

REPRESENTATIONS OF CONSUMPTION AT THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY. A CREATIVE WRITING TEACHING PROPOSAL ON POSITIVE CONSUMERISM

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Abstract

The present study consists of a critical reading of Tim Burton's adaptation of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory", accompanied by a positive consumer attitudes' teaching proposal for early childhood education. In the first part, a theoretical framework regarding representations of consumption practices in childhood within the context of various economic and social factors is presented. The case study outlines the way the film portrays in a sarcastic way distinctive consumer manners. Discourses of gluttony, competitive eating, nutritional indifference and famine are framed. What is clearly defined by the particular cinematic adaptation of the classic novel, are the consequences these young consumers suffer due to their ill consumption attitudes. Tim Burton's surrealistic representations of consumption practices frame the child's position in a capitalist era; they seem as if they are lurking to eat the most, or to eat the fastest, or to eat what is hard to find. In the second part, a Kindergarten teaching proposal regarding the promotion of positive consumer attitudes in early ages completes this critical reading. Based on film's notions and morals, two different creative writing approaches are outlined, recommending methodological ideas of teaching consumer behavior in early stages. The contribution of this particular study is to highlight children's cinema significant role as a means of influencing children's thinking on fundamental issues related with their capacity as citizens of the 21st century.

Keywords: *Consumption practices, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Tim Burton, kindergarten creative writing teaching proposal, positive consumer attitudes.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary cultures of consumption, focused on pleasure and immediate gratification, explain our fascination with imagery of food as magic. In addition to literal meanings of hunger and satisfaction, consumption in literature -and its cinematic adaptation- often symbolizes negotiation of authority, and appetite for food stands for desire of power and control (Andrievskikh, 2018; Cannon & Barker, 1893). In his film adaptation of 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' (2005), Tim Burton frames exaggerated notions of consumption and offers a view in children's attitudes as consumers. It is the story of five children, Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt, Violet Beauregarde, Mike Teavee and Charlie Bucket, who each finds a golden ticket inside of chocolate bars winning a tour to the world's most famous chocolate factory. In the end of the tour only one child remains and inherits the factory and a lifetime supply of chocolate.

2. Literature review: Representations of consumption at Tim Burton's cinematic adaptation of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory"

2.1. Socio-economic inequalities in consumption practices

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory portrays representations of consumption practices in childhood within the context of various economic and social factors. In a capitalist era, where consuming is a way of life, five children are presented as consumers. Some belong to the upper class, while others to the lowest class. Some can afford anything they desire, while others are starving. Even in the magical world of the chocolate factory, realism infiltrates in the form of the brutal socio-economic inequalities of a world comprised of the haves and have-nots. The film mirrors the impoverished conditions of the universal urban poor -hence the multicultural cast of characters and the absence of specific place and time of setting- in the image of the deplorable living conditions of the protagonist, who irrespective of the fact that it's his annual chocolate bar, he shares it with his entire family. In the middle of this bleak realistic depiction of impoverishment, the candy bar then transforms, from a piece of food to a piece of hope: the only warmth in that cottage (Das & Laik, 2019).

The elimination of these exact inequalities –The Inventing Room of the Chocolate Factory- is what restores the balance of the cruel capitalist framework. The source of capitalist production houses gastronomical delights with magical properties that can change and restructure configurations of reality and provide solutions to real life problems. Various forms of chocolaty mouthfuls, such as the “Everlasting Gobstoppers” that never get any smaller, the “Hair Toffee” to combat hair loss and the magic chewing gum that really is a three-course dinner in disguise, consist of a composite of solutions to the fundamental problems of humanity, thus solving problems of death, decay, loss and lack (Das & Laik, 2019).

The centrality of food in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* thus forms a commentary on the real economic imbalances in a society where eating becomes a primary indicator of identity as manifested in the characterization of the families belonging to different socio-economic strata (Dawn-Stephenson, 2016) - from the famished Buckets, to the greedy Gloops, to the compulsive consumer Beauregardes. The effects of confectionaries on the consumption culture are thus enunciated through the various impacts it has on these characters.

Ironically, the children's transgressions end up in their being consumed by the object of their desire and being literally and grotesquely enmeshed in what they wished to consume. Thus, Augustus comes out decked in chocolate fudge; Violet becomes physically altered to look like a blueberry as she comes out with a violet skin; Veruca is covered with nut scrapings and filth, a consequence of going through the rubbish chute, and Mike Teavee, stretched back to a thinner self resembles to the flat-screen hyper-real dimension he seems to be most invested in. Only Charlie, through eating and restraint, re-enacts the need for control and moderation, and thereby achieves a sense of gastronomical redemption by acceding to the position of the chosen one – the winner of the test of character and the ultimate inheritor of the chocolate factory. (Das & Laik, 2019).

2.2. A novel typology of contextualized consumption behaviors

Rees (1988) concurs that Willy Wonka is a dreadful example of the unacceptable face of capitalism. He is the owner of an enormous factory which breeds consumers. The Chocolate factory can be interpreted as the capitalist economy where every single person could be characterized by the way they consume. The factory brings every child's true self into the surface. The gluttonous devours; the competitive heads to the prize ignoring all costs; the unselfish shares in moderation and consistency.

Illicit consumption behaviors are common among children who are spoiled, greedy, bratty, selfish, disrespectful to others and their belongings, anti-social, bullies. They do not respect others' properties; they do not share; they do not offer; they do not distinguish the necessary from the luxury. On the contrary, healthy consumerism is represented by a child who consumes unselfishly, offers, respects, shares his only bar of chocolate with his two famished parents and his four ill-nourished grandparents. When most of the other children seem incapable of controlling their consuming mania, their greedy or competitive nature, their unethical ego, there is one that leaves behind his own desires to provide for his famished family. But that is "weird" as Wonka remarks in the end, weird behavior for such an era.

Zarantonello & Luomala (2011) identified the context of materialism among other contextual chocolate consumption categories in their research. On the basis of this chocolate consumption category, the nuances of chocolate consumption in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* film's context are explored in this research to produce/generate/present a conceptually novel typology of five contextualized chocolate consumption behaviors: gluttonous consumption; extreme consumption; competitive consumption; technological and hyper-real consumption; and positive consumption.

2.3. Aim of the current study

The particular study aims to explore children's cinema as a means of influencing children's thinking on fundamental issues such as consumption practices and attitudes in early ages. More specifically, representations of consumption at Tim Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* become the medium for familiarizing preschoolers with notions of consumerism and types of consumer behaviors and, thus, teaching positive consumption behavior through creative writing approaches at preschool stage.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research approach and sampling

The particular empirical research included the observation of the population sample during their participation in a teaching intervention conducted in a Greek public Kindergarten. The sample consisted of 20 preschoolers of typical development, between the age of five and six years old, since at this age their narrative skill is developed radically into distinctive developmental stages enabling the comprehension and generation of specific structural and morphological narrative elements (Applebee, 1978).

3.2. Data collection tool

The focus group was chosen as a data collection tool. Preschoolers were divided into small groups of three or four members and produced narrative speech while interacting with each other. Focus groups enabled the interplay among children, the constructive influence and the exchange of prior knowledge and experience concerning familiar fairytale characters and patterns. Focus group methodology enabled a better observation of the process of narrative production in action. Each group’s narratives were recorded and transcribed by the researcher (Wilkinson, 1998).

3.3. Framework: A creative writing intervention on promoting preschoolers’ positive consumerism

The intervention, whose design was based on previous research (Kalaitzi, 2020), follows the objectives of the Greek New Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy, 2014) concerning the interdisciplinary connection of the learning areas of language (creative writing) and social sciences (consumer behavior). Preschoolers participated in groups into a series of fairytale board games and plot cubes games, all of which formed activities repeated as many times as needed in order for every preschooler to produce narrative speech. All students build on their prior knowledge which included the identification and reproduction of the narrative basic structure (Applebee, 1978).

The intervention was divided in two phases. Based on the film’s consumption behaviors typology, two different creative writing approaches were used. The first phase, aiming at the comprehension and use of the intertextual hero, included activities in which preschoolers tried to discern the different consumer behaviors of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*’s five characters, to introduce them into Grimm’s *Hansel and Gretel* and to retell the fairytale plot including the twist caused by the film’s intertextual heroes. The second phase followed, aiming at the comprehension and use of the pattern subversion, included activities in which preschoolers tried to distinguish the fairytale pattern of the opposing pair of characters (the good and the bad) in Grimm’s *Sweet Porridge* and to subvert the pattern by replacing the protagonists with the film’s opposing pair of consumers.

3.4. Context analysis of preschoolers’ narrative speech

Preschoolers’ performance was evaluated through context analysis of their narrative speech, on the basis that this qualitative approach treats data as representations of text, image, expression, subject or rhetorical patterns created to be identified, analyzed and interpreted by the researcher’s personal judgment (Huckin, 2004). Specific expression patterns (Tables 1 & 2) were set before the implementation of the intervention in order to form the data for identification, analysis and interpretation by the researcher. In particular, the clear and concise reference to a film’s character -introduced in Grimms’ *Hansel and Gretel* - while adopting a discrete consumer behavior, was identified as the narrative element of the intertextual hero. Similarly, the reversal of the Grimms’ *Sweet Porridge* pattern of the good and the bad opposing pair of characters was identified as the narrative element of the pattern subversion under the condition that the replacement of the opposing protagonists with the film’s opposing types of consumers leads to a new sequence of events.

Table 1. Expression patterns of the intertextual hero and plot twist identified in preschoolers’ narrative speech during the creative writing intervention.

Narrative element	Expressi on pattern	Example of narrative speech	Expression pattern identified
Intertextual heroes & plot twist	Attributing a consumer behavior to the film character	<p><i>Transcription 1</i></p> <p><i>Veruca gave the Witch a huge bag of gold to buy the gingerbread house with all candies. She didn’t eat the candies. All she wanted was to have them all for herself. Then she kept Hansel and Gretel with her and she made them her own servants without sharing any candy with them.</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p><i>Charlie offered himself to the Witch in exchange of letting Hansel and Gretel free. The Witch felt sorry for all three children and gave them all candies. Charlie proposed to share the candies, and some sell them on the market. They all earned money and filled their tummies.</i></p>	<p>Attribute a consumer behavior to the intertextual film character:</p> <p>“All she wanted was to have them all for herself [...] she made them her own servants without sharing any candy with them.”</p> <p>...</p> <p>“Charlie proposed to share the candies, and some sell it on the market.”</p>

Table 2. Expression patterns of the opposing pair pattern subversion identified in preschoolers' narrative speech during the creative writing intervention.

Narrative element	Expression pattern	Example of narrative speech	Expression pattern identified
Pattern subversion	Replacing protagonists with the opposing consumers pair pattern	<p style="text-align: center;">Transcription 2</p> <p><i>Once upon a time two siblings, Mike and Charlie lived together. They were very poor and hungry. One day an old granny asked them for a glass of water and for exchange she gave them a magic pot. This pot could make sweet porridge non-stop. Charlie asked just for a single bowl of sweet porridge and he ate it. He was hungry no more and he was happy. Mike started thinking that if they make some adjustments to the magic pot, it will make more than porridge. With his tools he started knocking and banging the pot until it broke into pieces. He got furious and he stormed out. Charlie, glued back the pieces and asked for sweet porridge in order to feed his poor neighbors too. The magic pot started working again but only for Charlie who was always grateful and sharing with food.</i></p>	<p>Replace of the good and the bad pair with the opposing consumers' pair:</p> <p><i>“Charlie asked just for a single bowl of sweet porridge and [...] He was hungry no more and he was happy.”</i></p> <p><i>“Mike started thinking [...] it will make more than porridge. With his tools he started knocking and banging the pot until it broke into pieces.”</i></p>

All data collected were interpreted as representations of text and the above expression patterns were analyzed as indicators of the narrative elements of the intertextual hero and the pattern subversion detected in the text produced. Preschoolers' narrative speech that was produced during the intervention was audiotaped and transcribed. For the purposes of this article a small token of the narrative speech transcripts was translated and adapted from Greek to English by the researcher. Both the examples of narrative speech and the identified expression patterns are included in Tables 1 & 2.

4. Discussion

Discourses of gluttony, competitive eating, nutritional indifference and famine are framed. What is clearly defined by the particular cinematic adaptation of the classic novel, are the consequences these young consumers suffer due to their ill consumption attitudes (Downing, 2005). Tim Burton's surrealistic representations of consumption practices frame the child's position as a consumer in a capitalist era (Nivetha, 2019); they seem as if they are lurking to eat the most, or to eat the fastest, or to eat what is hard to find.

In Burton's cinematic adaptation, children are themselves ridiculed due to their consumption practices in a similar manner as the adults' control, which is forced upon the child's perception of nourishment that is always overthrown, ridiculed and defeated in Dahl's novels (Kalaitzi & Gavriilidis, 2019).

The extreme punishment of unhealthy consumption behavior in this particular cinematic adaptation ends with a surrealistic reintegration into an acceptable regularity (Davis, 2009): the positive consumerism wins, but in the same time this victory is questioned by the face of capitalism, Willy Wonka himself.

As marvelous and magical the food appearing out of thin air, Mr. Wonka's factory might seem to be serving the purpose of educating children about the commercial aspects of consumption (Davis, 2009). By portraying distinctive and extreme types of consumption behaviors, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* could be served as a medium for promoting positive consumer attitudes. The cinematic adaptation in particular might be considered as an even more approachable medium for early ages than the novel, since it combines narration, sound and motion picture.

The intervention showed that preschoolers are able to distinguish the different types of consumer behavior and use them in their intertextual characters arc. What is more, a consistency between the characters profile as a particular consumer type and their actions within the plot was noted. More specifically, the narratives produced during the creative writing activities included gluttonous consumers, greedy consumers, competitive consumers, hyper-real consumers and healthy consumers. These five types of consumers affected the plot in totally different ways, causing the corresponding plot twists and pattern subversions of classic fairytales. What should, also, be noted is that preschoolers' metafictional attribute all negative effects in consumers' profile, while they clearly highlight positive consumerism's benefits.

5. Conclusion

The contribution of this particular study to the field of scholarly approaches of children's cinema is to highlight its significant as an -approachable to early years- means of influencing children's thinking on fundamental issues related to their capacity as consumers in the capitalist era and to prove creative writing's dynamics as a teaching tool for provoking young children's imaginative expression on attitudes towards behavior matters.

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