Cinesthesia

Volume 7 | Issue 1   Article 3

12-14-2017

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The Added Value of Modern Blockbuster Films and Series:

Marvel Films as Effective Cinema Therapy

by Lucas Nielsen

Lists of the highest-grossing films over the past ten years have something in common: they are peppered with superhero films. Marvel and DC films have taken center stage over original film concepts, although even prior to comic book films taking the forefront of today's Hollywood box office returns lists, sequels and reboots of previous properties were the bread and butter of the Hollywood industry, representing a majority of the top box office draws [1]. With the action, spectacle, and witty characters, it may come as no surprise that this happens to be the case, but many question what this means for the society. People may worry that it's simple characters and plots are "dumbed down," creating a lower form of entertainment. However, there is added benefit from these films, gleaned from the characters, subject matter, and world within the films, for adults and children alike. These episodic films and the content of superheroes provide a form of therapeutic benefit in coping with trauma and establishing trauma narrative.

Episodic content is a major player in therapeutic cinema therapy, for several reasons. It can be seen on television, though the recent Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and sequel-driven Hollywood standard has brought a form of episodic content to the big screen by way of films. The concept of episodic content in therapeutic terms can be related through the cultivation hypothesis, which states that "exposure to recurrent patterns of images present on television shapes a viewer's perceptions of reality towards the portrayed issue or group" (Vogel). What this can mean in relation to a film series is that attitudes and behaviors, affected by this concept, are directly influenced by these films and their subject matter, particularly the issue or group. The heroes.

The Marvel film series revolves around a team forming and then defending and attacking various villains, while learning to work together and overcome their own weaknesses. This differs from many normal film plots or character arcs, in that the characters may stay very similar in their behavior, but the group dynamic may shift, which becomes the real problem to overcome over the course of the film. Captain America: Civil War (2016) pitted hero against hero, dividing the accumulated team into 2 sides of a conflict over a political policy.

A key number of examples of effective integration of familiar real-world issues into film are present in Marvel properties in theatres, including the original X-Men, made in the year

Sir Ian McKellen as Magneto in *X-Men*.

2000. The opening scene is atypically dark and tragic, taking place at a concentration camp as Magneto, a young Jewish boy, is separated from his family and in a desperate moment, displays his powers for the first time trying to open a gate that had closed between him and his parents. It ends with him being knocked out and his parents being sent off to nearby gas chambers. The late 1990s and early 2000s were the early days of modern comic book adaptations, and this dark, sometimes strange tone was not unusual, with the previous Marvel adaptation being of Blade, released in 1998, which featured awkward one-liners and was a much more adult film than modern standards. This was the age where the dark tones were appreciated in comic book adaptations, because these stories were very dark in nature, and weren't being changed to suit a younger, larger audience as later films were.

However, this dark tone isn't only in the past, it remains throughout the current run of superhero films, including Marvel's, but done in subject matter and adult conflict rather than violence, gore, or language. Captain America: Civil War surrounds a political policy and Iron Man 3 chronicles Tony Stark battling PTSD, among other serious character and story conflicts. The result of these choices is a film series that rides the line between fantasy and realism. This can be seen as valuable to therapists utilizing cinema therapy, because these conflicts are very familiar at times, such as PTSD and anxiety over political frustration, making real connections easier from personality to film. The original Iron Man, like the X-Men (2000), began with Tony Stark as a prisoner of war, a very serious beginning making the tension much more heightened and allowing personal interpretations to affect viewing of the film. The current Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has 14 feature films, beginning in 2008, with 6 more currently planned into the future ("All Movies: Marvel Cinematic Universe").

Superhero mythos has a strong reaction in children to projecting themselves within the story and relating to the goals and problems of the superheroes, through moral dilemmas and basic conflict of good vs. evil. However, the more recent Marvel films have taken on qualities of social commentary, specifically in Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014), displaying greater significance to American culture. The plot revolves around government control over weapons that are derived from technology from an evil organization Captain America had previously fought against, Hydra. The Captain is labeled as going rogue when trying to go against these actions, and must overcome government surveillance and engage in espionage to combat this corruptive influence on the government. Rubin noted that the children experiencing this type of narrative and story, may actually incorporate some complex elements, exploring "...rules, and concepts such as strength, power, justice, and morality." The fantasy play has a

penchant for involving the more complex elements and making it a space for the child to exhibit wisdom beyond their years in a learning environment of their own making.

How does this all relate to coping with trauma? A core tenet of narrative trauma therapy sessions is that "[o]nce an experience has structure and meaning … the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable," where the trauma itself can be minimized or damaging effects curbed by finding an order to the events (Pennebaker). The general patient usually seeks help when they are currently experiencing a traumatic event, and so the main element of therapy is determining the patient's role in their experience. The confusion stems from a lack of connection to the events and perhaps a misinterpretation of their role in said events. Forming a timeline can be effective in clarifying the event, but the trauma can be better understood by forming a story to shape the patient's perspective on the event.

So how can it be proven that Marvel films are appropriate for cinema therapy? They currently aren't included in approved cinematherapy lists, that is, recommended films to use in this manner. Jamoki Dantzler, however, believes these films fit a certain criteria of William Glasser, M.D., in being a quality world, using this theory developed by Glasser. Dantzler finds

The main cast of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

that the important aspects to pay attention to in a patient are the way they are acting, thinking, feeling, and their physiology, which all make up the patient's behavior. Throughout several Marvel films, Dantzler distinguishes the important elements showcasing strong moral standing among characters within the MCU, and this is what enables the films to be viewed as effective cinematherapy, because

each film takes a specific construct from Glasser's Choice Theory, which states that behaviors we choose are central to our existence, and these include survival, love, freedom, fun, and power. With a focus on superhero films, Dantzler states that cinematherapy may be most effective working with adolescents, because they can learn how to develop an internal representation and focus to understand themselves and how they interact with others, key to understanding trauma.

The superhero concept is naturally very therapeutic in its storytelling and characters, due to their usual archetypical standards of simplicity in good vs. evil conflicts. This is partially why children have a strong reaction to super heroes in stories, therefore suggesting that they will be effective in cinema therapy. The superhero is a form of fantasy that takes on more real-world issues of the modern day. Lawrence C. Rubin judges the value of fantasy in stating that "[o]f the various theories, tools, and techniques available to the therapist, one of the most powerful resources for self-understanding, growth, and healing may well be fantasy" (Rubin). By further extension, he finds that superheroes inhabit the fantasies of current children, since becoming a pop culture mainstay, and through fantasy play children have internal representations and symbolism, which is linked to developing a sense of understanding and mastery of this sense.

The act of discussing the event is the primary activity during therapy, the first step to understanding the event is to discuss it. The basic proponent of understanding a narrative is to make it a well-crafted story, but this depends upon having an understanding of basic storytelling because, according to Pennebaker and Seagal, the basis for a strong self-narrative is close to the requirements for a good story in general. They believe that the emotional release, possible due to a clear narrative, is mentally healthy but also connects to better physical health, as a result. The narrative is critical to releasing these emotions in an effective manner where one's role in their trauma can be understood and therefore promote personal growth in oneself.

In a political world, superheroes remain an innocent source of inspiration for children and offer a compelling source of trauma respite. They help to aid in forming a trauma narrative in adults and also assisting children to establish a coherent emotional space to lessen the chance of extreme trauma. And by watching these superhero films, a therapeutic benefit can be seen that's especially effective in children to help cope with trauma and establish trauma narrative. As stated by Cathy Caruth, "the repetition at the heart of catastrophe … emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind," an observation that makes clear the importance of narrative formation, to break the unwitting cycle that fuels further self-inflicted trauma.

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