

**Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities**

PhD Theses

Lénárd-Bella Dorina

Character Subjectivity in Hollywood Films and the Effects of Subjective Film Segments on the Spectator

Doctoral School of Philosophy

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Lénárd-Bella Dorina: *Character Subjectivity in Hollywood Films and the Effects of Subjective Film Segments on the Spectator*

PhD Thesis

The Topic and Objectives of the Research

The aim of my doctoral research was to analyze the frequency of occurrence and the main characteristics of narrative and visual/auditory film devices expressing character subjectivity in – both financially and critically successful – Hollywood movies between 1930 and 2020. The relevance of this topic is confirmed by the fact that – although it is one of the most frequently discussed issues of spectator-oriented theories – no consensus has been reached regarding the amount of use of subjective narration in films, nor about its role in film reception. Well-known film theorists (e.g. Rudolf Arnheim, David Bordwell, Murray Smith, Barry Salt) have expressed opposing opinions about how widespread the character subjectivity devices are in filmmaking and how often they are used. Most of the theoretical literature assumes increase, but there is neither consensus if this growth applies only to specific groups of films or should be considered more general, nor if this increase can be observed only in a narrow range of subjectivity devices or it is a more general tendency. Based on my own observation, I assumed a general increase in mainstream Hollywood film both in terms of the range of movies affected by the tendency and the frequency of application of character subjectivity devices. In my research I verified this assumption with a content analysis on a sample of 221 movies. I systematically selected the movies from Hollywood films between 1930 and 2020 based on Academy Award for Best Picture nominations, IMDb ratings, AFI's lists of best movies and AFI Awards. The statistical analysis clearly confirmed my hypothesis that after the 1980s the proportion and length of subjective film segments increased significantly in these movies. In order to identify the factors behind this tendency, I studied the changes of film history, related arts, science and technology that may have had an impact on the subjectivity of mainstream Hollywood movies and then specified the characteristics of the effect of each factor by deeper statistical analysis. Finally – in addition to the broader historical and cultural context – I studied the phenomenon from another aspect and conducted an experiment examining the effect of character subjectivity on the spectator. Regarding the possible effects of the representation of character subjectivity on the spectator the theorists have even more divided opinions, so I examined a wide range of effects on the viewers. The findings of the empirical results also aided the explanation of the growing tendency in the representation of character subjectivity.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into three units. The first unit contains the theoretical background, the method and the most important results of the content analysis. The first subchapter is dedicated to the broad overview of the film theoretical discourse of character subjectivity. On one hand this confirms the relevance of this topic – as this review reveals that character subjectivity has continuously attracted the interest of theorists from different film theoretical approaches ever since the birth of film – and on the other hand it serves as a basis for defining character subjectivity and for specifying the categories of the content analysis. The purpose of the historical review is to describe previous film history of Hollywood from the aspect of character subjectivity representation tendencies, which serves as a basis for comparison regards the studied period. The second subchapter presents the main research questions. The third subchapter provides a detailed explanation of the method of the content analysis. In this section the sampling method, the method of dividing films into units, the thematic and formal categories and the coding process are described. The fourth subchapter contains the description of the statistical procedures for testing the research hypotheses and the summary of the main results.

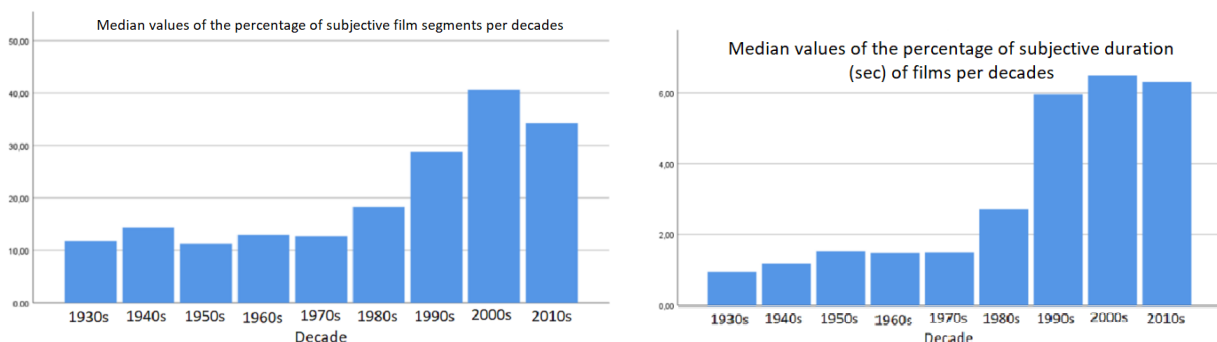
In the second unit of the thesis, I attempt to understand the antecedents, influencing factors and broader cultural and historical context of the upward trend of character subjectivity in film which was confirmed by the content analysis. The first subchapter is dedicated to the analysis of a narrower – only in some genres and in some thematic categories detectable – increase of character subjectivity in the 1940s which was revealed by the statistical analysis. In the next subchapter I identify the possible factors – some of which already served as the basis of the first wave of growing tendency – which may have had an impact on Hollywood movies in the last thirty years. Here I include the influence of modern film, related arts – primarily literature – and the attitude-shaping effect of the contemporarily dominant theoretical approaches of psychology, as well as the appearance of technical innovations in filmmaking. The deeper analysis revealed interesting trends also related to the representation of character subjectivity in Hollywood films (e.g. an extension of formal devices between 1960-1990, the genre revision of war film between 1960-1990, the “subjectification” of representation between 1930-2020), which well supported the main results of the research and helped the deeper understanding of the phenomenon. All these trends are presented in the second half of the second unit.

In the third unit of the thesis – after analyzing the phenomenon from a broader point of view – I approach character subjectivity from another perspective and study its effects – partly based on the results of my own empirical research – on the spectator. In the first subchapter I

review the functions different film theoretical approaches attribute to the devices of character subjectivity in regulating the viewer-character relationship, and the other potential effects assumed on the spectator. Here it is explained how the concept of identification has been replaced in the recent decades by cognitive approaches of viewer-character relationship, primarily by the Theory of Mind (ToM) based film theories. In the following section a broad overview of empirical research results about the effect of character subjectivity on the viewer is provided. The second subchapter contains the research questions and hypotheses I formulated based on this theoretical background. In the third subchapter the research method of the experiment is presented, covering the description of the materials, measurements and the procedure. At the end of the third section the statistical methods of hypothesis testing and the interpretation of the obtained results are reported. In the discussion, I attempt to interpret the conclusions from the analysis of the phenomenon's broader context and the results of the empirical research in interaction. The paper is closed by listing the limitations of the research and the description of the potential further research directions.

Main Findings and Conclusions of the Thesis

The most important result of the research is that between 1990 and 2020 Hollywood films were characterized by a significantly higher level of character subjectivity than the previous years. This upward trend can be detected in both the proportion and the duration of subjective segments of films.



It can also be stated that this revealed tendency can be detected not only in some special groups of films narrowed down based on some criteria (e.g. genre, director, mind-game narration), but in the entire sample in general. The analysis showed an upward trend in all genres in the last thirty years, but several different patterns emerged regarding the subjectivity level of the previous years. The most significant deviation from the main trend appeared in case of the war film, which can be explained by the genre revision presented in a subchapter of the thesis.

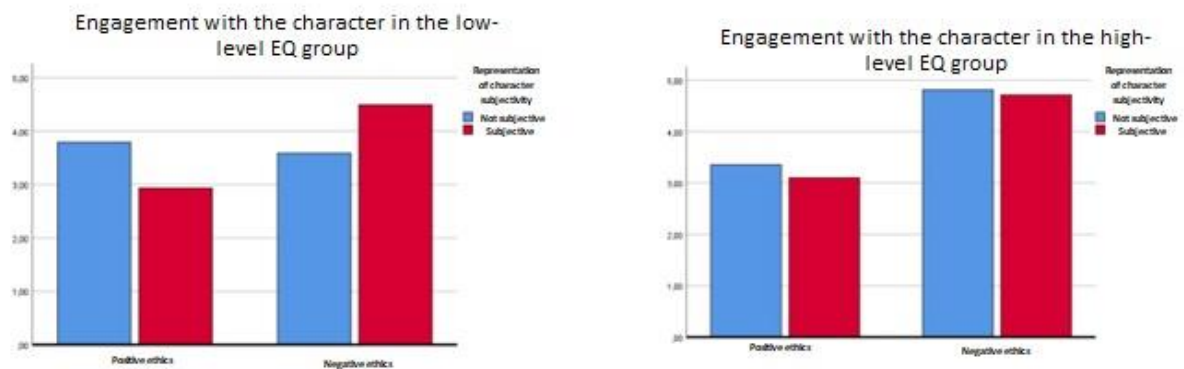
It was confirmed by the statistical analysis that the revealed tendency cannot be attributed to a particular thematic or formal subjectivity device, although differences can be observed between decades regarding their application.

Contracting my hypothesis, a growing tendency was also detectable in the films of the 1940s, which however stopped in the 1950s and then no numerical increase was observable in the sample until the 1980s. David Bordwell argues that this decade was an extremely creative period in Hollywood filmmaking, during which filmmakers introduced unusual narrative techniques that facilitated deeper and more complex narratives than usual. It explains the first detected growth wave in the representation of character subjectivity.

Analyzing the possible factors influencing the upward trend of character subjectivity also revealed important results. For this I created new statistical variables of the possible factors and estimated the effect of them on the growth of character subjectivity using generalized linear models. Among the studied factors the cognitive psychological theme, the special narrative techniques of the adapted literary work and the mind-game film narration had significant effects on character subjectivity in the entire sample, and the connection with the use of 3D and CGI techniques has also been confirmed. It is important to emphasize that none of the factors was able to explain the rising trend alone, instead the tendency can be most convincingly explained by the interaction of the single factors.

In my opinion the main novelty value of this research comes from the most important result of the experiment, which undoubtedly contradicted my preliminary hypothesis. Based on the literature of film theory I formulated a hypothesis that the effect exerted by character subjectivity can be more significant if the viewer has a high level of emotional intelligence. However, the result suggests the exact opposite. Based on this, character subjectivity does not generally help the viewer's affective and cognitive engagement with the character, but primarily for those with lower emotional intelligence (or weaker theory of mind abilities). This means that the narrative and visual/auditory devices of character subjectivity serve as a kind of "prompt" for the spectators having a problem – due to their weaker social skills – with attributing mental processes and emotions for the characters simply based on their behavior

(e.g., based on the actor's facial expressions, gestures, words).



A similar suggestion can be found in Carroll's analysis of point-of-view device, where he argues that POV has become so widespread in Hollywood, because Hollywood films – as part of mass culture – must be understandable for everyone. In one of Murray Smith's studies also a similar idea can be found, as he refers to POV as a "prompt" which helps the spectator understand the character's emotions and cognitive processes. However, based on the results of the experiment, it can be assumed that not only the point-of-view device, but also other character subjectivity devices are able to fulfill this function. In my opinion this result complements the interpretation of the revealed tendency in a wider context based on factors of film history, related arts, science and technology.

It can be assumed that the trend really unfolded based on these factors, but its widespread use in Hollywood films was made possible by its effect on the audience. Indeed, if devices of character subjectivity serve as a kind of help for spectators with lower emotional intelligence level to understand – and even experience – the mental processes of the characters, that can be easily reconciled with the evolutionary theory of Hollywood film, according to which – in this profit-oriented film production – devices that maximize the number of viewers can survive. If direct insight into the characters' subjective experiences helps spectators with lower emotional intelligence level or weaker theory of mind skills to engage with the characters – which is considered one of the most important factors in film reception – it obviously meets the interest of film studios. It can also be assumed that these devices have spread in Hollywood only in the recent decades, because – as a result of the gradual transformation of character subjectivity representation presented in one subsection of the thesis based on deeper analysis of data and films – they became suitable to fulfill this function by the 1980s.

Publications on the Topic of the Thesis

A hollywoodi háborús film műfaji átalakulása a 20. század második felében. *Valóság: Társadalomtudományi Közlöny*, 2022/2

Szubjektivitás a kortárs filmben. In: Ruszkai, Szilvia Éva; Szabados, Bettina; Furtado, Renato; Szabó, Ferenc (szerk.) *Ütközéspontok V.: A Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége Filozófiatudományi Osztálya konferenciájának kötete*, Szeged: JATEPress (2019) pp. 96-106.