

“Cartoonia hospital”. Skin disorders and films for children.

Cutrone M.

Ambulatorio per le Patologie Cutanee del Bambino
Unità Operativa di Pediatria, Ospedale Umberto I, Mestre-Venezia (Italy)

Summary

The Author discusses the utilization of skin disorders in the cinema literature to connote a character as good or bad. Particularly, the use of nevi, alopecia and piebaldism is discussed. Nevi and piebaldism are usual marker of the bad character. On the other hand, alopecia, mainly in childhood films, is used to connote a good character.

Key words

Cinema, skin disorders, nevus, alopecia, piebaldism.

In the imaginary world of children “the good and bad” is built with increasing frequency on images seen in TV, cassettes and DVD, in spite of the numerous and laudable activities of international pediatrics aimed at stimulating systematic reading for children -for instance the Italian activity “Born to read”- and the development of their autonomous fantasy. This fact is characterized by pros and cons. It favors the globalization of playing and thus the integration of foreign children educated on the same ludic base. On the other hand, this educational program impoverishes the autonomous creation of images and generally speaking the fantasy of children. Moreover, it is aimed to the subsequent merchandising.

With regard to this problem pediatric dermatologists are mainly interested in realizing how the skin disorder is presented and used in the childhood cinema.

The relationship between cinema and dermatology is emphasized in the web site “Skinema” (<http://www.skinema.com>). The latter is a long-standing web site managed by the dermatologist Val Reise. It continuously and effectively moni-

tors the general relationship between cinema and dermatology (1).

The actual report is aimed at investigating the films mainly directed to children and discussing how the presentation of the skin disorder of a character may affect normal children and children suffering from the same disorder.

Nevus. In the childhood cinema the presence of a well visible nevus on the face of a character is often associated to the role of villain, particularly in the role of adult females.

A melanocytic nevus of the face can be seen in Ursula, the sea witch stealing the voice to Ariel in *The little Mermaid* of Disney (Fig. 1), the bad witch of “*Snow-white and seven dwarfs*”, after her transformation from vain queen into witch (Fig. 2), the terrible teacher Miss Trunchbull of the picture *Mathilda* (Fig. 3) and the very severe head clerk Roz of “*Monsters*” Pixar-Disney (Fig. 4).

The nevus of the face connotes the character as “absolutely bad” in an unequivocal manner from the onset of the movie.

Piebaldism. The presence of a white tuft of hair is largely used in the childhood movies to



Fig. 1: Ursula in The little Mermaid.



Fig. 2: The witch (Snow white and seven dwarfs).



Fig. 3: The teacher in Mathilda.



Fig. 4: Roz in Monsters, Pixar-Disney.

express double-dealing and unreliability. A white tuft of hair is seen in Cruella De Vil, the bad character of 101 Dalmatians (Fig. 5), in the stepmother of Cinderella Disney (Fig. 6) and in the bad Gremlin of the movie Gremlins of Joe Dante. In all these characters an initial, apparent goodness of heart turns into wickedness during the course of the movie.



Fig. 5: Cruella De Vil (101 Dalmatians).



Fig. 6: The stepmother (Cinderella).

Alopecia. Baldness is a skin disorder classically used in the movies to connote immediately the bad character of the story. There is almost a direct relationship between the entity of the baldness and the wickedness of the character. Edgar, the bad but messy house-steward of Aristocats (Fig. 7) and Mr. Burns of Simpson have a classical androgenetic baldness, whereas Voldemort of the picture Harry Potter (Fig. 9), which is incarnation of the absolute wickedness,

is affected by total alopecia areata. The latter disorder also characterizes the Judge of the movie “Who framed Roger Rabbit” and Lex Luthor (Fig. 10), number one enemy of Superman.



Fig. 7: Edgar (The Aristocats).



Fig. 8: Mr. Burns (The Simpsons).



Fig. 9: Lord Voldemort (Harry Potter).



Fig. 10: Lex Luthor (Superman).

Syndromes. Various dermatological syndromes were used to negatively connote the character of a movie.

The emperor (Fig. 11), who is expression of the obscure side of the strength in the movie Star Wars, presents clinical features compatible with neurofibromatosis type I. The two faces gangster in the movie Batman is probably affected by Sturge-Weber syndrome. The conic teeth of Ades in Hercules of Disney could be expression of ectodermal dysplasia and the ambiguous character Dobby in Harry Potter is probably affected by progeria (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11: The Emperor of Star Wars.



Fig. 12: Dobby in Harry Potter.

The above mentioned examples could support the view of an exclusively negative use of the skin disorders in the childhood movies. This could lead to negative repercussion on the self-esteem of children affected by the same disorder.

In fact, the problem is more complex because there are a lot of positive characters affected by skin disorders.

The very good dwarf Dopey of Snow-white and seven dwarfs is clearly affected by total alopecia areata with persistent eyelashes and eyebrows. Charlie Brown (Fig. 13) of Peanuts is affected by the same disorder. Among the adult characters the good characters Fester Addams of



Fig. 13: Charlie Brown.



Fig. 14: Shrek.

the movie Addams family and the more recent Shrek (Fig. 14) are affected by the same problem.

An evident scar of the face, usually used as a negative trait, as in the character Scar of The Lion King, is, on the other hand, a distinguishing trait of Harry Potter to remind all the people his magic power. Moreover, multiple scars, as those ones visible in subjects who underwent a car accident, are the outstanding trait of Sally (Fig. 15), the good madly in love with Jack Skeletron in the Nighthmare before Christmas of Tim Burton.



Fig. 15: Sally.



Fig. 16: Peter Pan.

Peter Pan himself (Fig. 16) presents some unique clinical features, although non exclusively dermatological, reminding to a syndrome, particularly to Williams syndrome (turned-up nose, extreme sociability, attention of short duration, enthusiasm and sparkling eyes).

Discussion

The skin disorders as well as the somatic traits and, sometimes, the color of clothing has been always used in the cinema and yet before in the theatre to immediately connote a character -first impression-.

According to the actual Western culture, the evening reading of stories to children and most part of their spontaneous fantasy playing has been substituted by the screening of movies for children in VHS or DVD. Looking at skin disorders “functionally” used in such movies, very young members of the audience, who are not yet able to distinguish between reality and fiction, could be induced to associate even in the real world the presence of a skin disorder to a comprehensive negative judgment on the person. Particularly, we underline the association between melanocytic nevi, baldness and piebaldism from one side and this negative impression from the other side.

Luckily, almost to compensate for this negative impression, the major cinema industries put with years together with “dermatological” bad adult characters some childhood characters such as Dopey, Charlie Brown, Harry Potter, Peter Pan, affected by dermatological problems but good.

Until now there are not studies facing in a scientific way the positive or negative impact caused by the vision of these movies on children affected by the above mentioned disorders.

It would be interesting to evaluate in these children the possible changes in the perception of their disease and therefore in the quality of life.

It would be also interesting to compare such possible changes with the changes induced by the vision of movies containing smoking, alcohol and violence scenes.

In conclusion, dermatologists and pediatricians, to choose the more appropriate therapeutic approach, should know and take into account the emotional impact caused in the child by the awareness of being affected by a dermatological problem.. The multiplying or, on the contrary, reassuring effect possibly induced by the cinema or, generally speaking, media presentation of their cutaneous disorder has not yet considered among the factors able to condition the experience of children with a skin disorder. Further studies are necessary to evaluate and better understand these possible effects and therefore to give right indications to parents and workers in childhood communities.

Address to:
Dott. Mario Cutrone
Ambulatorio Patologie Cutanee del Bambino
Unità Operativa di Pediatria
Ospedale Umberto I
Mestre-Venezia

Reference

- 1) Reese V. - Dermatology in the cinema. J. Am. Acad. Dermatol. 33, 1030-5, 1995.