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## **Peculiarities of Teenagers' Perception of the Characters of a Film Narrative in a Situation of Moral Choice**

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### **Abstract**

The study of the system of moral values of young people using film narrative, which has an effect on the impressions, meanings, significations, attitudes of people and values, human beliefs, treatment of people and values would determine mental health of an individual and psychological well-being of a society as a whole. Teenagers are those most susceptible to the exposure. The novelty of the study was that the evaluation of the impersonations of the characters in a situation of moral choice, transmission of moral values presented in the film narrative, was studied in adolescents without parental oversight, living in residential care facilities for more than 10 years.

The methodological foundation of the study was the psychosemiotic approach to content analysis. A toolbox of techniques was used in the study: theoretical analysis, immanent analysis of the film; factorial analysis; a dedicated semantic differential was used to discover the factors revealing the semantics of the impersonations of the characters of the film narrative in a situation of moral collision, and to compare their perception by different groups of teenagers; analysis of letters to the character was carried out using the procedure of content analysis. We proceeded from the assumption that teenagers' perception and semantic evaluation of the characters of the film narrative in the situation of moral choice was determined by their experience of living in the situation of moral choice and conditions of their upbringing; the system of values presented in the film narrative, the situation of moral collision experienced by the characters, determined the perception and semantic evaluation of their impersonations by modern teenagers. The study was carried out on the basis of schools in Irkutsk, facilities for children without parental care (Republic of Buryatia, Irkutsk) (n = 78). 'The Boy in the Striped Pajamas' motion picture was used as stimulus material.

It was demonstrated that teenagers left without parental care would perceive the characters of the motion picture in positive categories of morality more often than those raised in families. The attitude towards the characters of a movie who were in a situation of moral choice, was determined by the categories of nobility, peacefulness, humanity, tolerance, and piety. The identified differences could be explained by their experience of living in a situation of moral choice, the attitude toward children in situations of living hardships, the individual psychological differences of adolescents. Differences in attitudes could also be seen as the reason for differences in the effectiveness of the impression of the movie. It was substantiated that the situation of moral choice in cinematography served as a tool for shaping moral values.

The study sustained the idea of the potential of motion pictures, their effect on shaping moral values of adolescents, complemented the data on the effect of the film narrative on personal development and individual differences in the evaluation of media products. The obtained findings set

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the task of identifying the mechanisms of positive influence of movies on different groups of adolescents.

**Keywords:** impersonation, immanent analysis, psychosemiotic approach, narrative, moral values, semantic differential, content analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Moral inconsistency is incidental to the modern stage of the development of society: a collision of conflicting aspirations and interests in the domain of human relations would cause moral controversies, which constitute the essence of any moral problem that would arise in society. The study of the system of moral values of young people using film narrative, which has an effect on the impressions, meanings, significations, attitudes of people and values, human beliefs, treatment of people and values would determine mental health of an individual and psychological well-being of society as a whole. Adolescents are the most susceptible to that effect because they are deeper incorporated into the domain of the media narrative, which transmits and promotes certain moral and aesthetic values, implicitly influencing their consciousness and behavior. Motion picture content is becoming a part of adolescents' lives, as they receive a significant share of information about the rules of behavior and communication, as well as the picture of the world as a whole, in the media space.

Media content is one of the main sources for shaping attitudes of modern young people towards reality and their behavior, the formation and development of their moral values. In its content and focus, the film narrative contains great potential and a resource that requires deep and comprehensive study. The issue of the effectiveness of the effect of motion pictures has been studied by many researchers (Balabantaray, 2020; Baveye et.al., 2018; De Leeuw, Van der Laan, 2018; Kubrak, 2020; Kyshtymova, 2019; Tan, 2018). Academic literature noted insufficient attention to the perception of the content of visual codes by consumers, which contributed to the fact that the impersonation of a character would assume metaphorical nature (Poznina, 2017); students' uncritical perception of information transmitted via media texts (Kyshtymova, Trofimova, 2018); the role of heroes and victims in the formation of sociocultural identity (Tulchinsky, 2014). G.L. Tulchinsky noted that the impersonations transmitted in motion pictures would shape not the historical memory only, but would convey emotions through experiences, contributing to the formation of both positive and negative impersonations of the characters (Tulchinsky, 2014). Interdisciplinarity in the study of film narrative was substantiated (Zagrebin, 2019). Besides, it was noted that cinematography today is becoming a form of entertainment to provide for the emotional needs of people (Baveye et al., 2018).

The core of the film content would reveal a wide range of values, patterns of behavior and roles, producing a significant effect on the formation of value preferences of an individual. Therefore, study of psychological effects of a film narrative (Kyshtymova, 2018), its effect on the formation of moral values, appeared timely. In the resolution of moral conflicts, contemporary Russian researchers look for guidelines in the domain of the two phenomena: society and personality (Mironenko, 2010).

In academic literature, an enormous role was dedicated to media environment: the effects of media environment on the formation of personal moral values, behavior, self-awareness, and culture has been proven (Gerasimova, 2007), its leading role in modern social transformation processes was noted (Belonozhko, 2017). It was emphasized that the media environment, with its vast array of media content options, was one of the social institutions that shape moral values and behavioral patterns (Belonozhko, 2017). Different approaches in the study of the problem of moral choice based on the analysis of the film narrative were substantiated: literary, historical, religious, philosophical, and cultural studies, which afforded to see new meanings in the judgments and behavior of the characters in a narrative (Zagrebin, 2019).

The presented research was targeted at obtaining new data on the effect of the situation of moral choice on the evaluation of the characters of a motion picture and the study of the semantic evaluation of the characters in the situation of moral choice and their attitude towards moral problems.

## 2. Materials and methods

The methodological basis of the study was psychosemiotic approach to the analysis of a film narrative, the idea of the role of imaginative writing in the generating an aesthetic response and

form of behavior, the algorithm of the psychological analysis of a media text. A toolbox of techniques was used in the study: theoretical analysis, semantic differential, content analysis method, intrinsic analysis, factorial analysis.

We proceeded from the assumption that teenagers' perception and semantic evaluation of the characters of a film narrative in the situation of moral choice were determined by their experience of living in the situation of moral choice and conditions of upbringing; the system of values presented in the film narrative, the situation of moral collision experienced by the characters, would determine the perception and semantic evaluation of their impersonations by modern teenagers.

At the first stage of the study, an immanent analysis of the content of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* motion picture (2008, directed by Mark Herman, *Miramax Films, BBC Films, Heyday Films*) was carried out, involving a step-by-step analysis of its imagery system and the identification of psychologically significant meanings transmitted by the movie characters (Bruno and Shmuel). The motion picture presented a story that was unfolding during World War II. All the events taking place were rendered through the eyes of an eight-year-old boy, Bruno, the son of the commandant of a concentration camp. At the core of the story was Bruno's acquaintance with a Jewish boy, Shmuel, which turned into a friendship, and the consequences of that acquaintance. All the substantive and formal features of the text as a tracer of its deeper meanings were examined (Kyshtymova, 2017; 2018). Intrinsic analysis was also used to identify the educational resources of the film narrative. As the level of the research algorithm, the figurative system of the narrative was used (Kyshtymova, 2017), experience of narratological analysis of motion pictures (Efimenko, 2013). We considered the selected excerpts from the movie as a film narrative, because it did not assert the situation of choice only, but amounted to a 'multi-way narrative' (Bugueva, 2012).

At the second stage of the study, a dedicated semantic differential was used to discover the factors that revealed the semantics of the impersonations of the characters of the film narrative in a situation of moral collision, and to compare their perception in different groups of adolescents. Differential scales were formed by 30 pairs of adjectives describing moral values: 'polite – rude', 'noble – villainous', 'sympathetic – gloating', 'generous – grudging', 'sincere – fabricated', 'humane – cruel', 'principled – unprincipled', etc. Teenagers were offered to rate each character on those scales after watching excerpts from the motion pictures (narrative). The resulting data were subjected to mathematical processing using the SPSS-22 statistical package. Estimated markers were identified based on factorial analysis (maximum likelihood method with Varimax rotation). The reliability of the correlation matrix calculation and the possibility of factorial analysis were ensured by the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test (KMO) and Bartlett sphericity index. The dependability of the differences in the semantic assessment of the impersonations of the characters of the film narrative in a situation of moral conflict between the groups of adolescents was determined using the nonparametric Mann-Whitney test.

At the third stage of the study, teenagers were offered to rate the motion picture itself using 6 scales: 'good – bad', 'interesting – uninteresting', 'helpful – harmful', 'teaches good – teaches bad', 'scary – not scary', 'comprehensible – non-comprehensible'. The resulting data were subjected to factorial analysis by the method of principal components. Besides, teenagers were offered to write a letter to a character of the movie, for whom they had the strongest fellow feeling. A content analysis procedure was used for the analysis. The categories of content analysis were determined on the basis of preliminary analysis of the concepts that made up the content of moral values: fellow feeling for the character, an attitude toward the character and his actions.

The study was carried out on the basis of schools in Irkutsk, the Kabansky Facility for children without parental care (Republic of Buryatia) and the Facility for children without parental care (Irkutsk) with the participation of teenagers aged 15-16 years (n=78). The entire sample was divided into two groups: the first group consisted of adolescents raised in a family, the second one – by adolescents without parental oversight who had been in care facilities for more than 10 years.

### 3. Discussion

The effect of media content on the oncoming generation, the influence of a film narrative on their mental and physical health was relevant and actively studied by representatives of various domains of academic knowledge. Both positive and negative effects of film content on a viewer were noted (Cingel, Krcmar, 2017; De Leeuw, Van der Laan, 2018), absence of clear-cut criteria for determining its potential (positive or negative) (Kyshtymova, 2019).

We used *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008, directed by Mark Herman, *Miramax Films*, *BBC Films*, *Heyday Films*) as stimulus material. The motion picture had already been used as the subject of analysis in academic studies. Thus, D. Pinford asserted that the movie presented criminals as victims; viewing a child as a means of exploring the subject of the Holocaust (Pinford, 2015). Rey performed a comparison of the protagonists of *Balada triste de trompeta* (de la Iglesia, 2010) and *The Boy in the striped Pajamas* (Herman, 2008) and substantiated the conclusions about the manipulation of the characters' minds (Rey, 2016). The effectiveness of that content for educational purposes on the issues of Holocaust was explored (Gray, 2014). Distorted moral ideas and historical inaccuracies in the content were emphasized (Gray, 2014). Critics and researchers were unison in their opinions that the motion picture would produce great effect on the perception of historical events and consciousness. S. Rauch, quite reasonably, pointed out that it was not textual analysis only necessary in the study of the movie, but also the study of the real audience. The author argued that the film was relevant to the individual perception of the movie (Rauch, 2018).

C.S. Arunprabu, K. Kaviarasu, S. Poornima, K.P. Sharma described the content of the existential crisis experienced by the characters, their despondency, and the suffering of the characters who were close to them (Arunprabu et al., 2020). A substantive analysis of advances in psychological research of the motion picture since early in the twentieth century was presented by Ed.S. Tan. The author presented an account of the emotional experience of film viewers (Tan, 2018).

In academic publications containing an analysis of the effect of motion pictures on perception, more attention was paid to the emotional component. For example, an analysis of the emotional content of movies was provided by Y. Baveye, C. Chamaret, E. Dellandrea, L. Chen (Baveye et al., 2018). In their scrutiny of video content, the authors emphasized its effectiveness and proposed the use of computational models that would assess emotions in conjunction with psychological theories. The emotions evoked by the video set were closely related to the content of the narrative and the sequence of events in the movies (Markovic, 2012). Novelty, suddenness, unpredictability, pleasantness were recognized as important in the emotional evaluation of content (Scherer, 2009). The experience of emotion evoked by the narrative of the plot was stipulated by aesthetic experience, taste, and interest (Leder et al., 2004). Baveye, C. Chamaret, E. Dellandrea, L. Chen noted the importance of examining the influence of personality and culture on perceived quality and effect of video content (Baveye et al., 2018). Interesting was the research by S.R. Balabantaray. The author made an attempt to substantiate the effect of motion pictures on changes in the way of thinking and lifestyles (Balabantaray, 2020).

Various methods were used to study the effect of motion pictures on the consciousness and behavior of an individual: polling (Cocer et al., 2015, Zafar, Chaudhary, 2018), interview (Cernikova et al., 2017), experiment (Dillon, Bushman, 2017), content analysis (Habib, Soliman, 2015; Luisi, 2018; Turkmen, 2016), as well as analysis of the substantive and formal features of a media text (Kyshtymova, 2017).

Content analysis of techniques targeted at the study of morality was presented by A.E. Vorobyova (Vorobyova, 2012). The author argued for the diagnosis of the cognitive component of morality using questionnaires, moral dilemmas, expert evaluations, simulations of a situation and proposed to use ratings of psychological indicators of the effectiveness of newspaper headlines and advertising to assess moral self-determination. In the view of A.E. Vorobieva, the methodology afforded to study moral self-determination in relation to the phenomena of the world around, relation of self as a subject of morality, relation to others (Vorobyova, 2012).

This study attempted to substantiate the diagnostic possibilities of a film narrative in the study of morality. We implemented the analysis of the content and formal features of the film narrative using the method of semantic differential. The role of semantics in content analysis was discussed by A. Dridi and D. Reforgiato Recupero. The authors argued that verbal semantics for tone analysis was superior to non-semantic approaches (Dridi, Reforgiato Recupero, 2019). We believe that the capabilities of that method for the purposes have not been fully explored.

J.A. Bonus, N.L. Matthews, T. Wulf, using response surface analysis in their research, showed that participants' relationships with the main villain of the movie strengthened when he was perceived as more moral than expected, while their relationships with the main character of the film weakened when he was perceived as more or less moral than expected (Bonus et al., 2019). Those results emphasized the need for a deeper study of the processes and mechanisms of the impact of the film narrative on the consciousness, behavior and attitudes of an individual.

In recent years, there have been studies targeted at identifying the therapeutic and corrective-developmental effects of motion pictures (Eğeci, Gençöz, 2017; Kyshtymova, 2019). Thus, it was substantiated that the existential themes of a movie, presented by artistic means acceptable for the age of adolescence, would contribute to the development of the personality of cinematographic audience (Kyshtymova, 2019). A. Gibbs appealed for an objective study of the motion picture, involving appropriate interpretation of the meaning of the movie (Gibbs, 2017). V. Poznin believed that the metaphors of film narratives were targeted at the analysis of audiovisual creativity, contributed to the formation of aesthetic taste, the development of associative and imaginative thinking, as well as comprehensive perception of the multimedia text (Poznin, 2017). The publications suggested models of therapeutic change in cinematography: to use the strengths and virtues of the characters in a movie to discover their capabilities (Niemiec, 2020). Appropriate selection of motion pictures that match the goals of the therapeutic process appeared an important thing there.

The research by J. Steffens appeared worthwhile. The author examined the effect of music on moral judgments in the context of a motion picture perception. J. Steffens substantiated a judgment on how music may control perception. Research findings demonstrated that music produced significant impression on emotions, while affecting moral judgments in an indirect manner only. At the same time, the author noted the need to study the effect of music from a motion picture not on emotions alone, but also on the cognitive domain and thinking processes in general (Steffens, 2020).

In the paper, we investigated the perception of the movie characters by adolescents under different living and upbringing conditions. It was important to study not the evaluation of the characters in a situation of moral choice only, but also the attitude toward those. The content of the movie, its musical accompaniment would determine the emotional empathy of the characters and, in a certain manner, characterize their moral preferences.

The approach presented in the article complemented the existing models of media content analysis in research and afforded to consider film narrative as a resource for the development of moral values.

#### 4. Results

Based on the immanent analysis, three narrative lines (excerpts), at the basis whereof were the meetings and dialogues of the 2 boys (total duration of 8 minutes and 30 seconds), were selected to provide semantic assessment of the teenagers' perception of the characters in a situation of moral choice. Analysis showed that those excerpts carried over the moral conflict expressed in specific events and actions of the characters. The characters in the movie rendered specific beliefs and moral values. Throughout the movie, the confrontation of good and evil, the power of choice to make decision and take on the consequences thereof, were transmitted. The characters of the film appeared as kind and sincere boys, urging the audience to get real. Through their actions and deeds, they transmitted honesty and openness, the power of goodness and great friendship, while teaching morality and humanity. The meanings conveyed evoked a sense of sympathy, and understanding of the inevitability of choice. The film narrative was full of heartbreaking suffering, which aroused emotions and might contribute to the formation of moral values in the viewer.

The data obtained in the process of semantic evaluation of the characters' impersonations made it possible to compile a correlation matrix. To determine the reliability of calculations, we used the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sampling reasonableness test. The adequacy of the factorial model to the set of variables in use amounted to the result of 0.898. According to G. Kaiser, the KMO values of about 0.9 were rated as 'marvelous', 0.8 as 'praiseworthy'. Accordingly, the data obtained could be characterized as the result of high efficiency. After using the factorial rotation procedure, we obtained five factors (factor rotation converged in 10 iterations). The significance level of the Bartlett test of sphericity was .000, indicating that the factorial analysis was applicable. We identified five factors.

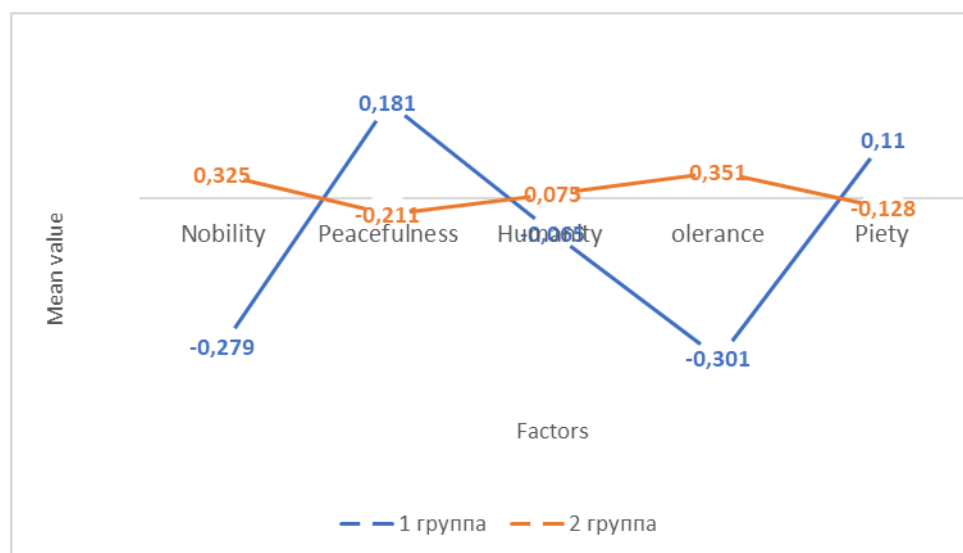
The first factor we designated as the 'nobility factor,' which included the scales of 'courageous (brave) – cowardly' (0.835), 'reliable – unreliable' (0.755), 'fair – unfair' (0.586) with high factor loadings. The second factor, the 'peacefulness factor,' was represented on the scales of 'friendly – hostile' (0.766), 'kind – evil' (0.689), 'humane – cruel' (0.672), 'polite – rude' (0.670), and 'friendly – envious' (0.612). The third 'humanity factor' was 'sympathetic – gloating' (0.701), 'generous – greedy' (0.624). The fourth factor, the 'tc factor,' was represented on the scales of 'cheerful –

moody' (0.715) and 'principled – unprincipled' (0.615). We designated the fifth factor as the 'piety factor,' which included the scales of: 'humble/submissive – proud' (0.738) and 'trustworthy – not trustworthy' (0.573). Thus, attitudes toward the motion picture characters, who were in a situation of moral choice, were determined by the assessments of 'nobility,' 'peacefulness,' 'humanity,' 'tolerance,' and 'piety'.

The highlighted factors reflected the structure of categorization peculiar to adolescents, through the prism whereof their perception of moral values would take place, by evaluating the impersonations of the characters in the motion picture. The study found that adolescents laid emphasis on the positive qualities of the characters, endowing the impersonations with the semantics of morality and humanity. The analysis of the results of the evaluation of the impersonations of the characters of the movie, differentiated on grounds of spiritual and moral values, showed that such moral values as nobility, peacefulness, humanity, tolerance and piety were preferable and determined with the highest rating of an impersonation. The representations of the characters would distinctly convey certain moral values by means of their conduct, actions, and beliefs. Teenagers, for the most part, would perceive those positively.

Comparative analysis of the semantic assessments of adolescents in the two groups using the Mann-Whitney test for independent samples showed statistically significant differences in the three factors: 'nobility' ( $U = 3949.0$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), 'peacefulness' ( $U = 2003.0$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), and 'tolerance' ( $U = 4175.0$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Mean values of the two groups of adolescents' semantic assessments (1 – raised in a family, 2 – left without parental care) according to the identified factors, were presented in the diagram (Figure 1).

The diagram showed that the greatest divergence in the semantic assessments of the impersonations of characters in a situation of moral choice was observed by the factors of nobility, peacefulness and tolerance. At the same time, adolescents in the second group named more positive qualities (courageous, reliable, fair, responsible, honest, noble, cheerful, tolerant, etc.) in the impersonations of the characters in the factors of nobility and tolerance, while adolescents in the first group named more positive qualities in the factor of peacefulness (friendly, benevolent). It should be noted that, for the teenagers in the first group, negative qualities in the evaluation of characters, dominated: cowardly, mean, hateful, etc.



**Fig. 1.** Distribution of mean values of semantic assessments of the impersonations of the characters of the film narrative by teenagers

At the same time, differences in the evaluation of the two characters, were found in the factors of 'nobility' ( $U = 5022.0$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and 'piety' ( $U = 4269.0$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Bruno was perceived as cowardly, unreliable, unjust, mean, deceitful, and untrustworthy by teenagers. At the same time, Shmuel was endowed with antipodal qualities. For every other factor, no significant differences were found in the assessments of characters in the two groups of adolescents.

It may be stated that adolescents in the second group were more receptive to the moral content than those in the first group. We noted the fact when teenagers differentiated between good and evil in the presented film narrative. It is possible to assume that such particularity depended on the life circumstances whereunder teenagers found themselves. It was noted in psychological and pedagogical literature that adolescents left without parents and raised in orphanages and care facilities would experience permanent anxiety related to their past, present, and future, and the formation of their values, as a rule, would take place outside the institution of their biological family (Umanskaya, 2013), their axiological preferences would differ from those of children raised under different conditions (Fominova, 2019). Adolescents without parental care would learn standard values and attitudes through social relationships and the values transmitted via media space. It might be assumed that it was the reason why they, unlike children raised in a family, would define the spiritual and moral content of the narrative so 'closely' and accurately, emphasizing the positive moral qualities of the characters.

The data obtained by evaluating the motion picture itself on 6 scales were subjected to factorial analysis (method of principal components). Two factors were singled out, the rotation whereof converged in 3 iterations. The Kaiser-Meier-Olkin (KMO) measure of sample adequacy was  $-0.760$ , which afforded to purport reliability of the calculations of the correlation matrix variables. The first factor included four scales: 'useful – harmful' (0.875), 'interesting – uninteresting' (0.826), 'good – bad' (0.75), 'teaches good – teaches bad' (0.689). The content of the second factor was determined by two scales: 'scary – not scary' (0.890), 'comprehensible – non-comprehensible' ( $-0.557$ ). Thus, one may say that teenagers characterized the content of the motion picture, in general, positively, determining the factor of its reliability, that is, they evaluated the movie as useful, interesting, good, teaching goodness. At the same time, they found the movie scary and incomprehensible. That was probably conditioned not by the genre of the content (drama) only, but also by an incomplete understanding of the history of the period in the chronicle of World War II in question.

For every designated category of analysis of letters to the characters of the motion picture, the prevalence of generally positive judgments and ratings of the impersonations of the characters carried over by the narrative, was revealed. Thus, in the category of 'sympathy for the character', the majority of adolescents, empathizing with Shmuel, noted: 'I understand the suffering you went through and still do', 'don't feel bad about being in that situation', 'be strong, be brave'; Bruno was advised to be 'more courageous and reliable'. In the category 'attitude toward the character, his actions', positive judgments were addressed to Shmuel. The teenagers called him 'the good man' and addressed him as 'my own one', 'dear'. 'keep going, dear', 'find the strength to hold on despite all the obstacles and problems', 'be positive under any circumstances'. Negative judgments were recorded in relation to Bruno: evaluating his action, they called Bruno 'very mean and cowardly' and urged him 'not to betray' and 'not to quarrel' with his 'only friend' anymore. However, Bruno was evaluated as a generally 'benevolent', 'generous' and 'kind' person. It should be noted that the letters were short in content, but were filled with morality and humanity in no small way.

The results presented may also testify to the importance of the film narrative in the transmission of moral values.

## 5. Conclusion

Immanent analysis revealed the values (honesty, openness, kindness, friendship, humanity, etc.) and meanings carried over by the characters in the motion picture, the situation of inevitable choice. The emotional background was supported by a minor, at times disturbing, musical accompaniment. All that afforded to conclude about the complexity of perception of the content. As rated by the teenagers themselves, the motion picture happened to be difficult, scary and incomprehensible to them.

A study of the semantic evaluation of the impersonations of characters in a situation of moral choice demonstrated that teenagers left without parental care would perceive the characters of the motion picture in positive categories of morality more often than those raised in families. The attitude towards the characters of a movie who were in a situation of moral choice, was determined by the categories of nobility, peacefulness, humanity, tolerance, and piety.

The identified differences could be explained by their experience of living in a situation of moral choice, the attitude toward children in situations of living hardships, the individual

psychological differences of adolescents. Differences in attitudes could also be seen as a reason for differences in the effectiveness of the influence of the movie.

In general, the study confirmed the idea of the potential of motion pictures, their effect on the formation of moral values of adolescents and afforded to acknowledge the remarkable importance of the movie for the younger generation, fairly indicating that movie as one of the film narratives to encourage teenagers towards reflection and self-discovery and contributing to the formation of moral values in teenagers. The study added to the data on the effect of film narrative on personal development and individual differences in the evaluation of media products. The obtained findings set the task of identifying the mechanisms of positive influence of movies on different groups of adolescents.

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