

# The Therapeutic Possibilities of Cinema for Adolescents

Andrei TACHE-CODREANU<sup>1</sup>, Diana-Lidia TACHE-CODREANU<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *Life stressors at school or at home increase the risk of anxiety and depression among adolescents. Through cinematherapy or filmmaking therapy a healing process could be created. The field of filmmaking therapy could be especially suitable for adolescents dealing with behavioural disorders, thanks to their familiarity with the means of digital media. The present study aims towards understanding filmmaking therapy through studying the psychoanalytical and artistic processes that are involved, and understanding how they could be applied to offer adolescents, which represent a vulnerable category of individuals due to their developmental challenges, a better insight over their transition from children to adults.*

**Keywords:** *cinematherapy; filmmaking therapy; adolescents; creative therapy; art therapy;*

## Introduction

Besides being seen as an art and entertainment product, cinema is starting to be understood also as a therapeutical method, offering multiple healing possibilities for individuals suffering from a variety of psychological disorders. Screening films in which the patient watches characters with similar problems on which further discussions with the therapist are based has been known as cinematherapy. Moreover, using filmmaking as a therapeutic method has also started to be used more recently, but the field is still lacking a precise theory due to its novelty. Adolescents represent a demographic population which is exposed to the possibility of developing behavioural disorders at a higher rate than other individuals, and cinema might represent a friendly environment which could be used as a therapeutical method in order to help them improve their well-being.

### 1. Adolescents as Vulnerable Individuals

Adolescence is considered a difficult developmental period in the life of an individual, during which the foundations for the subsequent mental health as an adult are created. Approximately 20% of the global population is known to suffer from psychiatric disorders like anxiety or depression. Moreover, the preponderance of such disorders is higher in the population that is between 16 and 24 years old than in other age groups<sup>3</sup>. In a certain study following the mental health of adolescents in five different cities, it was discovered that 44.6 % and 67% of the female adolescents in Johannesburg, South Africa suffered from depression respectively posttraumatic

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Film, National University of Theatre and Film „I.L. Caragiale” Bucharest, email: [andrei.tachecodreanu@unatc.ro](mailto:andrei.tachecodreanu@unatc.ro).

<sup>2</sup> Colentina Clinical Hospital, [dianatache@spitalulcolentina.ro](mailto:dianatache@spitalulcolentina.ro).

<sup>3</sup> Lök et al. 2017, January. „Factors Affecting Adolescent Mental Health”. *Journal of Depression and Anxiety*, 6:4. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320802074\\_Factors\\_Affecting\\_Adolescent\\_Mental\\_Health](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320802074_Factors_Affecting_Adolescent_Mental_Health).

stress symptoms<sup>4</sup>. On a global scale, mental health conditions affect between 10% and 20% of adolescents<sup>5</sup>.

Life stressors encountered both at school or at home can contribute or directly cause mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety among adolescents<sup>6</sup>. One of the most important stressors from school is bullying, which is known as an aggressive behaviour that has as a purpose causing harm through a repetitive abuse aimed to the victim<sup>7</sup>. A study made on 4449 school students in Romania found out that 49% of them were victims of bullying<sup>8</sup>, which is associated by scholars with severe mental health problems<sup>9</sup>.

Media is one of the most important elements in the lives of the adolescents, being used by them in order to relate to peers, cope with certain problems or form their own identity<sup>10</sup>. Although certain media exposure can become harmful for them, research literature revealing risks of depression or social anxiety caused by the use of social media, the therapeutic applications of cinema could counteract these effects through using media in a meaningful way.

This would include taking as an advantage the familiarity of consuming and creating media content among adolescents nowadays, and guiding them towards using their technical skills in order to increase their mental health. Because they rely on media creation and consumption, filmmaking therapy and cinematherapy, if used in a controlled therapeutical environment, might therefore have a positive impact on adolescents.

Cinematherapy is able to help teens understand themselves better, find about their strengths and vulnerabilities and how to improve themselves<sup>11</sup>. In a study conducted on 173 adolescents who had recurring conflict issues with their parents, it was revealed that by a treatment intervention through movies their problems were reduced<sup>12</sup>. The domain of cinematherapy is an already developed one, with multiple applications, and specialized websites exist where individuals, including adolescents, can find movies related to their specific problems and which encourage them to gain a new perspective over their situation. Some of these websites contain common issues for adolescents such as the transition to adulthood, search for identity or peer relationships, for which specific films can be recommended that address these problems<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Cheng Y, Li X, Lou C, et al. 2014, Nov. 19. „The association between social support and mental health among vulnerable adolescents in five cities: findings from the study of the well-being of adolescents in vulnerable environments”. *J Adolesc Health*. 55(6 Suppl):S31-S38. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25454000/>.

<sup>5</sup> Lök et al. 2017, January. „Factors Affecting Adolescent Mental Health”. *Journal of Depression and Anxiety*, 6:4. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320802074\\_Factors\\_Affecting\\_Adolescent\\_Mental\\_Health](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320802074_Factors_Affecting_Adolescent_Mental_Health).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Östberg, V.; Låftman, S.B.; Modin, B.; Lindfors, P. 2018. „Bullying as a Stressor in Mid-Adolescent Girls and Boys—Associations with Perceived Stress, Recurrent Pain, and Salivary Cortisol”. *Int. Journal Environ. Res. Public Health* 2018, 15, 364. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/15/2/364>.

<sup>8</sup> *Date alarmante privind bullying-ul în școlile din România*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-educatie-25857816-date-alarmante-privind-bullying-scolile-din-romania.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Arseneault L, Bowes L, Shakoor S. „Bullying victimization in youths and mental health problems: ‘Much ado about nothing’?” *Psychological Medicine*. 2010; 40(5): 717-729. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/psychological-medicine/article/abs/bullying-victimization-in-youths-and-mental-health-problems-much-ado-about-nothing/398C43084EE75D885F19C397C4C11BA8>.

<sup>10</sup> Wu, A.Z. 2008. *Applying Cinema Therapy with Adolescents and a Cinema Therapy Workshop*. p. 8. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.cinematherapy.com/pressclippings/Angela's-thesis1.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Zur, O. „Positive Cinema Therapy with Children & Adolescents”. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from [https://drzur.com/clinical\\_updates/positive-cinema-therapy-with-children/](https://drzur.com/clinical_updates/positive-cinema-therapy-with-children/).

<sup>12</sup> Tannous-Haddad, Lubna & Shechtman, Zipora. 2019. „Movies as a Therapeutic Technique in School-Based Counseling Groups to Reduce Parent-Adolescent Conflict”. *Journal of Counseling & Development*. 97. 306-316. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333757949\\_Movies\\_as\\_a\\_Therapeutic\\_Technique\\_in\\_School-Based\\_Counseling\\_Groups\\_to\\_Reduce\\_Parent-Adolescent\\_Conflict](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333757949_Movies_as_a_Therapeutic_Technique_in_School-Based_Counseling_Groups_to_Reduce_Parent-Adolescent_Conflict).

<sup>13</sup> *The Cinematherapy.com Film Index*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://cinematherapy.com/filmindex.html>.

Filmmaking therapy, on the other side, is still a field which lacks a precise theory and definition<sup>14</sup>, but in the same time it may offer a more complex healing possibility because of its merge of multiple creative therapies, process which is proved to help the art therapy process become more effective<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, the use of this therapeutic method with adolescents is not sufficiently developed, recent studies proving that educational filmmaking projects indeed show a decrease in behavioural and emotional problems among adolescents<sup>16</sup>. The present study therefore aims towards a better understanding of the therapeutic possibilities of filmmaking and understanding why the process might be especially suitable for adolescents.

## 2. Filmmaking Therapy

When working on a film various types of arts are employed, from screenwriting and photography to acting. Moreover, these types of arts are used separately as creative therapies in certain therapeutical environments. Writing a film script has been employed as writing therapy<sup>17</sup>, capturing certain pictures that rely on the individual's emotional perspective regarding a certain subject has been known as therapeutic photography<sup>18</sup>, listening or creating music in therapeutic environments has been known as music therapy<sup>19</sup>, and the use of theatre in order to achieve a psychological well-being is known in literature as Drama Therapy<sup>20</sup>.

Filmmaking, which merges all the types of arts described above, can therefore become an efficient therapeutical process, as combining various types of creative therapies is known to result in a more effective process<sup>21</sup>. The types of creative therapies that represent the base of filmmaking and the whole process itself might be understood on a deeper level through studying the theory of the film *auteur*.

### 2.1 Theory of the Film Auteur

Alexandre Astruc was discussing in 1948 in his essay *Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: la Caméra-stylo* about the filmmaker who writes with his own camera in the same way a writer writes with his fountain pen. There was no difference, in his opinion, between the status of a director and a screenwriter, the two becoming a single person. Therefore, directing becomes in

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<sup>14</sup> Tuval-Mashiach, R. Patton B.W. Drebing C. 2018. „When You Make a Movie, and You See Your Story There, You Can Hold It”: Qualitative Exploration of Collaborative Filmmaking as a Therapeutic Tool for Veterans”. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 9. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01954/full>.

<sup>15</sup> Tuval-Mashiach, R. Patton B. W. Drebing C. 2018. „When You Make a Movie, and You See Your Story There, You Can Hold It”: Qualitative Exploration of Collaborative Filmmaking as a Therapeutic Tool for Veterans”. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 9. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01954/full>.

<sup>16</sup> Gagliano, A. Costanza, C. Bazzoni, M. Falcioni, L. Rizzi, M. Scaffidi Abbate, C. Vetri, L. Roccella, M. Guglielmi, M. Livio, F. et al. 2023. „Effectiveness of an Educational Filmmaking Project in Promoting the Psychological Well-Being of Adolescents with Emotive/Behavioural Problems”. *Healthcare*. 11. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9032/11/12/1695>.

<sup>17</sup> Coleman, A. 2022. *Group Scriptwriting for Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Community Engagement Project* (2022). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 570. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from [https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive\\_theses/570/](https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/570/).

<sup>18</sup> *Therapeutic Photography*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://phototherapy-centre.com/therapeutic-photography/>.

<sup>19</sup> Wong, C. 2023. „What to Know About Music Therapy”. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/benefits-of-music-therapy-89829>

<sup>20</sup> Rudlin, K. 2023. „What to Know About Drama Therapy”. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-drama-therapy-2610360>.

<sup>21</sup> Hu, J. Zhang J. Hu, L. Yu, H. Xu, J. 2021. „Art Therapy: A Complementary Treatment for Mental Disorders”. *Frontier in Psychology*. 12. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.686005/full>.

his vision a writing process itself. How could someone make a distinction between the person who writes a work and the person who conceives it? Could someone imagine a novel by Faulkner written by somebody else than Faulkner himself? Could one imagine Citizen Kane to be satisfactory in other form than the one offered by Orson Welles?<sup>22</sup>

André Bazin's essay *La Politique des Auteurs* from 1957 represents an essential point in further developing the *auteur* discussion and understanding the process of creating a film from a therapeutical point of view. In the context of the massive imports of American films in France after lifting the World War II restrictions, French critics started to consider offering the same status of *auteur* also to certain Hollywood directors who were not directly involved in writing their scripts<sup>23</sup>, further developing Astruc's theory.

Bazin's point draws a critical difference between an *auteur* and a *metteur-en-scène*. The *auteur* represents a subject for himself in his films, regardless of the screenplay having the same attitude about life and the same judgements about his characters and action. An *auteur* is therefore someone who refers only to himself while creating his films. The American filmmaker Nicholas Ray is therefore considered an *auteur*, while John Huston is a *metteur-en-scène*. Robert Bresson and Roberto Rossellini are *auteurs*, while Rene Clement remains a very important *metteur-en-scène*<sup>24</sup>.

John Huston, being considered a *metteur-en-scène* and not an *auteur*, confirmed Bazin's theory by declaring himself eclectic and considering his cinema opposed to the personal approaches of *auteurs* such as Bergman, Fellini or Buñuel<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, although a valuable director, Huston remains only a storyteller of situations and characters that do not rely on his personal inner tensions.

The theory of the film *auteur* is considered to follow the exact opposite, the filmmaker relying on his own personal feelings when creating, recent studies proving that the process is strongly related to the one of psychotherapy. Therefore, when discussing the individual therapeutic processes that are employed in filmmaking, it can be noticed that they are based on the same principles as Bazin's *auteur* theory, in which the filmmaker represents the subject of his own films. Writing therapy, therapeutic photography, music therapy and drama therapy all rely on the patient's own expression of inner feelings, the process being strongly connected to the one of an *auteur* film.

## 2.2 The Film Auteur's Healing Process

Unfulfilled wishes are the ones who make an individual pursue the need to follow his imaginary, using fantasy as a method to sweeten his or her own reality. According to Freud, only people who are unsatisfied with their lives have the need to fantasise<sup>26</sup>.

Jung develops in 1913 a technique called active imagination, in which a fusion between conscious and unconscious appears, that allows an individual to understand himself on a deeper

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<sup>22</sup> Astruc, A. 1948. „The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo”. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.newwavefilm.com/about/camera-stylo-astruc.shtml>.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Hayward. 2000. *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 20-21.

<sup>24</sup> Bazin, A. 1957. „La politique des auteurs”. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.newwavefilm.com/about/la-politique-des-auteurs-bazin.shtml>.

<sup>25</sup> John Huston. 1980. *An Open Book*. London: Columbus Books Limited, p. 361.

<sup>26</sup> Rountree, C. 2008. „Auteur Film Directors as Contemporary Shamans”. *Jung Journal*, 2(2), 123–134. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jung.2008.2.2.123#:~:text=Auteur%20film%20directors%2C%20like%20their,soul%2Dreievers%2C%20and%20metaphysicians>

level<sup>27</sup>. Through this technique, the unconscious is accessed by allowing unfiltered images to develop in the patient's mind when he is in a relaxation state<sup>28</sup>.

According to the author Cathleen Rountree, artistic self-understanding is closely related to the theories of Jung and Freud. Some film auteurs are going through this process because of an unconscious intention of healing themselves of certain traumas from their past, while others simply enjoy the process of exploring their own inner vision. Rountree continues her work by quoting Pablo Picasso, who stated that a painter conducts his work in order to unload certain feelings and visions<sup>29</sup>.

In order to understand the mechanism which lies behind the process of *auteur* cinema on a deeper level, the authors suggest studying it from the perspective of a therapeutic filmmaking project named "I was There" (IWT). During this program, veteran soldiers suffering from PTSD caused by combat were guided in a video-based intervention during which they were able to regain a sense of affiliation, process their trauma and also regain a sense of agency. The process facilitated expressing issues that the veterans considered important to them through creating a series of short films, for which they were separated into groups according to their common interests. As PTSD is known to be a multisensorial disorder and traumatic memories are visual and auditory, the medium of cinema proved to be especially efficient in order to create an audiovisual narrative about past events<sup>30</sup>.

The veterans that were part of this project actively took part in all creative stages of making their films, including writing, directing, acting and editing. In the end, they were able to screen their films in front of an audience that they were able to choose freely. Thanks to its particularities, filmmaking proved to be an efficient healing method that was especially attractive for young veterans, as the authors observed<sup>31</sup>.

### 3. Practical Application of Filmmaking Therapy for Adolescents

Although the benefits of a project of this kind are clear, the costs of implementing it can be considerably high. The shooting, editing and screening phases of producing a film involve the use of specialized equipment and technical knowledge that would make impossible to replicate this kind of program in a manner that would allow helping adolescents with mental health issues on a larger scale.

Therefore, by taking as an advantage the technical knowledge that adolescents have of producing social media content, these could be used in order to guide them through a similar therapeutic process of creating content such as short videos on mobile phones that reflect their own feelings. As in a country such as the United States it is considered that most of adolescents have access to a smartphone, and 60.64% of the group studied in the cited paper received their

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> *A Guide to Active Imagination* (n.d.). Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.lewisconnolly.com/post/2021/12/9/active-imagination>.

<sup>29</sup> Rountree, C., *op. cit.*. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jung.2008.2.2.123#:~:text=Auteur%20film%20directors%2C%20like%20their,soul%2Dretr ievers%2C%20and%20metaphysicians>.

<sup>30</sup> Tuval-Mashiach, R. Patton B.W. Drebing C. 2018. „When You Make a Movie, and You See Your Story There, You Can Hold It”: Qualitative Exploration of Collaborative Filmmaking as a Therapeutic Tool for Veterans”. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 9. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01954/full>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

first smartphone during middle adolescence<sup>32</sup>, the technical and cost-related disadvantages of a filmmaking therapy project might be reduced if applied to adolescents.

An art therapy workshop based on the principles of André Bazin's theory of the film *auteur* could be therefore made, in which adolescents would be guided in creating a series of mini-*auteur* films. Moreover, as during the process of art therapy one of the most important factors is self-expression and not creating a product of commercial value, the products created are private and frequently remain so<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, inspired by the process of art therapy, it is essential that the adolescents could choose whether they would like to share with the rest of the participants or with the public the videos they create. In the same time, a context in which the therapist could analyse the films would be essential, as through observation of the art product an insight into the adolescents' mental health can be obtained, and further directions for treatment could be offered<sup>34</sup>.

The process would follow the same steps as a normal filmmaking therapy project, in which adolescents would be guided in creating their own short films. The usual steps of filmmaking would be pursued, from preproduction, production and postproduction, followed by a voluntary screening of the films. Moreover, as the process would not demand the usage of professional filmmaking equipment, each adolescent could use a separate mobile phone, whether it is his personal one or one employed through the project, and therefore gain the possibility of being the *auteur* of his or her own short film. In this manner, the benefits of the IWT program could be enhanced. Although the veterans were divided in teams according to their common interests, filmmaking is a very personal experience for an *auteur*, which relies on his own inner feelings when creating. Therefore, in this kind of process, being in the main creative position on a subject that particularly interests an individual would be able to offer the participants an even more efficient opportunity of unloading their unwanted feelings and visions.

#### 4. Conclusions

Cinema is an environment with multiple possibilities of therapeutical applications. Although the healing possibilities of cinematherapy have been widely studied, filmmaking as a therapeutic tool has proved itself also to be efficient, but more research needs to be done in the field. In the context of the familiarity of creating content for media by adolescents, this method may represent an efficient way of engaging them in a therapeutical activity that develops within a familiar context. Moreover, since adolescents are a demographic category which is especially familiar with the technical aspects of media, the use of tools that are usually aimed towards creating social media content may be used in controlled environments for treating certain disorders such as anxiety, depression or PTSD.

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<sup>32</sup> Vaterlaus, J. M, Aylward, A, Tarabochia, D, Martin, J. D. 2021. „“A smartphone made my life easier”: An exploratory study on age of adolescent smartphone acquisition and well-being”. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 114. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0747563220303125>.

<sup>33</sup> Koppers, P. 2024. „Art therapy”. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/art-therapy>.

<sup>34</sup> Péntes I, van Hooren S, Dokter D, Hutschemaekers G. 2018. „How Art Therapists Observe Mental Health Using Formal Elements in Art Products: Structure and Variation as Indicators for Balance and Adaptability”. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 9:1611. Retrieved May 19, 2024, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6143814/>.

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