood innocence. Innocence is often characterised as or ‘equated with purity, naivety, selflessness, irrationality, and a state of unknowingness, or of being less worldly’ (Robinson, 2013 p.42). This is encapsulated in both films by the children’s lack of knowledge about the world around them, for Bruno this is shown in his inability to spot the signs that indicate the true nature of the camp at the bottom of his garden that are presented throughout the movie. And for David, a theme throughout the film is his lack of understanding of social conventions and norms, for example he opens the bathroom door on his adopted mother while she is on the toilet and expects her to continue the game they were playing. Both of these could be interpreted as the film makers trying to explicitly demonstrate each child’s innocence and to affect the audience by presenting each child with obstacles that challenge that innocence.

**A brief history of innocence**

Innocence is in no way a modern concept, it has long been a central pillar of Western Christianity, embodied in the new born heavenly baby (Robinson 2013). The bible itself refers to loving and educating children, setting them apart from adults; similar connotations have been found in ancient Greek and Roman documents (Fogel, 2004). However childhood innocence can only be achieved, in the eyes of (some versions of) Christianity, through infants being baptised and educated, washing away the original sin of man (Hendrick 1997).
Contrary to this, ancient Christian writings from the Middle Ages have recently been found that focus on childhood innocence and how unique an experience childhood is (Davis 2011). This shows that despite the prominence of the idea of children being born with original sin they were still considered innocent and being in the process of experiencing something very different to adulthood.

Innocence itself, as a concept, is heavily linked to the romantic view of childhood and Rousseau’s idea of the ‘original innocence’ of childhood which emerged in the 18th century (Hendrick 1997, p.36). Similarly Duschinsky (2013) equated innocence with ‘natural essence’ (p.765). The romantic view of the child focusses on what a child has that is lost in adulthood (Hendrick 1997). Wordsworth (cited in Hendrick 1997) believed that infancy was full of blessings from God which are lost in adulthood, innocence being one of these blessings. ‘Only those forms and processes that will contribute to the embodiment of an ideal modern adulthood – socially, ethically, morally, economically, culturally- are treated as unmarked characteristics of innocence’ (Duschinsky 2013, p.768), emphasising innocence as a blessing and ultimately the ideal, which children are closer to achieving than adults.

Throughout history, the view of children and childhood as innocent is contrasted with the view of children as wild and untamed. A comparison has often been made between the child and the savage of ancient times, uncultured and in need of being tamed (Zumwalt, 1999). ‘Some of the first formal legal interventions on behalf of children came under the actions of Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals beginning in the 1870s, with the argument that children, like animals, are a form of property and that they share with animals a fundamental helplessness’ (Finn, 2013 p.1168). Along with the shared helplessness the comparison also stands when referring to children’s need to be tamed and trained. However it is important to note that Finn (2013) is referring to historic American child protection policy.

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, as a historical film, may represent an historical view of childhood even though the specific situation is fictitious; however it was produced in the 21st century for a modern audience possibly altering the plot of the story to have a particular emotional effect. Juxtaposed to this, A.I is set in the near future after an environmental disaster. Both films have an innocent child at their heart displaying clearly that the filmmakers felt that innocence is a timeless concept that will forever be linked to childhood, at least in the eyes of the intended audience.
Innocence as a social construct - The purpose of innocence

Innocence is often considered a social construct created by adults to serve a purpose (Duschinsky 2013, Erricker 2003, Robinson 2013). These purposes are varied but often stem from the adult’s need to protect or control the child. Duschinsky (2013) believed innocence to be a tool ‘used to support a conservative social agenda’ (p.764), including the nuclear family and the need for the mother to be at home caring for her children as opposed to leaving the home to earn a wage. Therefore the concept of childhood innocence is often used as a cause and reason for intervention in the lives of children and their families. Erricker (2003) believed that the concept of innocence ensures the need for protection and places adults in the role of protector, and so provides a justification for greater control over children’s lives by adults. Bruno’s innocence is used by his parents as grounds for not telling him about the nature of the concentration camp, allowing them to have greater control over his life and the knowledge he has access to.

Similarly Robinson (2013) believes that the concept of innocence is a societal tool for the regulation of knowledge and behaviour, innocence being the lack of information from the adult world. This regulation is justified through the adult ‘perception that accessing this knowledge too early may impact on children’s normal and healthy emotional and physical development, scarring them for life’ (Robinson 2013, p.8). In the world of cinema, every film is given a certificate which indicates who is allowed to watch the film, this system was designed so that children could only watch films intended for children so they avoid any explicit content which is deemed inappropriate (see British Board of Film Classification, 2017).

In both of these films the concept and image of childhood innocence is used to gain a reaction from the audience. The audience would not have reacted to David’s abandonment in the emotional way the filmmaker intended if they had not believed he was an innocent child who did not deserve to be left alone in the woods by the mother he loved. In this way film makers are also taking advantage of the social tool of innocence in order to manipulate the audience and keep them drawn to the story in order to see if the situation is improved for these innocent characters.

Link to sexuality

Throughout the literature childhood innocence is heavily linked and set against the idea of childhood sexuality. Steven Spielberg’s film *A.I Artificial Intelligence* makes this opposition explicitly clear for his audience by pairing David on his adventure with a runaway adult
robot called Gigolo Joe, whose occupation is made clear to the audience through his name and through a scene earlier in the film. The dynamic between these two characters provides the viewer with a direct comparison between a ‘knowing’ and ‘corrupted’ adult robot and an innocent child robot. The difference between them is highlighted in the way they both approach the same events, David with wide eyes and optimism and Joe with suspicion and the expectation that everyone wants something in return, with the lack of innocence moving ‘toward monstrosity, both corrupted and corrupting’ (Duschinsky 2013 p765). Pairing these two characters together may also act as a message to the adults of the audience to be wary of the company children have and the influence that may have on their young minds. Mayall (2015) referred to Bourdieu’s theory that our assumptions, beliefs and practices are gained during early childhood. It is for this reason that childhood is considered an influential time, reaffirming the idea that children need protecting.

**Family**

As the concept of innocence is ingrained in the definition of childhood (Robinson 2013) it is also closely linked to beliefs about the family and how a family should act. ‘Innocence serves to organise the social and symbolic boundaries of the individual, family, community, or nation’ (Duschinsky 2013, p.773). Innocence allows society to justify the differential treatment of these groups, especially the family, where the protection of children gives way to surveillance and monitoring. Furthermore state intervention in the family is often also justified through the view of children as future citizens (Finn, 2013), a perspective from which childhood is seen as ‘a sacred time and place to be sheltered, structured, and supervised (Finn 2013, p.1167).

The family also often includes the adults who are closest to a child during childhood and if, as Bourdieu believes, children are the ‘objects of adult socialization’ (Mayall 2015, p.17), then the family are the first adults to have control over a child’s life and protect their innocence by deciding what information and knowledge should be taught first. Zumwalt (1999, p.25) discusses the evolutionary view of the child where ‘the child is weak and unformed, with a need to be emotionally nurtured by the mother and physically strengthened by the father’, reinforcing the idea of parents as educators and protectors, and ‘children as incomplete projects’ (Mayall 2015, p.18) which need to be socialized and therefore completed.
The family unit is a strong part of both of these films. In *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008) it is because of the parents’ need to protect Bruno and preserve his innocence that they do not tell him anything about the place at the bottom of the garden and his father’s role within it despite everyone else around him knowing about the camp. It is also this lack of information that eventually leads to young Bruno’s death. However it is *A.I*’s lack of a strong family unit that causes David to go on his quest and challenge his innocent view of the world, one which is hardwired into his system (Hoberman, 2001).

**Different worlds**

Throughout the literature a common theme associated with childhood innocence is the notion of two different worlds, the adult world and the child’s world. Each is filled with its own social codes and knowledge. Through the use of innocence as a tool ‘adulthood and childhood become mutually exclusive polarised worlds with the child becoming the powerless “other” in the world of adults’ (Robinson and Davies 2008, p. 343).

This notion can be traced back to the industrial revolution when the introduction of laws specific to children set them apart as a ‘distinctive subcultural group’ (Sutton-Smith 1999, p.19). Such laws include the Factory Act of 1833 (The National Archives 2008) which separated children who were under the age of nine from those who were older, by limiting how many hours a child could work, dependent on age. By 1914 childhood had acquired a largely agreed identity of its own, solidified in legislation, medicine, socially, educationally and through politics (Hendrick, 1997) which deliberately marked childhood and adulthood as separate. This was further reinforced by the introduction of school groups separated by age (Robinson 2013), which increased the distinctions and barriers between adulthood and childhood.

However, the line between adults and children has become more blurred with the emergence of the teenager and teenage culture (Savage, 2008). By not being fully in either world the teenager seems to be a part of both the spheres of adulthood and childhood with both the powerlessness of children and the knowledge of adults. This makes the idea of the once very distinctive qualities of the adult and the child, which Robinson (2013) went as far as to call polar opposites, less distinct in modern society.

Furthermore there is a distinct difference in the way children are presented in children’s films as opposed to films for adults. The majority of films for children show children as the hero or heroine, behaving in a competent manner with very little help from the adults around them. A prime example of this is the 1996 adaptation of Roald Dahl’s
Matilda, directed by Danny DeVito. In Matilda the young heroine faces every challenge either by herself or with the help of her young friends, making her a very capable character, not despite the fact that she is a child but because of it. However, children in films for adults are more likely to be seen as the victims and/or motivation for the adults in the film. For example in the film Gladiator (2000), directed by Ridley Scott, the child is used solely as motivation for the lead character and is not even given a name.

Spielberg himself appears to have spent his entire career switching between the adult world and the child’s world, in terms of genre and choice of audience (Shone 2016) with films of high drama and adult themes such as Schindler’s List (1993), Saving Private Ryan (1998) and his cold war drama Bridge of Spies (2015), compared to films full of fantasy and imagination such as, E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (1982), Jurassic Park (1993) and The Adventures of Tintin: The Secrets of the Unicorn (2011). However in this varied mix of films I am unsure about where to place A.I. Spielberg himself said that he felt it was a story he could show his children (Hoberman, 2001) but I feel with scenes of abandonment and robot torture while a crowd cheers on, it is perhaps more suitable for the adult genre. On the other hand this simply displays different concepts of childhood and probably reflects the variety of an ‘average’ audience.

Phenomenon of family films
Because of this inability to separate the worlds of the adult and child either through reality or the medium of popular cinema, film companies have endeavoured to provide for a mixed audience with a form commonly dubbed the ‘family film’. The genre emerged in 1920s Hollywood as a result of the pressure from religious and civic groups coupled with commercial pressure to reduce the ‘adult’ content in films (Brown 2013). However Hollywood has always presented itself as a ‘family institution’ (Brown 2013, p.1), but despite this a survey conducted on behalf of The Education Screen in April 1930 found that only 6 out of 30 films released in America were deemed to be suitable for children under 15 (Brown 2013). This demonstrates that despite the pressure to create more films suitable for all the family, the majority of films, even at that time, were still designed for an adult audience.

Family films have become a large part of the modern box office, providing serious competition for adult films. With cinema attendance and box office gross receipts reducing year upon year, family films seem to be exempt from this recent trend (Hampp, 2011). This
is enough to encourage production companies to focus on creating quality family films in order to continue to gain enough revenue to produce other films.

Spielberg considered his film *A.I.* to be suitable for both children and adults, making *A.I.*, in a broad sense, a family film. Similarly Mark Herman, director of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, believed his film to be truly for a family audience (Banister 2008) with no onscreen blood-shed or violence. However Herman does admit that the subject matter is troubling and may upset children but he hopes this emotional reaction can be used as a springboard for children to start asking questions about the Holocaust and so gain more information about this significant period of history (Banister 2008). In another interview Herman went so far as to say that he didn’t mind how many people he upset, it was all worth it if one child went and learnt more (Nugent 2014). This sentiment is echoed in the literature, ‘the problem with the protection of innocence in childhood is that it does not develop children’s capacities to deal effectively with their experiences’ (Erricker 2003 p.5) especially negative ones. Therefore there is a fine line between protecting children by avoiding a difficult subject or situation and giving them enough information which will allow them to protect themselves to avoid certain situations.

**Conclusions**

When looking at films it can be difficult to see the deep cultural meanings that most represent or at least are intended to portray. All films have a deeper meaning that the film makers aim to express; even the silliest of films may have an underlying message about working together despite some large and obvious differences (e.g. *Ice Age* 2002). These messages can often be overlooked or go unrecognised unless the film explicitly makes you think or search for them, it is always worth considering what the film maker was trying to portray and what type of audience they were trying to entertain, move or motivate.

It is also important to consider that children do not imagine themselves to be innocent, this is something imposed on them by adults (Robinson 2013) for ‘we adults have absorbed our society’s ideas about what childhood is and should be’ (Mayall 2015 p.18), thus (more or less) restricting the view we have of children and childhood to what has been deemed culturally appropriate by society and the people around us. Furthermore when looking further than the concept of innocence, ‘children’s ability to challenge how they (as children) are classified is limited’ (Mayall 2015, p.25). Children as a social group are a permanent structural form in society (Mayall 2015) but this is not reflected in the degree of power children can exercise in society. The limited power children have is often deployed
with the support of adults to help create or alter physical places that affect children but not to combat societal and adult views of childhood. However adults may not be the best ones to promote the views of the child, if only for the obvious reason that they are not children anymore and therefore their view of childhood will be clouded by their own memories of when they were young as well as the changed perceptions that comes from adult experiences.

This clouding of adults’ views of childhood has a large impact on our own concepts of childhood. All the writers mentioned above and I have all been influenced by our own concepts. For example I have not particularly enjoyed re-watching both of these films, not because they are bad films but because I don’t agree with the way they treat children, with the adults in The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas prioritising innocence over safety and David’s lack of knowledge and innocence, which is initially used to endear him to the audience, later being used to alienate him from his human family. A similar process may have happened to both directors, examining their beliefs and concepts of childhood before and during the process of making these childhood focussed films, Spielberg has said that he often draws on his own childhood when making films such as A.I (Shone 2016).

In conclusion both A.I and The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas clearly display the adult concept of childhood innocence; this concept is used by both directors to manipulate the audience and to help the audience make a connection to the story. This manipulation of innocence is reflective of society’s manipulation of innocence in order to protect and control children through the regulation of their behaviour and the information they have access to.

However innocence is only one of many concepts adults have of childhood, and so when examining any aspect of society or culture created by adults that affects or represents children it is worth examining the concepts that may have driven or affected their decisions.

References


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