SOSYAL HİZMETLER VE ÇOCUK ESİRGEME SİSTEMİNE NORA FİNGSCHEİDT'İN "*SİSTEM KIRICI*" ADLI FİLMİNDEKİ ELEŞTİREL BAKIŞ

A CRITICAL VIEW TO CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN NORA FINGSCHEIDT'S FILM "*SYSTEM CRASHER*"

Aylin YARKA

*Öğr.Gör., Beykent Üniversitesi, ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5371-278X,
aylinyarka@beykent.edu.tr*

ÖZET

Günümüzde sinema, sanatsal anlamlarından ayrı olarak ayrıca sosyolojik sorunları yansıtan mesajlar da sunmaktadır. Filmlerdeki dramatik ve sürükleyici görsellerin ve anlatıların seyirci üzerinde önemli bir etkisi olduğu bilinen bir gerçektir; sonuç olarak toplumsal sorunların yanı sıra bireylerin zorlu yaşamlarını da yansıtan filmler izlemek toplumu daha iyi anlamamızda rol oynarlar. Bu şekilde hayatımızı eleştirmemize, kendimizi anlamamıza, sosyal bütünlük ve ilişkilerimizi sorgulamamıza yardımcı olurlar. Nora Fingscheidt'in *System Crasher* (2019) filmi de bu tür filmlerden biri olarak kabul edilebilir. Sistem Kırıcı adlı film, Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme/Koruma adı verilen sistemin içinde, sosyal hizmet görevlilerinin ısrarlı çabalarıyla bir yer bulmaya çalışan, kontrol edilemeyen şiddetli öfke patlamalarını önlemeye uğraştıkları, sürekli problem yaratan, travma geçirmiş, dokuz yaşında bir çocuk olan Benni'nin toplumdan dışlanmasını konu almaktadır. Benni, Alman sosyal hizmetlerinde bir ev veya bakım tesisi bulmak için her şeyi deneyen, ancak başarısız olan çocukları tanımlamak için kullanılan, "Systemsprenger" "sistem bozucu/yıkıcı" olan bir çocuktur. Bu nedenle, Fingscheidt'in filmi, Benni'nin koruyucu bakım evlerinden psikoterapiye, öfke yönetimi kurslarından sürekli tedavi tesislerine geçişinin tasvirine odaklanmaktadır: Filmde, sonsuz bir döngüye dönüşen olaylar dizisi içinde kısılan bir çocuğun toplumsal yalnızlığı yansıtılmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Nora Fingscheidt'in *System Crasher*'ının sosyolojik yansımaları ile Çocuk Esirgeme/Koruma Sistemine nasıl eleştirel bir bakış açısı sunduğunu aktarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, savunmasız çocukları korumak için daha iyi bir Çocuk Esirgeme Sisteminin gerekliliği konusunda kamuoyunu bilinçlendirmek adına sosyal temalı bu tür filmlerden daha fazla üretilmelidir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Sistem Kırıcı, Alman Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme Sistemi, Çocuk İstismarı, Travma Geçirmiş Çocuklar

ABSTRACT

Today, in addition to its artistic meanings, cinema also conveys messages reflecting some problems in society. It is a well-known fact that dramatic and engaging visuals and narratives in films have a considerable effect on the audience; as a result, seeing some great movies that show the difficult lives of individuals including some societal problems can play a significant role to comprehend the society better. They help us criticise our lives, understand ourselves, and inquire about social coherence and relations. Nora Fingscheidt's film *System Crasher* (2019) can be considered as one of the movies of that kind. It is about a traumatised nine-year-old child whose caregivers are determined to give the troublesome Benni some foundation and prevent her uncontrollable violent outbreaks in the Child Welfare system. She is a "systemsprenger" or "system crasher," a phrase used in German social services to identify children who fail to find a home or care facility to live. Therefore, Fingscheidt's film focuses on a repetitive portrayal of Benni's transition from one treatment facility to the next: from residential care to psychotherapy, foster care, and anger management courses. It is a sequence of events that happens to be an endless circle. In this study, it is aimed to convey how Nora Fingscheidt's *System Crasher* reveals a critical perspective to the Child Welfare System in terms of reflections of sociology. In this context, the film is analyzed as a critique of the inadequate Child Welfare and Social Services

system. As a result, more of these films with social themes should be produced in order to raise public awareness about the necessity for a better Child Welfare System to protect vulnerable children.

Keywords: System Crasher, German Child Welfare System, Child Abuse, Traumatised Children

1. Introduction

On the one hand, movies can tear us apart from reality; on the other, they can enable us to see the core truths beneath the surface. All by resorting to sociological imagination in these movies watching activities, people become more conscious of the lives of others living in their community, and they could develop a deep understanding. "Sociologically, through some films that reflect the problems in society, people can gain a sharper awareness of their individual lives and improve their understanding and perspective in the society" (Çayırcıoğlu, 2014). In her movie, Nora Fingscheidt scrutinises a severe sociological problem in German society that resonated in the community. The phrase "system crasher" is used to characterise out-of-control children whose behaviour is so anti-social that they cannot be looked after just by their parents at home. These kids are generally in need of special care by social services professional caregivers who try to take them under control, accommodating them in group homes with some other kids. Nora Fingscheidt's *System Crasher* (2019) is based on a story of a 9-year-old girl who is defiantly incongruous with society, including adults and other children although she is intensely forced to by caregivers. *System Crasher* is a criticism of the German Child Welfare System which does not care about the real needs of some out-of-control children since they ignore the transformative power of love by avoiding emotional relations, which could be a solution to gain them to the society. It also depicts the inefficacy of some professional caregivers who cannot deal with every problem child in the system. The character of Benni, performed by a child actress, is so well fictionalised and reflected that it leads the audience to re-evaluate the system founded for problematic children today. "The film is mostly coming from Benni's perspective. The aim of this is to humanize her, to make the audience understand that, even though she can be violent, this rage is coming from past trauma, and she is not only a victim of violence herself but of a broken institution" (Bowmer, 2020). In addition, she yearns for the people in her life to love her hopelessly. However, her aggressive transgressions are driven towards everything and everyone around her and are rooted in a traumatic childhood marked by psychological and physical abuse from the start. While watching the movie, regardless of how flawlessly a system works, it prompts the audience to scrutinise the answers to some questions such as: What are the expectations and needs of children? What makes a flawless system is filling all gaps or offering a solution in line with every child's needs? Why shouldn't everyone be a parent? This study aims to examine Nora Fingscheidt's *System Crasher* from a critical perspective on the Child Welfare System through sociologic reflections.

2. Child Welfare System / Child Protection Services

Child Welfare refers to a range of government programs and social services to protect children, such as investigating allegations of child abuse and neglect, facilitating adoption, and providing foster care in group homes. According to German Child Welfare System (Child Protection Services), if anti-social, out-of-control kids cannot be grown up in the circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care by their parents or are too aggressive to stay in foster care, they are placed in community homes for some time. "Children with maltreatment histories, such as physical and psychological neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, are at risk of developing psychiatric problems. Such children are at risk of developing a disorganised attachment. Disorganised attachment is associated with a number of developmental problems, including dissociative symptoms, as well as depressive, anxiety, and acting-out symptoms" (Lyons and Jacobvitz, 1999).

The title of the German film by Nora Fingscheidt, *System Sprenger*, reflects the informal term given to children who fall through the cracks of the German Child Welfare Services. *System Crasher* depicts the struggle of a quick-witted, chatty and out-of-control nine-year-old kid, the protagonist Benni, who seems like a ticking time bomb, full of aggression and anger, ready to explode at any time. Benni is given to social services by her mother because she uses violence against herself and especially outside because of her anger problems. Benni is inside a hospital bed in the opening scenes of *System Crasher* and hooked to devices with apparent injuries. Throughout the film, it becomes clear that she has been rejected from fifty-two different institutions yet is still unable to modify her behaviour by challenging

every rule and refusing to be confined into a societal structure, which falls outside of the system designed to protect such traumatised children.

Benni is too troublesome for either community homes or fosters care with psychotic episodes including trauma; she is crashing around the screen with infinite angry energy and is practically bounced from one location to another, which means visiting different social service institutions and group homes throughout the film in an unwanted position due to her attitudes; therefore, she is isolated from the society. Benni has no desire to be accepted by those homes anyway. Whereas some social caregivers provide services to those children by helping them develop a sense of control, they cannot do anything for Benni throughout the movie. Most of the scenes in the film indicate how it becomes impossible to engage or reason with her due to her erratic, passive-aggressive behaviour.

Besides the beginning of *System Crasher*, Fingscheidt uses the same cracked glass image in the final scene. While Benni is running outside of the airport, she jumps up, and the audience witnesses a crack in the glass of the window, then the screen freezes (Fingscheidt, 2019 (60:55) as the final scene of the film. The same cracked glass on the window is seen (Fingscheidt, 2019 (03:11) when the film starts, Benni, living one of the sudden outbursts of anger, attacks the other children in the garden, everybody stampedes into the building, leaving her alone to smooth down, yet she starts to throw some big toy cars toward the windows. As two of the teachers are looking at her through the window, one asks whether the big toy cars hitting the glass could break it or not. Even though the other confidently responds that there is no need to worry as the glass is unbreakable, it causes a crack in the window's glass. Fingscheidt might be implying the limits and breakable stability of the German Child Welfare System with the cracked glass as a symbol. Despite the educators' beliefs, their system is not as effective and helpful as they trust to heal all the children who desperately need their protection.

3. Parents' Affection / Medical Treatment

Beneath all the rage and aggressive streak, Benni is just a delicate, vulnerable kid, looking for unconditional love and support and seeking to reconnect with her mother, Bianca. Whereas her mother is stuck in an abusive relationship and too weak to run the risk of living with her daughter. She also fears that Benni's violence could encompass her personal life, including adverse effects on her other kids. Although in some blur scenes of the film Bianca often comes to Benni as a lovely affectionate mother, in reality, she never visits her in group homes. She even does not read the document consisting on the risks of performing a medical intervention on Benni's brain in detail. She immediately approves possible adverse effects and signs them. All her attitudes show that she sees her daughter as an expendable child since she never shows any effort to live with her daughter. She is portrayed as a weakling who is utterly hopeless regarding Benni by neglecting her desire of living together. On the contrary, Benni loves and longs for being with her so desperately that she often imagines some spectacles in her mind in which they are overjoyed, only two together. She is frequently dreaming, and in her imagination, her mother always visits her as a lovely, affectionate mother and hugs her with love but in those blur scenes, that all happens in her mind. "When coping with children saddled with severe traumas and potential neurological disorders, Nora Fingscheidt might be depicting the message that one-on-one attention with affection is more effective than medicine in offering a safe healing base" (Weissberg, 2019). *System Crasher* makes us consider sceptical of prescription-based solutions, particularly when Benni is not healed according to their norms.

The blur scenes as she dreams of being with her mother reflect Benni's actual need for affection instead of medical pills. In the scene when she talks to her mother on the phone, the first question Benni asks is, "When are you coming, Mama?" The sense of abandonment is apparent and seems to underpin all Benni's actions. As all her attitudes show how she longs to be reunited with her mother. Unfortunately, her mother seems unable to deal with Benni and she confesses her fear of Benni's living with her new family and siblings.

4. Foster Homes / Community Houses

Intrinsically, Bianca is an inefficient character as a mother since when Benni sneaks out of her group home and goes home to see her mother, she finds her siblings left unattended watching a horror film without anything to eat. That scene indicates not only Bianca's irresponsibility as a mother, but it also reflects Benni's kind and caring approach to her siblings since she changes the channel to protect them

from possible psychological harms of the movie they are watching. Besides that, she prepares sandwiches for the kids, acting like a mother despite not having an ideal one. Benni could be very affectionate in a few scenes, though potentially a brutal and violent girl. When Bianca's live-in boyfriend turns up, Benni's meeting with her mum and her siblings takes a horrific, violent turn. Until he locks Benni in a cupboard, they engage in a violent altercation; finally, the police come to take her back. Bianca's unresponsiveness to her boyfriend's harsh attack on Benni again reflects her inadequacy in personality. As a mother neglecting her daughter, it might be claimed that she has her pain as a potential victim of abuse, as much as Benni's. It is also likely that Benni's years of trauma and suffering abuse are interconnected with her mother suffering the same thing. "Despite not explicitly it is showed what has happened to Benni to live her trauma, Fingscheidt makes her audience guess with some hints that at the hands of her mother's boyfriends, or maybe her father, Benni has suffered some abuse, a childhood incident which continues to trigger a violent reaction in her" (Jutton, 2020). She is portrayed as simply terrifying much of the time, a sociopath in training, very unteachable, and terrible to the individuals trying to support her. She is a captive of boiling anger with her erratic urges. Although the exact source of her trauma, leaving her with unhealed wounds, has not been revealed, the audience witnesses in scene one of the several traumatic events where her face is covered, and diapers are stuffed into her mouth. Whenever someone except her mother touches her face, she is triggered to attack violently and loses her mind in a wave of imminent unpreventable anger. Her reaction to chronic fear arises from specific painful childhood memories reflected in exasperation.

5. Social Acceptance

System Crasher depicts events by its grown-up characters, often from the viewpoint of Benni. The purpose of this is to humanise her and let the audience realise that her belligerent, unpredictable and anti-social conduct stems from a childhood experience. As an abused child, she is not only a victim of violence but also a victim of a broken Children's Welfare System. Benni's marginalisation also criticizes the sociological tendency to classify people into various categories. Benni's marginalisation also criticizes the sociological tendency to classify people into various categories. All in all, Benni's traumas are not depicted in *System Crasher* clearly, in this respect, it is obvious that Nora Fingscheidt emphasizes, most importantly, the process of gaining those out-of-control children in the society again whatever the trauma/s sources result in dissociative behaviour.

Some social caregiver professionals are sincere to support with patience and consideration. "However, they are still mindful that they should not get too personally and emotionally attached, should keep a distance, and prevent standing as a parent" (Howe, 2009: 443-444). When they no longer can keep the professional distance, required in social services, they have to disconnect their relationship with those children. Portrayed in characters; Frau Bafané, who understands Benni's overwhelming need for love and Micha Heller, who is tasked with making sure Benni goes to class on time, they cannot avoid having a compassionate friendship and emotional attachment. Child Welfare caregiver Frau Bafané consistently tries to find a place in group homes for Benni even though child and welfare services outright reject Benni for her out-of-control behaviour, resulting in deafening screams and violent attacks toward other kids. Her need for love, by the way, grows stronger with each rejection. Frau Bafané might be considered an affectionate mother figure who never desists Benni and is determined to place her in a group house again. Although Benni seems unaffected, the burden takes its toll on Bafané, turning her into a mental mess. Their emotional attachment becomes evident in the scene (Fingscheidt, 2019, 60:29) when Frau Bafané cannot prevent her tears with the news of Benni's rejection again. Benni tries to console her affectionately like an adult while Frau Bafané is crying in the corridor on the floor. In that scene, it is revealed how Benni can be angelic for someone who loves her sincerely; thus, Benni shows the delicate, kind, and affectionate features of her character. When the last attempt of Frau Bafané for Benni's place in another group home is rejected, Micha finds out a possible solution to the situation.

Micha Heller is portrayed as a school escort for Benni first, and the scar on his head, though never spelt out in the film, implies that he may have suffered from something like Benni's in his past. That could be the reason for his empathising deeply with her. Micha quickly bonds with the colourful little girl and thinks Benni might be better off in nature, away from people. Benni spends the happiest three weeks of her life in the nature camp they go to, experiencing freedom from detractors and distractors, which may help her redeem herself and gain inner peace. They retreat into nature for one-on-one education and

anti-violence training to manage anger. Micha reflects his anger in boxing; he leads Benni to manage her anger since punching is a way of releasing her anger. Moreover, she chops wood, goes for a walk in the fresh air and gets one-on-one attention, all of which seem helpful to soothe her to change some behaviour. In the scene, Benni's yelling to hear an echo in the woods is remarkable since she calls "mama" as if she could get a response from her mother. That behaviour reminds the audience how she has a desperate longing for her mother. The idyll ends with Benni's outburst; Micha, bending all the rules, lets her spend one night at his own house with his pregnant wife and a baby. After a while, Benni, who desires to reunite with his mother throughout the film, suddenly internalises Micha as a father figure, although he never talks about the concept of fatherhood. He lets Benni stay with his family, so she begins to see him as a family member rather than a social caregiver. In the scene (Fingscheidt, 2019, 60:13), she calls him, "Papa, papa, please, papa. . ." Unable to keep his distance, Micha says he has crossed the border after a while. Although Benni cares for Micha's baby, when she locks herself in the bathroom with her, Micha realises the threat to his own family as Benni has asked him whether he would be her father if she kills his family during the scene (Fingscheidt, 2019, 60:12) when Benni's emotional attachment to him is revealed. Micha does not call her back while she is running to the woods after releasing the baby in the bathroom without doing any harm, so Benni loses her belief in being loved in a disappointed mood again and escapes from Micha completely. In the final scene of *System Crasher*, while she is at the airport about to be sent to a farm in Africa, Kenya, she escapes from social service assistants of the German Child Welfare Institution and starts running with a happy expression on her face. As the troublesome child feels free and content without their fictitious care and opposes being transported to another institution in another country, it is considered that the director is once again reflecting on the system's ineffectual attempts to meet her demands in the last scene.

6. Conclusion

System Crasher stresses the faults in the Child Welfare System in Germany as the system is meant to help kids like Benni, but not enough assistance is provided to the adults charged with supporting her. It suggests, of course, that Benni is not receiving the emotional care she desperately needs due to the strict rules of the system. "It is clear that Benni is at the mercy of a system ill-equipped to help her" (Baughan, 2020). The film reflects a sociologic view of a severe social problem. "It might be considered a documentary-based one since Fingscheidt comes from a documentary background and based her script for *System Crasher* on considerable research" (Bradshaw, 2020). The aim of Fingscheidt in *System Crasher* might be to advocate an individualised utopian setup to satisfy everyone. The child welfare system does not allow welfare caregivers to have a close, emotional relationship with those children. "The system is supposed to help children like Benni, yet the adults tasked with aiding her are not given enough support. Of course, it shows that Benni is not getting the support she desperately needs" (Bowmer, 2020). Even if a child develops an affective attachment to the house, she/he is staying in, that child must change her shelter immediately. *System Crasher* questions the welfare system and sheds light on the condition of out-of-control children's lives. Nora Fingscheidt depicts a never-ending circle for children like Benni moving from one care facility to another without any emotional attachment, which is the most crucial need for a child. "Nora Fingscheidt wants to confront the audience with the harsh realities of Benni's situation. She is enclosed within a flawed institution that does not cater to her specific needs, even as individual adults within the system try to aid in Benni's well-being" (Bowmer, 2020). She does not provide a traditional ending for the sorrowful story of Benni, since Fingscheidt's purpose seems to make the audience aware of the fundamental issues in the system and consider out-of-control children's problems socially by leaving bare open the cracks in the Child Welfare System, which is inadequate for a child, like Benni. In *System Crasher*, writer/director Nora Fingscheidt wants the audience to comprehend the harsh realities of Benni's situation. Benni is enclosed and surrounded by a flawed institution that does not provide her specific needs, even as individual adults within the system try to aid in her well-being. In conclusion, more films with similar social content should be produced to address the problem by increasing public awareness about the necessity of an efficient child welfare system and assisting out-of-control children in society.

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