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Environmental Nonviolence in the BBC Young-Children Animation Bob the Builder: Bob's Big Plan (2004)

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the pilot episode of *Bob the Builder: Project Build It* (2004-2009), one of the most popular BBC animation series for young children, with a view to discussing environmental nonviolence – the issue which in recent years has become an important subject of academic study within a number of disciplines. It will be argued that environmental nonviolence in its child-friendly BBC version is embodied in Bob's designing and constructing the (utopian) settlement of Sunflower Valley. Based on the theoretical considerations of nonviolence put forward by Bryan Teixeira (1999), the article shows how the practice of nonviolence as depicted in the animation involves a set of shifts described by Teixera with regard to the empirical world. Among them is a shift from alienation to interconnectedness; from individualism to community; from low self-worth to high self-worth; from inhumane conflict to humane conflict; from inequity to equity; from exclusivity to inclusivity; from centralization to decentralization, etc. As a result, the animation combines entertainment with serious educational value, instilled in the young fans of the *Bob the Builder series*.

Keywords: *nonviolence, environmental nonviolence, Bob the Builder, education through media, stop-motion animation*

Abstrakt

W artykule proponowana jest analiza pilotażowego odcinka animowanej serii dla młodszych dzieci pt. *Bob Budowniczy: Wielki plan Boba*, wyemitowanej po raz pierwszy przez telewizję BBC w 2004 r., w odniesieniu do edukacji ekologicznej, wyrażonej przez ideę określaną w języku angielskim jako *environmental nonviolence* (dosł. nieagresja, wyzbycie się przemocy, itp.). Autor artykułu dowodzi, iż idea ta – w wersji dla najmłodszych widzów – znajduje wyraz w zaprojektowaniu i zbudowaniu przez Boba Budowniczego i jego przyjaciół (utopijnej) osady w Słonecznikowej Dolinie (Sunflower Valley). Opierając się na teoretycznych rozważaniach Bryana Teixeiry (1999), autor pokazuje, w jaki sposób zjawiska obserwowane przez Teixeirę w świecie empirycznym zostają przedstawione w świecie animacji. Wśród opisywanych zmian są np. przejścia: od wyobcowania do współzależności,

od indywidualizmu do społecznościowości, od niskiej samooceny do poczucia własnej wartości, od niehumanitarnego do humanitarnego rozwiązywania konfliktów, od niesprawiedliwości do równości, od wyłączności do poczucia przynależności, od centralizacji do decentralizacji, itp. W rezultacie, rozrywkowa wartość filmu zostaje wzbogacona o warstwę edukacyjną, promując postawy ekologiczne wśród małych fanów *Boba Budowniczego*.

Słowa kluczowe: *edukacja ekologiczna, Bob Budowniczy, edukacja przez media, animacja poklatkowa*

In recent years, the concept of nonviolence has become an important subject of academic study. Approached from a number of theoretical perspectives, it has been discussed within such disciplines as history of ideas, philosophy, ethics, religious and theological studies, (social) psychology, anthropology, political science, and literary studies (e.g. Dear, 1993; Teixeira, 1999; Kurlansky, 2008; Weber, 2008; Mayton II, 2009; Nistandra, 2012). As Mark Kurlansky (2008) observes, "while every major language has a word for violence, there is no word to express the idea of nonviolence except that it is not another idea, it is not violence" ("Imperfect Beings"). Likewise, in his attempt to theorize nonviolence, Bryan Teixeira (1999) defines the concept principally as "the alternative to violence and aggression" (p. 556), the latter term denoting "behavior done to ... *any living beings* that would prefer to avoid such treatment," encapsulating, significantly enough, "*the ecosystem* with which we are *inextricably connected*" (p. 556, emphasis added). It seems, therefore, that the dichotomy: violence-nonviolence makes perfect sense also in the context of environment. And indeed, ecological nonviolence[1] is discussed by such scholars as, for instance, Toh Swee-Hin and Virginia Floresca-Cawagas (2008), who note that "much of the modern era has endorsed human-led violence against our environment" (p. 1021). "Unless we learn to institutionalize nonviolence in our relations with planet Earth," Toh and Floresca-Cawagas assert, "there are and will be dire consequences for human survival" (p. 1022). One of the aspects of such institutionalization is children's environmental education (p. 1022), which, in my view, can be conducted not only at school but also via the child-oriented media.

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[1]My understanding of ecological nonviolence follows the definition put forward by Toh and Floresca-Cawagas (2008), who describe the concept as "[t]he relationships between human beings ... and the natural environment that are underpinned by principles of sustainability, social and economic justice, simplicity of lifestyles, and biodiversity" (p. 211).

Accordingly, this study is concerned with *Bob's Big Plan* (2004), the pilot episode of the stop-motion BBC animation series for young children *Bob the Builder: Project Build It* (2004-2009), with a view to discussing the issue of environmental nonviolence as embodied in Bob's designing and constructing the (utopian) settlement of Sunflower Valley.[2] In particular, I will refer to the value base of nonviolence distinguished by Teixeira (1999) in his article for the 1999 issue of *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict*. The scholar contends that "[n]onviolence has a value base, including an interconnected perception of self and others, ... [which] recognizes the need for organized and disciplined group action in the process of conflict resolution" (Teixeira, 1999, p. 564). More specifically, the practice of nonviolence involves the shift from alienation to interconnectedness; from individualism to community; from low self-worth to high self-worth; from inhumane conflict to humane conflict; from inequity to equity; from exclusivity to inclusivity; from centralization to decentralization; from aggression to assertion; from rigid gender roles to flexible gender roles; from male dominance to gender equality; and from passivity to power (Teixeira, 1999, p. 564, fig. 4). In the subsequent part of this article, I will demonstrate how most of these values are reflected in *Bob's Big Plan* (2004).

Broadcast between 2004 and 2009, *Project Build It* is the second series of *Bob the Builder*, originally created in 1999 by Keith Chapman and HiT Entertainment ("The Story of Bob the Builder"). The educational character of the animation is underscored on its official webpage, which also offers parents a number of film-related projects to be used with their children:

> Bob and his team are an inspiration to kids. ... Motivated by the construction in episodes, kids may want to create their own Bob projects through imaginative play. As a result, they begin to understand important lessons about Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics. ... [For instance,] [k]ids may become captivated as they discover how their manmade world works and what actions they can replicate. ... [Furthermore,] [c]reativity and imagination is sparked when seeing the sights, colors, and textures in Bob's world. Inspired by Bob's work, kids may want to design their own ideas using out-of-the-box thinking, bringing their blueprints to life. ("Why Bob the Builder?")

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[2]While I have analysed the entire series elsewhere (Kowalczyk, 2015), and in another context, this article concentrates entirely on the prequel, *Bob's Big Plan* (2004), to be approached within the framework of nonviolence.

To these one may add some elements of environmental education, accentuated particularly strongly in the second series. It contains ninety three episodes, grouped in seven seasons, which together take about sixteen hours of watching. The twenty-two minute pilot, *Bob's Big Plan* (2004), inaugurates the series and provides the (young) viewers with the framework of environmental "philosophy" to be developed in the subsequent episodes.

The events commence in Bobsville-a small town inhabited by human characters, talking machines, and animals, which form a *sui generis* utopian, or actually eutopian community.[3] Surrounded by a rustic landscape, this play-town upon a hill, with its pastel houses, pink- or peach-coloured streets, and greenery all around, as well as with its democratic, multi-ethnic population, in the second series conveys the role of a background rather than being the chief focus of attention. The latter is shifted onto a newly constructed town, known as the Sunflower Valley settlement, which can be regarded as an example of ecotopia (Kowalczyk, 2015). Nonetheless, it is in Bobsville that the eponymous Bob the Builder and his business partner, Wendy, cooperate with a gang of mechanical mates to cater for the building-and-repair needs of the locals. This visually attractive, anthropomorphic team consists of Scoop the digger (yellow), Roley the steam roller (green), Muck the dumper-digger (red and orange), Lofty the crane (blue), and Dizzy the concrete mixer (orange) – all more or less child-like in their ignorant inquisitiveness, proneness to mistakes, and (idealistic) naivety.

At the outset of *Bob's Big Plan* (2004), Wendy is to take a week off, while Bob and the team are to work on the new studio of a Mr Adams, the town's official (?) architect. It is Mr Adams who introduces the central theme of an architectural competition for the designing and building of a new town in Sunflower Valley – a place Bob immediately recognizes as one where he "used to spend a lot of time when [he] was young," camping there with his fraternal twin, Tom.

The architect's higher social status is underscored by the fact that he is constantly referred to by his title and surname ("Mr Adams"), as opposed to Bob, who is addressed by the other citizens and his machines simply as "Bob." Mr Adams is further distinguished by the clothes he is wearing: an elegant suite with the town's coat of arms, to be contrasted with Bob's casual working clothes and his characteristic yellow safety helmet. Evidently,

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[3]According to Lyman Tower Sargent (1994), eutopia is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived" (p. 9).

while the (young) viewer is likely to associate the architect with a sense of respect but also with some aloofness, Bob can be perceived as "one of us," "a guy from the neighbourhood," a friend.

Nonetheless, whereas the Bob team keep working, Mr Adams allows the builder to "have a sneak peek," as he puts it, at the model of the town he has designed. Here, together with Bob, the (child) viewer learns about Mr Adams's idea underlying the blueprint: he intends to provide the future Sunflower Valley dwellers with "everything you could wish for," including "hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, gyms, [and] golf courses." The architect believes the place will become a fantastic holiday resort to which "people will come from all over" – a misguided version of utopia. Bob seems a little shocked at the view of "Sunflower Valley looking like a city;" when asked by Mr Adams for an opinion, he fails to comment on the idea of the project as such. "Well, it's a very good *model*" (emphasis added), he says instead.

Apparently, even though he may have personal doubts concerning Mr Adams's blueprint, Bob at first humbly adheres to his duties. Inquired by Muck why he is not going to take part in the competition, the builder replies: "I'm a builder, not an architect." The machines, however, tend to ignore both the technical and social complexities of the difference: "But you can think of ideas," says Muck. "And draw things," adds Dizzy. "You know more about building than anyone," confirms Roley. The machines, then, assume a child's perspective, from which anything can be done owing to sheer enthusiasm and good intentions.

The conversation ends with a question which proves central to the film's environmental message: "What's Sunflower Valley like, Bob?" Bob's answer involves not only the team of his machines but also, arguably, the film's young viewer, who is invited to *experience* Bob's response at different sensory levels. Namely, rather than offering a simple narrative, Bob resurrects his timeworn film projector and actually *re-creates* the valley he remembers from his youth, organizing an impromptu evening showing. The combination of hand-held shooting with a film-grain effect and the ragtime soundtrack reminiscent of silent cinema, together with the unobtrusive whirring of the projector, create the impression of nostalgia and a sense of longing for the past. This, apparently, is intended to make the viewer contrast the natural world of Sunflower Valley[4] with its corporate, institutionalized, and profit-oriented equivalent, represented by Mr Adams. Furthermore, Bob's

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[4]Noteworthy, the very name "Sunflower Valley" can be construed in symbolic terms, its two components bringing to mind such qualities as warmth, happiness, longevity, affluence, fertility, and goodness (Kowalczyk, 2015, p. 74).

old recording shows the brothers, himself and Tom, camping in a hippy-like state of joyous communion with the environment: beautiful, tree-covered green slopes with interspersed clusters of sunflowers, frequently zoomed-in to indicate their yellow petals, set the background against which the builder is portrayed. Bob looks younger and more casual, barefoot, with longer hair, a set of beads around his neck, an arty sweatshirt, and a pair of worn-out jeans. There is even a gag involved, as his freshly-made breakfast becomes intercepted by a bleating goat, which makes the machines laugh their cabins off.

And such may be the reaction of the pre-school viewer of *Bob's Big Plan*, who, owing to her/his multisensory engagement in the scene, is likely to regard Sunflower Valley as a truly good place, where blue rabbits and funny goats, frolicking among the sunflower fields, happily coexist with the human visitors, also elated at this state of close association with nature. In a nutshell, Sunflower Valley as recalled by Bob is an eu-topia, a child-like version of earthly paradise.

After such a trip down memory lane, the machines ask their boss another vital, if naïve, question: "What will happen to the sunflowers when they build there?" When Bob responds that they are likely to be dug up, the machines keep inquiring: "Can't someone design something that won't spoil everything?" (Scoop); "So the sunflowers can keep their home?" (Dizzy). These child-like questions/suggestions (note the personification in Dizzy's comment) prompt Bob to provide his team with a stock (father-like?) answer: "Well, let's hope so." It seems that the builder will return to his routine duties, letting the things which hardly depend on him go the way they do, while the film-show is just a unique moment of longing for the bygone days. Bob's attitude, however, radically changes the same night, after a dream vision which turns out to be so persuasive as to wake him up.

At first, the builder dreams a pleasant dream, a *sui generis* continuation of his youthful memories preserved on film. Against the background of harmonious music and the jubilant bleating of animals, Bob, now in his building clothes and safety helmet, makes his way through omnipresent sunflower fields, together with a goat and a sheep, jumping over a pyramid of blue rabbits, all in slow motion. Suddenly, the music changes into a sinister one, the sunflowers begin to shrink and wither, and the animals run out of sight. As Bob's dream metamorphoses into a nightmare, the sky, so far light blue, turns red, and skyscrapers start soaring on the horizon. The unpleasant tooting of car horns can be heard, completely drowning out the panic-stricken voices of the sheep/goats. While previously the natural-

ly beautiful sunflowers framed the "joyful" shots, now their artificial, child windmill-like copies border the screen, their rotating movement and jazzy, psychedelic colours attacking the viewer's sight on a par with the deafening roar of city traffic. Bob's final exclamation of protest ("No-o-o-o!") restores him to reality; as a result of the nightmare vision, which shows the dystopian outcome of human actions, he becomes determined to take part in the architectural competition. His decision to "save Sunflower Valley," as he puts it, is reminiscent of Teixeira's (1999) characteristic of nonviolence, "power" replacing "passivity" (p. 565).

The verb "to save," as well as the context in which Bob uses it, foreground the salient problem of an environmental conflict, simultaneously setting the disparity between the destroyers and preservers of nature, epitomized by Bob and Mr Adams, respectively. As a matter of fact, Bob's new project is to contrast *not* with Bobsville – an already – existing community which, to the adult viewer, is "eu-topian" enough-but with the Sunflower Valley city, Mr Adams's misconceived blueprint, which stands for unhampered industrialization, aggressive urbanization, and blatant lack of respect for nature. As such, the architect's project is more than likely to be treated as an equivalent of what is deemed "environmentally-unfriendly" in the young viewer's empirical reality. The discussed conflict, however, is a non-violent one, for it follows the rules of fair play and just rivalry (cf. Teixeira's "humane conflict" [1999, p. 565]). Mr Adams is not so much a villain but rather a slightly standoffish theoretician; a dreamer who misinterprets his co-residents' needs.

In contrast, Bob may lack formal qualifications, but he does "have some ideas" and is always eager to learn new things (cf. Teixeira's values of "decentralization" and "equity" [1999, p. 565]). For instance, prior to designing his project, the builder intends to visit the local library "to check a few things out"-an idea which apparently reveals the animation producers' educational intention. The film communicates to its young viewers that indeed it is worth consulting books and other materials in a library: Bob's exclamations ("Wow! It's clever!") and statements of amazement ("I never knew you could do that...") indicate the protagonist's open-mindedness and his urge to broaden his knowledge, even though he takes part in a race against time, for the judging is to be held the following day. Concurrently, Bob's research on environmentally-friendly construction may point out his being indebted to entire generations of eco-architects, which in turn brings to mind Teixeira's (1999) value of "interconnectedness," replacing (Mr Adams's) "alienation" (p. 565).

Another important scene is Bob's conversation with Roley. The builder has been struggling with the draft of his version of the Sunflower Valley

venture, but he is far from content with the results of his work, admitting: "Sunflower Valley just doesn't look right with houses." Taking a look at the sketch – together with the viewers, to whom the picture is demonstrated – the steam roller agrees: "They need to ... well ... blend in a bit more." At this moment, nature itself provides Bob with the solution: a bird and a squirrel show to Roley, who understands animal language, their houses which "don't stick out." Bob takes up the idea and decides to design houses which are built *into* the hills. The new version of the sketch is approved of by Roley. He observes that the new houses are "cool because they don't spoil the countryside." Lofty the crane suggests another pivotal notion, i.e. recycling. It is him who actually invents the slogan which has become the trademark of the entire *Project: Build It* series: "Reduce, reuse, recycle!" (cf. Teixeira's "assertion" supplanting [environmental] aggression; also "inclusivity" replacing "exclusivity" [1999, p. 565]).

While Bob keeps working on his model, there appears a character the young viewer might remember from the first series, namely Mr Bentley, Bobsville's (hilariously starchy) construction site inspector. Passing by, he informs the builder that he should remember to prepare a speech so as to explicate the ideas behind the project – apparently one more obstacle in the path to success. To make matters worse, the machines working without Bob's direct supervision have misleadingly laid the foundations of the studio on the wrong side of Mr Adams's present building. The film's adult viewer might expect Bob to get into fury, but the builder just quietens the guilty machines down: "It's OK. If we work quickly, we can get the concrete up before it sets" (cf. Teixeira's "humane conflict," again [1999, p. 565]). The Reduce-Reuse-Recycle rule is thus put into practice, the concrete intended to be utilized as hard core later, which, together with the psychological message of non-violent moderation and self-control, can be interpreted as another educational component of the animation.

One other hindrance to Bob's finishing his project on time is a power cut, which renders his electric saws and drills useless. The motif, apart from its basic thrill-building role ("Will he manage?"), performs two more functions: (i) it makes Bob's work, even at this early stage of the project, more "natural" (and thus environmentally-friendly), as Bob has to resort to candles and hand tools; and (ii) it provides him with a chance to discuss energy-related issues with his team, as well as, indirectly, with the preschool viewer. First, the builder explains that "in the old days water was sometimes used to power things." Second, when quizzed, the machines, like pupils in a classroom, mention wind energy, the generator, as well as batteries, among

other energy sources. Third, inquired about the source of power in Sunflower Valley, Bob informs the team that he will use what is already there: water, wind, and sun (cf. Teixeira's component of "decentralization" [1999, p. 565]). This way of educating young audiences seems particularly effective, since it shifts emphasis from "being educated" to problem-solving – and who but Bob and his gang can do it? (Here, consider the trademarked slogan of the *Bob the Builder* series, "Can we fix it?" "Yes, we CAN!").

The night of preparation being over, the film's action becomes focused on the architectural competition per se. Complying with the democratic character of Bobsville's society, the event takes place in the open, with both the jury and ordinary citizens listening to presentations. To underscore the difference between Mr Adams's and Bob's opposite philosophies underlying their respective projects, the young viewer once again witnesses the architect publicizing his Sunflower Valley city design. Mr Adams's speech (or, rather, its ending), combined with relevant slides, conveys his wish to construct something "bigger and better than anything you've ever seen," with the view to "really putt[ing] Sunflower Valley on the map." This one man show brings to mind typical corporate presentations, expected to be glib and impressive, where the "package" is as significant as the content.

In contrast to the architect's performance, undoubtedly well-prepared and rhetorically impressive, Bob and his team enter the competition at the last possible moment. The builder, somewhat awkward in an elegant suit, white shirt and tie, definitely cannot be called a natural-born speaker. Technically, his presentation includes "ah-hem-s," "well-s," "oh-s," "um-s" and colloquialisms ("it's very simple, really;" "that's it, really"). And yet, it is not *how* but *what* he is talking about that wins public acclaim. Building, Bob explains, must "work together with nature," and therefore he intends Sunflower Valley to become a place of living, working, and playing without destroying its original character. Significantly enough, Bob is joined by his machines, who take an active part in the speech, completing it with particular words or ideas. One may interpret this moment of the non-violent competition in terms of Teixeira's (1999) "community" replacing "individualism;" "equity" supplanting "inequity;" and, perhaps, "high self-worth" appearing instead of "low self-worth" (p. 565). As for the new settlement, apart from being nature-inspired and nature-oriented, it is to be created out of recycled materials, thus reducing waste, which, as indicated later in the series, is a problem also in otherwise (virtually) perfect Bobsville. Last but not least, although in contrast with Mr Adams's neat summary, Bob experiences a blackout at the end of his speech, he does end up with a me-

morable phrase – the Reduce-Reuse-Recycle chant, shouted out together with his mechanical mates.

As the clock keeps ticking, the judges are discussing the entries, and Bob is walking to and fro. Meanwhile, the camera's eye focuses on the competing models, out of which Bob's is, obviously enough, the most "natural" and the greenest; even its base is hand-painted, with golden sunflowers on a light blue background. When the mayor finally announces the verdict, she underscores the winner's project's "impress[ive] ... inventiveness and forward thinking," adding that the idea "will build the community for the future, blending in with its surroundings, and using the natural resources around it for energy and power." Furthermore, to Bob's utter surprise, he and his machines are commissioned to actually *construct* the new settlement, though the task might seem too complex for so humble a team. Still, the native community's both official and more spontaneous support, expressed through a hearty farewell, leaves no doubt as to the future success of the undertaking. In Teixeira's terms, such values as "community," "power, "high-self-worth" and "inter-connectedness" (1999, p. 565) are finally reasserted.

As indicated above, *Bob's Big Plan* provides only a general frame within which the project of Sunflower Valley will develop in the consecutive episodes of the second series. Yet even in the case of the pilot, it is conspicuous that the qualities Teixeira (1999) recognizes as the value base of non-violence correspond with Bob's environmentally-friendly vision underlying the scheme, all the merits being present in the cycle taken as a whole (i.e. also "flexible gender roles" and "gender equality," far less noticeable in the pilot). The project's eco-friendly, egalitarian, small-scale, and innocently child-like character instils in the young viewer a sense of empowerment and hope, expressed through the trademark motto of the series: "Yes, we CAN!" It is not impossible, therefore, to perceive the animation as being equivalent of small-scale community literary narratives for children, which, as Clare Bradford et al. (2008) argue, "can both raise consciousness and offer avenues for practical action available to children as well as adults" (p. 96). Consequently, people can find motivation "to reweave culture and nature by means of sound ecological decisions," even though "they won't save the planet" (p. 96). The educational role of *Bob's Big Plan* (and the entire *Project Build It* series) can also be regarded as an instance of "institutionalize[d] nonviolence in our relations with planet Earth" (Toh and Floresca-Cawagas 2008, p. 1022), oriented at young (pre-school) viewers. It must be remembered, though, that such a function is intertwined with *Bob the Builder's* aesthetic, adventure-like, and entertaining character, which undoubtedly lies behind the worldwide success of the animation.

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