

Simba's Leadership – A Socio-Symbolic Content Analysis and its Empirical Examination among Children and Students

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ABSTRACT This study examines the attitudes of children and students towards *The Lion King*. Its first part comprises a content analysis of Simba's leadership figure according to the socio-symbolic leadership model. Findings show that those who create change are deceitful and undermine social order, and therefore it is better to follow the accepted rules, obey the leader, and avoid adopting a critical standpoint since those who did are presented as negative characters. Following these findings, several questions were composed as a preliminary examination of the validity of the content analysis, while focusing on two principal subjects: (1) Attitude towards change – is change perceived negatively, and how is the initiator of change regarded? (2) Passivity – should the directives of leaders be accepted across-the-board? And can only a leader effect a positive change and lead? The film was screened before twenty (20) 10-year-olds (in five groups of four), and after viewing the film individual interviews were conducted. The film was also screened before an audience of 50 students. After viewing the film, they were given questions (similar to those presented to the children), requested to answer in writing, and a discussion followed. Findings show that in the group of children change was perceived negatively and their majority did not support it. Findings also show that there is an unmistakable tendency to accept the leader's attitudes without question. Similar findings were also found among the students. They also indicated the positive characteristics of Simba's behavior, but stated that we are also subject to the Circle of Life, and therefore it is wrong to initiate change. In light of these findings, due to the evolving influence of the media in our time, parents, educators and other people in influential positions are asked to introduce a more balanced perspective and dialogue to cultural texts.

INTRODUCTION

Walt Disney's animated films constitute one of the most notable means for creating a social reality relating to diverse subjects, such as gender, ethnic relationships, class relationships, characteristics of "the good citizen," and additional ethical and normative messages (Giroux 1994; Dundes 2001). These films reflect a narrative that symbolizes the mainstream of the American social structure (Beveridge 1996; Strayer 1996), one that comprises conservative social messages, devoid of a critical viewpoint (Barzilai 1990; Giroux 1994; Claudine 1996; Beres 1999; Sheldon 1999; Baker-Sperry 2007). In view of the film's creators absolute control of its components (Champoux 2001), these messages reflect the credo of the Walt Disney Studios.

These statements should not be underestimated since films have an effect due to the emotional involvement they arouse in their viewers (Sedney 1999; Champoux 2001). Disney's films' great popularity (Giroux 1994) and the fact that the younger generation as well, whose worldview has still not been shaped, is the target audience, justify deeper scrutiny of the encounter between the

(young) viewers and the film and its potential implications.

We cannot ignore the effect of the media on audiences in general, and that of television/cinema in particular. Different studies confirm the influence of this medium in coalescing the worldview of viewers (Ashbach 1994; Van Evra 2004). This is particularly significant in all matters pertaining to children, as they have not yet formed a stable inner self (Lemish 2002). Viewers, and particularly children, identify with the characters they see on screen. Following viewing, questions can arise that relate to shaping the spectator's identity – who am I in comparison with the character? Can I change my behavior in order to resemble the character in the film? and additional questions. The answers to these questions constitute part of the individual's identity formation process, which can generate a change in attitudes compatible with things that appeared on screen (Lemish 2002). These issues are also compatible with Althusser's theory of the ideological subject (Ben-Shaul 2000), which is part of his overall perception of the creation of ideological state apparatuses that act in the service of the establishment and preclude critical viewpoints (Althusser 1970).

THE LION KING

The Lion King sold 27 million copies and is one of the Disney Studio's all time box office successes. The film describes the evolution of a relationship in the animal kingdom after the birth of Simba, the son of King Mufasa. Simba's birth denies Scar, the king's brother, the kingship, which he would have inherited if Simba had not been born. In order to change the course of events, Scar brings about the death of Mufasa. He asks the hyenas to kill Simba, tells the pack that Simba is dead, and therefore he has no alternative but to undertake the role of leader. The hyenas do not kill Simba, who finds refuge with Timon and Pumbaa. Later he meets Nala, a childhood friend, and Rafiki the mandrill-shaman, and decides to return and fight Scar for the kingdom, ultimately conquering it, and he returns to the throne.

Different researchers have studied this film. Gooding (1995) analyzes it, and reaches conclusions that relate to three main contexts: (a) The film reflects a condescending attitude towards Africa, as the natives are presented as subordinate to the laws of nature and are unable to shape reality; (b) The film legitimizes the stratified-ethnic structure of the United States, as it draws an analogy between the light and dark spaces in the film and the residential areas of the Afro-Americans and the Caucasians; (c) The film conveys a conservative message since those who seek to initiate change (Scar) only aggravate the situation, and are presented in a negative light. Therefore, the message might be that it is better to continue living according to the Circle of Life and not to doubt its legitimacy. Morton (1996) accepts the class analogy between the film and the stratified structure of the United States, and adds that Mufasa and Simba represent a legitimate social order, in which all the rulers are men, and therefore the film conveys a message that supports a patriarchal social structure (Giroux 1994). Sedney's (1999) study deals with the narratives of mourning. She presents a positive interpretation of the film, as she believes it reflects a mature and better dealing with the issue of death, in comparison with the ways these matters were dealt with in Disney's earlier films. The overall message is that death, with all the pain it involves, is something with which one may deal successfully. The film is also analyzed from the perspective of leadership. These studies describe

how *The Lion King* helps to concretize issues such as authority, power, leading an organizational change, and implications in cases in which there is excessive dependency on the leader (Rosemarie 1996; Champoux 2001; Comer 2001). On the other hand, no attempt has been made to characterize Simba's leadership figure, examine how Simba is perceived in the eyes of viewers, and elicit ensuing social implications.

This article has two main objectives: to characterize Simba's leadership behavior, and in view of these characteristics, examine the attitudes and feelings that the film evokes in children and adults.

The characterization of Simba's leadership behavior is conducted through content analysis of his character according to the socio-symbolic model of charismatic leadership (Shamir 1999). The attitudes of children and adults toward the film/Simba were examined through a constructed interview and open questions which was formulated in view of the content analysis findings. Before relating to the findings and analysis, I will briefly review Shamir's model according to which the content analysis was performed.

Charismatic Leadership – A Few Characteristics

Shamir (1999) offers six explanations for charismatic leadership. In view of the research question with which this article deals, I have focused on the socio-symbolic explanation. According to this model, charismatic leaders are perceived as having a connection to central factors that enable and maintain social order (Shamir 1999, p. 42). This sentence reveals the three cornerstones of the socio-symbolic explanation – followers, society and the leader – while highlighting their reciprocal relationships.

Regarding the followers, the basic assumption is that every person aspires to achieve a social order and fears social chaos. This is a kind of human instinct which seeks to obtain the essence of social, cultural and cosmic order, as part of the need to integrate into a larger "thing." This integration creates a feeling of continuity, consistency and stability.

The social context clarifies that every society creates a "symbolic center" for itself – a "region" in which ethical and normative foundations exist and according to which social order is maintained.

Since this is a special and significant “place” which is not accessible to everyone, the leaders are those who are perceived as maintaining contact with this center, having the ability to affect what takes place, and hence having an effect on society as a whole.

“Attributing charismatic qualities occurs in the presence of a force that creates and maintains order... a great deal of power makes itself known through its control over order. It is the thing that reveals order, creates it, protects it or destroys it. Hence, the ability to bring about the occurrence of events in the desirable way is a sign of charisma” (Shamir 1999, p. 43).

This sign remains steadfast through rituals that glorify leaders; rituals that not only reinforce their status but also create a feeling that their power and actions are part of a transcendental ethical order.

All in all, charismatic leaders underscore their relationships with the symbolic center, are perceived as possessing a great deal of power, create rituals that preserve their power and manifest ethics and values that validate their strength and the order they have created.

SIMBA'S LEADERSHIP ATTRIBUTES – THE SOCIO-SYMBOLIC ANGLE

The analysis relates to two main contexts; one is an overall characterization of the social context in which the story takes place, and the other is individual – Simba's leadership attributes, and how the two contexts are intertwined.

The overall social context can be seen in the film's opening song. The song, *The Circle of Life*, presents a deterministic worldview in which natural cyclicity, over which we have no control, is underscored. The circle of life moves us forcefully and we seek only to survive in this world. This song is sung while the different animals come to celebrate the birth of Simba, the future king. During the ceremony, the royal family is situated on a high cliff, and all the animals attending the ceremony are in the valley, and bow in precise synchrony (the hyenas and Scar are absent. Are they not part of the food chain?)

As stated in the socio-symbolic model, rituals glorify the status of the leader; in my opinion, it is not by chance that against the background of the ceremony the opening song conveys a deterministic message that illustrates the existence of an immutable social structure and

cyclicity. The film then presents a strict hierarchal structure, support for which can be found in several scenes: in the dialogue that evolves between Zazu (the King's advisor) and Mufasa, during which Zazu advises the king to transform Scar into a throw rug as a punishment for his absence from the ceremony; in a tour Mufasa and Simba take during which Zazu, the king's loyal assistant, is degraded and made Simba's pouncing trainer, regardless of his humiliation; and when Mufasa goes off with Simba on a tour of the kingdom which the latter was supposed to inherit after his father's death. During the tour, Mufasa talks to Simba about the boundaries of his kingdom, the food chain/Circle of Life of which they are all part, and the fundamental nature of the role of king – to maintain balance, to ensure that everyone fulfills their role, and that everyone remains in their place in the Circle of Life. This description leads to Mufasa's view of the principal values according to which a society should be organized – hierarchy, balance, conservatism, etc. It is compatible with Shils' (1964) description of the “symbolic centers” of society – a “place” in which the behavioral codes, according to which one should act, exist.

Later in the film, Simba understands the message and sings a song of praise to himself in which he stresses his superiority and importance. He uses words such as, “respected”, “saluted”, “I'm gonna be the mane event”, “No one saying do this,” etc. The descriptions so far testify to a hierarchal structure, and the king's significant place is in maintaining the extant social order.

Simba's leadership-personal context can be seen in his meeting with Nala, which takes place after he saves the warthog from her fangs. Following their fight, their identities are revealed. Simba has grown up and lives a life free of worry with his two new friends – Timon and Pumbaa. Nala has her reservations and turns to Simba in a way that reveals her perception (and that of others) of social order and Simba's central role in creating and maintaining this order: “You're alive. And that means you're the king!... It's like you're back from the dead. You don't know how much this will mean to everyone... What it means to me... But I don't understand something. You've been alive all this time. Why didn't you come back... *We've really needed you at home* [Simba denies his responsibility and tries to avoid returning home, but Nala lets go and says] “It's your responsibility... you don't understand, you

are our only hope [my italics].

One of the characteristics of charismatic leadership according to the socio-symbolic theory clarifies that followers seek a social order that enables them to position themselves and enjoy a feeling of security and significance (Shamir 1999). After Scar comes to power, the social order is violated and Nala's description shows that they are all lost – there is neither food nor water, and the animals cannot adjust to the new situation. In terms of the socio-symbolic explanation, Nala says that the social order has been violated, and that they all yearn for order. Without it, they cannot function and Nala expresses a fear that disorder will reach such dimensions that everything will collapse. The other followers/animals cannot create a proper social order, unlike Simba who is "our only hope," as Nala says to Simba when he tries to explain to her his reasons for not wanting to become king.

With the help of Rafiki, the shaman, who has recruited Mufasa's spirit to the cause, Simba decides to return to the kingdom, where he is faced with a gloomy picture – neglect, desolation, everything is dying and there is no sign of life. Dark colors concretize the severity of the situation (in stark contrast with the vibrant multicolor of Mufasa's reign). Simba orders that the lionesses be called in, and after an argument with Scar, is forced to fight him and return to the throne. Scar's death symbolizes the end of the dark days, and this is notably concretized in the film. After Scar's death Simba slowly climbs up a cliff, his head high; during his climb rain begins falling, a skull is washed up, and the kingdom flourishes once again. Nature joins forces with the good, those who are designated to play a role in the kingdom, those who preserve the Circle of Life. Shamir (1999) argues that in the socio-symbolic approach, one of the characteristics of charismatic leadership is that the followers follow a leader because he creates, reveals and protects a social-ethical order. Simba restores past balance and order and "hence, the ability to bring about the occurrence of things in the desirable way is a sign of charisma," (Shamir 1999, p. 43). In Simba's case, it is not only that he makes society's symbolic center accessible to him, but Simba is, in fact, the symbolic center of the film's social order. In his absence, there is no proper order and his followers are powerless, and when he is present, proper order exists.

Two poles are revealed to us. Simba, who is

identified with the good, the flourishing, the just and the right, and the other – Scar who is identified with deception, murder, manipulation, violence, a yearning for power, self-glorification (Scar: "I'm the main addressee", "I will be king, bow before me, show me some respect"), and attempts to effect social change (Scar: "It is not in heaven where they decide on a generation shift"). These words can be interpreted as the film's message - change is identified with the bad, and conservatism with the good. Simba is a positive and worthy leader (he preserves order, ensures that everyone remains in their designated place, fights for his citizens, etc.), while Scar is a negative leader, and his behavior may convey the message that those who effect change are deceitful, murderers, who undermines social order, and therefore it is better to behave according to accepted patterns, obey the leader (Simba) who "is determined by the Circle of Life," not replace him, and avoid adopting a critical standpoint.

Two main questions arise: (a) How will the children who viewed the film interpret it? (b) Will their interpretation be compatible with the interpretation I have presented?

Justification for examining the subject stems from the fact that films also create a schema through which spectators examine themselves vs. reality (Lemish 2002, p. 240). Spectators may ask themselves questions such as, who am I in comparison with the characters I have seen? Can I resemble the plot's protagonist – yes or no? What does this say about me? etc. Since children have not yet developed a stable/coalesced self, and can regard the things they see on screen as a suitable role model (Althusser 1970; Lemish 2002), there is room to examine their "dialogue" with the film and consider resultant implications.

Research Procedure and the Main Contexts Examined

Following the interpretation presented, several questions were composed, designed to engender the spectators' feelings and thoughts toward the film in general, and towards Simba and Scar in particular. An attempt was made to generate insight into two principal contexts:

(i) *Attitude towards change*- Is change perceived negatively, and what will be the attitude towards the change's initiator?

(ii) *Passivity*- should I accept the directives of the leaders across-the-board? Can only a leader

create change and lead, or can anyone initiate/lead/effect change?

The children viewed the films in five groups of four, and were later requested to draw a picture that illustrated their feelings towards the film. This enabled an initial engendering of thoughts and feelings towards the film, and prevented the children from becoming bored while they waited for their interview. At this stage, the children were interviewed one by one. The interview comprised the following questions: Feelings and thoughts about the film, what were the messages that the film conveyed, what is the main message in your opinion, would you want Simba as your leader, describe the good and bad qualities of Simba and Scar, did you learn anything from the film, if so, from which character and why?

Later the children were presented with a list of sentences and were requested to report whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements. The statements were as follows:

Anyone who wants to effect a change will fail, and therefore it is not advisable to change; The role of leader can only pass from father to son; Life will not be as good if we change anything in it; Anyone who attempts to make changes is bad; One must accept what the leader says and criticizing him is impermissible; Only a leader can save; Do you think you can lead?

The interviews were approximately 30 minutes in duration. Twenty (20) 4th grade children were interviewed in the study (11 boys and 9 girls). Although this is not a representative sample, the study enables an initial examination of its underlying idea and can help in the following stages of a later study.

In order to flesh out the pilot study, the film was screened before an audience of 50 students in their mid-20s. After viewing the film, the students received a list of open questions to which they were requested to respond in writing immediately after the viewing. The questions explored their thoughts and feelings about the movie, the messages in the movie, pleasant and unpleasant characters and the reason for their liking or disliking of each character, norms and values which the film tries to convey, and a similar list of sentences (that the children received) in which they were requested to report whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. After they responded a discussion of the film was held.

All the interviewees come from middle and upper-middle class families. The primary schools,

from which the 4th grade children came from, are similar state schools. Pupils were chosen randomly (every 4th pupil from the class name list). Students participated in the research were in their second year of B.A. in the social sciences and are at the same social status as the children (middle and upper-middle class).

FINDINGS

Findings of the interviews show that the vast majority of children (18 of 20) believe that change is a negative thing, and that one should be obedient and accept the leader's directives. Relating to the attitude to change, repeated statements were, "If you change things the bad guys win", "Change does good things to the bad guys and bad things to the good guys", "Change can be good only if it changes a previous change, and restores what was there before", "Things that are good should not be changed", "If the leader agrees, the change will be positive", etc. One interviewee said that change is a good thing, and three other interviewees distinguished between the film and real life. In general terms their answers to other questions show that despite what they said their overall attitude falls in line with the answers of the other children.

Regarding Simba as a singular redemptive God, and adopting the interviewee's passive stance towards the leader, the following issues arose: the majority of children (17 of 20) said that one should obey the directives of the leader and he should not be criticized. One child said he would criticize the leader but would not do it directly to his face, and all 20 stated that they regarded Simba as a singular leader who could bring about salvation. Notable statements in this context were: "Simba can make everyone happy again," "Simba had all the power and besides him no one could bring about salvation," "He [Simba] is the only one who knows what is good," "Only he can help," "The good depends on one person who has all the power," "Simba is the king. He knows what he's doing and one should obey him," "Only a leader has the power," "A true leader is destined for it," etc. All the interviewees attributed only positive characteristics to Simba, and only negative ones to Scar. In other words, the positive attributes of a leader/Simba are bound up in conservatism – strictly adhering to a destiny that is dictated by the Circle of Life – and there is no room to criticize a leader's behavior. Another point was raised on

the issue of leadership while the majority of children stated that the role of leader passes from father to son.

As stated above, the film was also screened before an audience of 50 students. The data shows that the students' responses were not essentially different from those presented by the young interviewees, therefore data from both research groups falls in line with my socio-symbolic content analysis. The students were happy that Simba became the king and that justice had been achieved ("I was happy to see that at the end Simba and not Scar became the king"). All the students liked the good figures (Simba, Nala, Zazu, etc.) and disliked Scar and the hyenas ("Scar has a bad character and bad values. He will do anything in order to get what he wants even if he has to kill for it," "I liked all the good figures since they represent hope and happiness"). Regarding leadership, the main values according to which society in general and the leader in particular should act are loyalty, caring, self-sacrifice, etc. All the students regarded Simba as a positive and worthy character ("Simba represents hope, the good, and happiness ... the only 'person' that can take care of things"), and saw no fault in his behavior ("he [Simba] is a good leader. He suffered as a child but as soon as he grew up and his journey in search of the self came to an end, he did what he had to do"). In relation to the film's main message they said that a leader should be loyal, caring and attentive to the public, and should fight for what he believes is important ("he is very good to his subordinates and will take care of all their needs, just like his father did"). Two other important issues evolved: "the upper class rules and the lower class is subordinate", and "we are all bound to the Circle of Life – everything goes back to what it was before". If we scrutinize the values mentioned by the subjects in this study, according to which a society/leader should behave, the social structure (in which the upper class rules) and the fact that life goes on according to the cyclic rules of the Circle of Life, we see that the students who participated in the study do not believe that a basic/essential change is possible and therefore there is no room for critical stances since life goes on as it has until now. This stance was also found among the children who participated in the study.

ANALYSIS AND INITIAL CONCLUSIONS

From the interviews conducted with the

children it appears that the interpretation I presented is compatible with the way in which they perceived the film. They perceive change negatively, only a leader has the capability of effecting change, and only if he is a good leader. If not, the change he effects will be negative. From the point of view of Althusser and the Ideological Subject Theory, the combination of relating negatively to change, the fact that only specific people have the capability to make changes, and that the leader should not be criticized – constitute a message which may prove problematic. Althusser believes that at a young age a reflection of an external visual image exists in consciousness. Since children lack a coalesced inner identity, the external is perceived as a whole. This external whole becomes a role model, which Althusser terms "the super-subject of the ideological apparatus." This "Subject" is reflected in human consciousness and is assimilated into it as a model which the individual seemingly chooses to be – an individual identifies with the super-subject of the ideological apparatus, while in reality he/she is accorded an illusion that he/she is the ideological subject that independently engenders reality, which is in fact dictated. Thus, in Althusser's opinion, people become Subjects, which are the sum total of all the attributes required for the ideological apparatuses to become part of the individual (Althusser 1970).

I am aware of the fact that viewers are not passive. They conduct a "dialogue" with the messages to which they are exposed, and do not necessarily accept things at face value (Livingstone, 1998). However, in my opinion, the film creates a context, within which its plot can convey an educational message that is incompatible with the educational attributes of the modern era – ones that call for regarding social reality as something that has been created and undergoes change by the individuals themselves, as part of the cultivation of a reflexive ability that will enable individuals to become independent human beings that are not inclined to accept things only because they are self-evident (Aloni 1997; Aviram 1997; Bronstein 1999; Giroux 1997; Ofir 1997; Zuckerman 1997).

It seems to me that we should ask ourselves about the meaning of this message which encourages viewers to think and behave conservatively, leaving infinite room for dominant characters who at the same time are perceived positively by the interviewees.

It is clear to me that young viewers will change some of their attitudes as part of their maturing process, and it is also clear to me that films are not the only socialization agent to which children are exposed. However we must not forget that the time children devote to watching television is constantly increasing (Lemish 2002), and that the time they spend with their parents in the afternoons is diminishing (Lemish 2002: 19), which shifts a larger portion of influence to other socialization agents, among them, Disney Studio's feature films. Therefore, negative implications may exist if these are the feelings and thoughts the film evokes among young audiences –

“Media do play a central role in children's make-believe worlds ... [it helps] children symbolize ... their self image and as a springboard for their own narration of a world that allows them a personal space for developing who they wish to be. ... visual media, so it seems, participate in this process in a more powerful manner, thus leaving stronger imprints on children's fantasies.” (Gotz et al. 2005).

In a way, the facts that support this line of thought may be found in the analysis of the students' responses, which gives more weight to the previous analysis. As mentioned earlier, the students indicated positive messages which exist in the film (they used expressions such as: “a journey in search of the self”, “Simba is caring, loyal, and these are the proper behaviors”), but at the same time indicated two additional issues which merit thought. One, that the upper classes rule and the lower classes are subordinate, and the other – in view of the Circle of Life, everything goes back to what it was before. This means legitimizing the hierarchal structure that was created, and linking the stratified structure with leadership. This stance supports extant social cyclicity, and reinforces my earlier statement vis-à-vis the lack of encouragement of initiative and change since we are all subject to the great Circle of Life. This interpretation reflects a perspective of modern society as it appears in the writings of Adorno, Marcuse, Kellner and other critical social scientists (Ritzer 2006) –

“techno-culture is a result of mass culture society, in which consumption goods, cinema, television, and mass images ... become the dominant cultural role models ... that can be noticed in every aspect of social life and has influence on social relations, politics, economics etc.” (Ritzer 2006).

This macro perspective should be the context in which we examine possible outcomes of the attitudes found in this analysis. I am not claiming that the media has absolute influence over its audience, but, on the other hand, it is an extremely important factor in our society. Therefore, we cannot ignore the fact that the collected data show that both children and adults identified non-critical messages in this movie, and identified ideas that encourage people to accept reality as is, be passive, reject change, identify change with negative figures, etc. It appears that Adorno was right when he said that pleasure is always flight from the last remaining thought of resistance. And pleasure that calls for passivity and other ideas mentioned earlier should encourage parents, educators and other people in influential positions, to introduce a more balanced perspective and dialogue to cultural texts.

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